



# Power to the People

The Future of Planning in a Localist Landscape

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Edited by Richard Carr



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## **About the author**

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

As the Government implements a series of reforms to devolve more power over planning to town and parish councils and neighbourhood groups, this report sets out what this might mean for communities, as well as developers and local planning authorities.

The Government is balancing two impulses: the need to deliver long term growth, and a desire for subsidiarity in the planning process. This is reflected in the draft National Planning Policy Framework's prioritisation of 'sustainable development', whilst the Localism Bill gives specific powers for neighbourhood groups to instigate and create plans that are then subject to local referenda.

By analysing community involvement in the planning process of 11 case studies, this report explores how local residents have participated in the system to date, and what this experience tells us about best practice going forward. If, as the government has predicted, over half of all neighbourhoods will have a plan within a decade, this is an important time to be considering such questions.

Community planning has the potential to deliver increased levels of development, faster, and of a better quality. Local knowledge will produce better informed decisions, whilst giving such decisions a greater legitimacy by embedding them in the community. The potential benefits go beyond the planning system however. By involving citizens in the future planning of their area, the wider gains include fostering a vibrant, participatory democracy, creating a more informed electorate, and increasing social cohesion amongst engaged groups.

## Lessons

The case studies offer some important lessons:

- **Councils have a crucial leadership role to play** – As the Battersea Park case study illustrates, local authorities have a vital role to play

in serving as ‘honest brokers’ between developer and resident interests. They are in a position to shape the consultation process, keep an eye on potential costs (including those associated with holding referenda), and provide community planners with instruments (such as maps and flowcharts, as in Moseley) to simplify a complex system. Though the new system is bottom-up, it relies on strong leadership from the LPA which will continue to provide an overarching strategic vision for delivering growth, as seen in the Birmingham Big City Plan.

- **Developers need not fear the new system** – Whilst developments perceived as being imposed upon a community can be unpopular, local residents have often shown a propensity to negotiate. As Battersea Park shows, by listening to local communities, developers – in this case building residential accommodation – can bring a project to completion (and thereby help deliver national growth) with the allocation of relatively minimal resource.
- **Early engagement leads to better outcomes** – Past experience, particularly in Sherford, shows that where communities are engaged early on, this often leads to better outcomes – which can vary from a complete turnaround in attitudes to, more often, an understanding of the need for development. It is also worthwhile testing the waters with overarching planning workshops before a potentially costly process such as neighbourhood planning is instigated.
- **Building on existing structures** – Tattenhall Parish Council and Balsall Heath Neighbourhood Forum show the importance of building on existing council or community group structures. Previous participants in Tattenhall’s 2006 Parish Plan have re-engaged with planning in recent months, and Balsall Heath’s Forum offers a range of potential expertise which is helping to minimise delays in their plan’s implementation.
- **Capitalise on opportunities to trigger community involvement** – The proposed development of North Harlow shows that people will get involved in neighbourhood planning if prompted, particularly by new media. The redevelopment of a former military site at Caterham Barracks is one of many developments to make extensive use of workshops to canvass opinions. Such lessons apply equally to planning authorities and developers.

The case studies illustrate that there is the potential for strong relationships to develop between a local authority which holds the information and

can help nurture the skill sets required to plan, businesses which can bring capital and expertise to the table, and a latent desire amongst the community to plan. The new system will not lead to residents getting all of what they want all of the time, and the planning authority must be upfront about the need for neighbourhood plans to conform to existing local plans and the new NPPF. Private developers also need to make profit, and will seek out schemes where they see the potential to do so. At times resident, developer and authority interest may therefore conflict. This report acknowledges that total consensus is difficult to achieve, but offers some pointers for all parties to help create a more harmonious and collaborative system going forward.

A successful localist planning system must therefore include:

- **Central government** articulating the virtues of planning, ensuring that the new system is sufficiently resourced, and that Local Authorities are suitably incentivised to quickly formulate their Local Plans following the instigation of the new system.
- **Local planning authorities** intervening to resource future community planners with the means to plan, and devolving incentives (principally the New Homes Bonus and Community Infrastructure Levy) to the lowest possible level.
- **Developers** viewing the process as an opportunity for collaboration, and where their direct gains will be as much saving time as increasing profits.
- **Communities** fostering existing local capabilities, and attempting to bring more people into the process.

### Ongoing considerations

If these are the goals, key questions remain over:

- The resourcing of neighbourhood plans after the initial government funded pilots are completed – put simply, where will the money be found for future plans?
- The democratic mandate of parish councils and neighbourhood groups to speak for their locality – giving them more powers may well produce an increased interest in their activities, but can these groups do more to engage and demonstrate they are representative of the wider neighbourhood interests?
- Where central government will intervene to correct any localist endeavours that harm ‘sustainable development’ or national

growth – can they resist the temptation to direct from on high where undesirable outcomes emerge from below?

If executed successfully, the new system will lead to an increased power, and sense of power, for local communities. It can engender a greater faith in the planning process as a whole, a harmonisation of interests between communities, the public and private sector - and, ultimately, national growth. This report offers some evidence based suggestions as to how this might be best achieved.

## 1. Introduction – Planning for Growth and Localism

The Coalition Government is implementing substantial changes to the planning system in England as part of a package of supply side reforms aimed at stimulating private sector-led economic recovery, and raising the involvement of local communities in the planning process. Planning has been characterised as an obstacle to growth because of the costs and delays of engaging with an over centralised and bureaucratic system of control. It is clear however that current low levels of development activity are also a result of the continuing fallout from the credit crunch, the subsequent fall in commercial and residential property values resulting in unattractive risk and rewards for potential developers.

A series of steps are being taken by the Government to address these concerns. These are being implemented through a variety of measures, in particular the Localism Bill. The key elements in the Government's planning reform agenda are as follows:

- The simplification of policy guidance in relation to planning. This is reflected in the new Draft National Planning Policy Framework which introduces a presumption in favour of sustainable development, particularly in the absence of an up to date plan.
- The abolition of the Infrastructure Planning Commission with decision powers returned to the Secretary of State. These will be taken on the basis of National Policy Statements approved by Parliament and a 'fast track' planning process overseen by the Planning Inspectorate.
- The abolition of regional planning bodies and Regional Spatial Strategies as a bridge between national planning policy and local development frameworks.
- Proposals to put in place a more streamlined Local Plan making process which will provide the context for more locally produced planning documents.



- Powers to allow local communities to produce Neighbourhood Plans and Neighbourhood Development Orders and to exercise a local Right to Build.

A key element in the Government's proposals is the introduction of financial incentives for local authorities and communities to benefit from development through a revised Community Infrastructure Levy and New Homes Bonus.

The main thrust of the reforms is to change planning from an activity which is perceived as a negative control mechanism to one which fosters and enables sustainable development and growth. The imposition of 'top down' national and regional targets is to be replaced by locally derived, evidence based, assessments of housing and employment needs. Local communities and businesses are being invited to play a much more active role in shaping the nature of the places in which they live and work within the framework provided by national and local planning policy.

The central hypothesis, which this research report seeks to test, is that *community engagement with the planning process is critical to the delivery of more, faster and better quality development*. This has involved undertaking case study research into a range of projects to identify critical factors in the successful involvement of local people in shaping place and promoting beneficial development.

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The research provides practical recommendations to central and local government, planning and development professionals and local communities on how to make the new system work in terms of the Government's objectives of economic recovery and growth. In doing this it seeks to identify the best ways of engaging with communities to get a positive result in terms of sustainable development. While the Government is currently funding a number of community and business led 'frontrunner' projects with the aim of informing neighbourhood planning after the Localism Bill passes into law, there is already a substantial body of experience which can help local planning authorities, communities and the development industry prepare for the changes ahead.

## 2. From Participation to Involvement – The Case for Community Involvement in Planning

The Government's proposals for enhancing the role of communities in the planning process are part of a trend which has been underway for many years and may be seen as a response to the changing nature of the society which the planning system seeks to serve.

The comprehensive system which was introduced by the Town and Country Planning Act in 1947 reflected a post war society which accepted 'command and control' exercised by democratically elected authorities and the advice of professionals acting 'in the public interest'. This helped the delivery of an ambitious New Town development programme, the protection of valued landscapes (National Parks and Areas of Outstanding National Beauty) and the creation of Green Belts around many of Britain's major cities. For the most part there was a high degree of consensus about the need for, and benefits of, planning.

With growing prosperity and emerging concerns about the impacts of slum clearance and re-housing programmes, urban motorways and town centre redevelopment leading to the creation of protest groups, Government started to consider how to engage people in the planning process. The Skeffington Report on Participation in Planning<sup>1</sup> published in 1969 helped to establish the right for the 'public' to be consulted during the preparation of development plans. While only involving the lower rungs of Arnstein's 'ladder of citizen participation'<sup>2</sup> it represented an important first step in promoting public engagement in planning.

1 MHLG, (1969) Public participation in planning: Skeffington Report, HMSO, London.

2 Arnstein, S. R. (1969) A Ladder of Citizen Participation, JAIP, Vol. 35, No. 4.

This was accompanied by a shift in the understanding of planning as a rational process, in which public views were seen as an input to be taken into account alongside other technical considerations, to an approach where the central role of planning was seen as facilitating communication between often competing and in some cases unrepresented interests.<sup>3</sup> The notion that planning is essentially part of both representative and participatory forms of democracy is now part of both the political and professional conventional wisdom.

As a result communities have variously been characterised as part of the problem and part of the solution. For example, public opposition to development during the *laissez faire* period of planning in the 1980's, led the then Secretary of State, Nicholas Ridley, to popularise the use of the NIMBY acronym. Indeed the ability of communities to use the planning system to resist unwanted development remains a persistent concern for policy makers and development interests. Fears have been expressed that the Localism Bill could become a 'NIMBY Charter'. It would be foolish to think however that the NIMBY will disappear under the new policy and therefore the target should be to create policy that acknowledges their concerns. For instance if local neighbourhoods, in preparing their neighbourhood plans, chose to plan properly for the medium and long term to accommodate appropriate levels of growth then this would avoid the need for continual challenge by landowners to release yet further land every 5 years. It is the threat of more development that incites NIMBYism and yet if it were tackled directly by the neighbourhoods and planned for then, to an extent, they have future-proofed against imminent attack.

The need for positive engagement with the planning process became more important following further reforms introduced by the Town & Country Planning Act (TCPA) 1990. This made it a requirement that applications for planning permission should be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Government emphasised the need to ensure that the public were engaged at an early stage in formulation of plans and policies. For example, PPG 12: Development Plans stated that *'the aim should be to encourage local people to participate actively in the preparation of plans from the earliest stages so that they can be fully involved in decisions about the pattern of development in their area. Consultation with the general public, community groups, conservation and amenity groups, business, development and infrastructure interests*

3 Healey, P. (1996) The Communicative Turn in Planning Theory and its implications for spatial strategy formation, *Environment and Planning B*, 23.

*helps local planning authorities secure a degree of consensus over the future development and use of land in their area.'*

Building on the work of the Urban Task Force,<sup>4</sup> the new Labour Government actively promoted the concept of sustainable communities as a means of delivering housing growth and improving the quality of urban living. While emphasising the need for public participation and involvement in the development of urban vision statements, planning increasingly became focused on the delivery of housing numbers and the challenge of affordability in an era of rapidly rising land and property values.

While the reforms to the planning system introduced in 2004 were accompanied by a policy statement on Community Involvement in Planning: The Government's Objectives,<sup>5</sup> the TCPA reported that by 2010 'overall delivery has been patchy, raising very significant concerns about the skill set of the profession in relation to communication and community development.'<sup>6</sup> Further problems identified by the TCPA included confusion arising from multiple local authority consultation, cynicism about how seriously community views are taken and concerns about 'equality of arms' with the private sector having access to overwhelming resources and expertise. This led to the growing use of legal challenge in an increasingly sclerotic plan making system. Consensus had broken down.

It was against this background that the Conservative Party published its Policy Green Paper on Open Source Planning in 2010.<sup>7</sup> This argued that civic engagement and collaborative democracy is the means of reconciling economic development with quality of life and that communities should be given the greatest possible opportunity to have their say and the greatest possible degree of local control. The paper went on to state that '*if we enable communities to find their own ways of overcoming tensions between development and conservation, local people can become proponents rather than opponents of appropriate economic growth.*'

This belief underpins much of the Coalition Government's agenda for planning reform as promoted through the Localism Bill. This has been the subject of extensive consultation with a range of stakeholders as well as amendment as a result of the Parliamentary legislative process. The debates which have taken place reveal a high level of consensus around the benefits of securing the participation of local people in the planning process although concerns have been expressed about how far neighbourhood led planning can be truly

4 Urban Task Force, (1999) *Towards an Urban Renaissance* reference, E & F N Spon, London

5 ODPM, (2004), *Community Involvement in Planning: The Government's Objectives.*

6 TCPA, (2010) *The Future of Planning Report: Distilling the TCPA Roundtable Debates*, TCPA, London.

7 Conservative Party, (2010) *Open Source Green Paper*, Policy Green Paper 14.

representative. This is a recurring issue for all forms of participation, particularly in relation to 'hard to reach' groups, giving rise to a fear of 'hijacking' by local interest groups. In this regard the requirement that a Neighbourhood Plan has to be endorsed by a local referendum can be seen as an important, although challenging, safeguard.

### Summary

While communities have made significant contributions to local planning for many years, through, for example, Parish Plans and Village Design Statements, there is little doubt that the Localism Bill seeks to take local participation in planning to a new level. While the draft legislation requires that Neighbourhood Plans must be in conformity with national and local planning policy, it represents a significant devolution of decision making powers on the planning of land use and development to local communities. So a journey which started over 40 years ago with the Skeffington report now puts local people centre stage in the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans. This is seen as a key step in rebuilding trust in planning as a means of delivering sustainable development to improve local economies, the environment and social wellbeing.

## 3. Empowering Communities to Plan

The Localism Bill contains a series of measures intended to enhance community engagement in the planning process. These go beyond the formal consultation requirements enshrined within existing legislation and are focused primarily upon plan and policy making at the local level.

One of the Coalition Government's first acts of planning reform was the announcement that it intended to abolish the regional tier of planning and revoke regional spatial strategies which had become a symbol of the extent to which parts of the planning system had become dysfunctional and discredited. Notwithstanding the legal challenges raised against the revocation process, the Localism Bill will simplify planning into national and local tiers based on democratically elected authorities. While commentators have expressed concern about the delivery of strategic planning in relation to 'cross border' issues, it is likely that a combination of formal (e.g. Local Enterprise Partnerships) and informal arrangements will emerge, underpinned by a 'duty to cooperate'.

Critically the retention of National Policy Statements, endorsed by Parliament, will provide a clear framework for decisions on major infrastructure projects using the processes established for the Infrastructure Planning Commission, set up by the Planning Act 2008. However the Localism Bill returns decision making powers on such projects to the Secretary of State, operating within a set timescale. In many ways these powers are intended to limit the scope for local communities and pressure groups to frustrate the planning process for projects which are deemed to be in the 'national interest'.

During the property boom of the mid 2000's, the planning and land development process became a significant source of funding for physical and social infrastructure and, in particular, affordable housing. This was achieved through the power of local authorities to seek s106 contributions from landowners/developers. This mechanism has been criticised as being somewhat arbitrary and lacking in transparency. The Planning Act 2008 therefore gave local planning authorities the power to establish a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to fund local infrastructure based on an explicit schedule of charges for different forms of development.

The Localism Bill retains this power but aims to give councils greater flexibility to determine how to implement the levy and ensure that communities have a greater say in how resources are deployed. Coupled with proposals for a New Homes Bonus, where central government pledges to match council tax contributions for new builds and bringing refurbished properties back into stock, this offers an incentive for communities to accept higher levels of growth in their area. The new CIL also requires charging authorities to 'allocate a meaningful proportion of their levy revenues raised in that neighbourhood back to that neighbourhood to spend on the infrastructure that local people consider is most needed.'<sup>8</sup>

The measure in the Localism Bill which has attracted most attention relates to the power for local communities to establish Neighbourhood Plans. In addition the Bill provides for Community Right to Build Orders which allows for small scale development that meets local need to be brought forward by community groups without a traditional planning application and Neighbourhood Development Orders which gives deemed to consent for particular forms of development.

Neighbourhood Plans, once approved, will form part of the Statutory Plan alongside the Local Plan with which it must conform. The Local Plan will take on a strategic role and will provide guidance

<sup>8</sup> DCLG, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/176860911>

on housing and employment requirements, and key transport routes for example. Thus a Neighbourhood Plan will have to incorporate the Local Plan's housing targets for the area as a minimum, but may propose additional development.

Town and parish councils, where they exist, will be allowed to prepare Neighbourhood Plans and where they do not Neighbourhood Forums can initiate the process provided that they comprise at least 21 people who live or work in the area, and have a clear constitution with the purpose of fostering social, economic and environmental wellbeing. Local councils will have a key role in the designation of Neighbourhood Forums to whom they will have a duty to provide non financial support.

Once prepared a Neighbourhood Plan will be subject to independent examination to establish whether it conforms to local and national planning policy, respects European Directives and national and international designations. Subject to passing the independent examination, the Plan will be put to a local referendum and will become an adopted development plan if more than 50% of those voting support it.

The Community Right to Build provision within the Bill is more modest but allows small-scale (e.g. 5 to 10 homes), community led developments to be brought forward through a neighbourhood planning process. This will not be able to exceed 10 per cent of existing development over a 10 year period. Once again Community Right to Build Orders will require the support of more than 50 per cent of voters in a local referendum.

The Localism Bill imposes a duty on the promoters of major development to consult with local communities prior to submitting a planning application. While this is already common practice, this power emphasises the importance which the Government attaches to giving local people a stronger role in, and more positive outlook on, both planning and development.

Indeed in the Ministerial Foreword to the Draft National Planning Policy Framework<sup>9</sup> (NPPF), the Rt Hon Greg Clark MP states: *'in recent years, planning has tended to exclude, rather than include, people and communities. In part, this has been a result of targets being imposed, and decisions taken, by bodies remote from them. Dismantling unaccountable regional apparatus and introducing neighbourhood planning addresses this. In part, people have been put off from getting involved because planning policy itself has become so elaborate and forbidding – the preserve of specialists, rather than people in communities.'*

<sup>9</sup> DGLG, (2011) Draft National Planning Policy Framework.

### Summary

The Government's planning reforms and the powers contained in the Localism Bill give communities an opportunity to have a more direct influence over changes to the places where they live and work. While this will have to be within the framework of national and local planning policy, local residents and businesses are being trusted to take the right decisions for the future well being of their neighbourhoods. The newly truncated draft NPPF's aim to make the planning 'system less complex and more accessible' is reflective of such thinking.<sup>10</sup>

The remainder of this document seeks to explore the key issues and challenges involved in engaging local people in the planning process and identify practical ways in which the Government's reforms to the planning system can be made to work in delivering sustainable development for the public good.

<sup>10</sup> DCLG,  
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/draftframework>



Courtesy of Land Securities



## 4. Learning from Experience – Key Issues for Community Engagement in Planning and Development

There is considerable cumulative experience to draw upon regarding the issues and challenges of securing the effective engagement of local people in the planning and development process. Both practitioners and academics have explored the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches applied in a variety of contexts. However, despite the communicative model of planning being widely accepted and providing the basis for much of the Government's reform agenda, there is still much to be learnt.

For most people engagement with the planning process is triggered in two ways:

- seeking planning consent for development involved in adapting or improving their own living or business accommodation; or
- responding to planning applications arising in their locality as a result of neighbour notification, site notices or local advertisements/press coverage.

Both instances may contribute to a negative perception of planning although this will depend to a significant degree on the outcome. It is undoubtedly the case that either as promoter or objector, planning is principally viewed as a control function which either has to be negotiated to secure the necessary consents or used to prevent unwelcome change. This perception highlights the extent of the challenge which the Government has set itself in promoting its reform agenda.

The positive role of securing the meaningful engagement of local people in the planning process is widely recognised but needs to be more clearly articulated. Key benefits which have been highlighted<sup>11</sup> include the following:

- involvement leads to outcomes that better reflect the views and aspirations and meet the needs of the wider community in all its diversity;
- public involvement is valuable as a key element of a vibrant, open and participatory democracy;

<sup>11</sup> OPDM (2004) op cit p 4.

- involvement improves the quality and efficiency of decisions by drawing on local knowledge and minimising unnecessary and costly conflict;
- involvement educates all participants about the needs of communities, the business sector and the role of local government; and
- involvement helps promote social cohesion by making new connections with communities and offering them a tangible stake in decision making.

One of the principal obstacles to engaging communities in planning is that it is seen as complex and impenetrable involving bureaucratic structures and processes and using technical terms and jargon which can be off putting. The Government's reforms are aimed at removing much of the bureaucracy and providing a simplified national policy framework. However, articulating the important role of planning in balancing between multiple objectives across a range of scales and involving a variety of interests will remain a substantial challenge.

Experience indicates that it is much easier to engage local people where they can see the connection of planning with their everyday lives. In this regard participation in the planning of discrete places (town, village, or neighbourhood) or specific areas (e.g. town centres, parks or regeneration site) is easier to achieve than county or district wide plans. There is little doubt that there is genuine appetite for engagement in Neighbourhood Plans from town and parish councils who have felt that key decisions about the future of their place have been taken out of their hands.<sup>12</sup>

Critically, successful community engagement depends upon convincing local people that their views will be listened to and acted upon. Participation in planning must involve a genuine, two way dialogue which gives communities a real influence over outcomes. This requires participation to be approached from the right mindset. Undertaking forced consultation as part of a plan making process is unlikely to be as productive as undertaking consultation because of a genuine belief that it will produce a better result. Individuals and communities are quick to sense when local authorities and developers are 'going through the motions' and can rapidly become cynical and disenchanted leading to 'consultation fatigue'.

A recurring issue for those seeking to engage local people in community consultation is the extent to which it is truly representative.

<sup>12</sup> Research undertaken by Plymouth University in 2010 found significant interest amongst town and parish councils in the South West in the opportunities arising from the Localism Bill.

It has long been recognised that participation can be dominated by the educated, organised, time-rich, and articulate who do not reflect the full range of local circumstances and opinions. Indeed the tendency for local/special interest groups to hijack proceedings can in itself become an obstacle to wider participation.

Ensuring an inclusive approach to participation is therefore essential – although one needs to be realistic about the limits on what can be achieved. Accordingly the socio- demographic characteristics of the neighbourhood need to be understood and arrangements made to engage ‘hard to reach’ groups. These will vary from place to place but experience suggests that young people, minority ethnic groups, and the socially excluded pose particular challenges. In addition ‘difficult to contact’ groups like working families and the small business community may require special effort.

A common approach is to work through existing community structures and networks, such as residents groups, clubs and associations. While this can be effective in reaching a higher proportion of local people, concerns about securing a representative and inclusive response will remain. However these concerns apply equally to the democratic institutions through which planning is ultimately delivered.

Perhaps a more fundamental issue relates to the planning of new neighbourhoods and communities. This raises the challenge of consulting with people that are not yet there. In these circumstances is it appropriate to rely on planners and intermediaries to interpret what future residents and businesses will want or should the wider community be consulted? Given that large scale development can take many years to deliver should particular attention be paid to the views of children and young families?

A wide variety of approaches and techniques have been developed to address the challenge of securing effective community engagement in the planning and development process. These can be characterised as either ‘traditional’ or ‘innovative’. Traditional techniques are those which have typically been used by local planning authorities to fulfil their obligations to consult with ‘the public’ during the preparation of development plans. These include:

- leaflets/brochures;
- newsletters;
- advertising; and
- briefing meetings.



Planning outreach  
in Teignbridge  
– courtesy of  
Teignbridge BC

Increasing use is being made of websites, email and other forms of digital communication both to disseminate information and elicit responses. This is now supplementing public exhibitions and consultation meetings which are used to invite written comments and achieve responses to questionnaire surveys.

Innovative techniques tend to be more deliberative in nature with a clear aim of identifying and exploring key planning issues and challenges. For example they may involve facilitated workshops and focus groups looking at a specific area or topic such as transport. Other approaches include ‘planning for real’, ‘planning weekends’ or design charettes (enquiry by design). These aim at producing a consensus vision for a community by engaging local people, stakeholders and professionals in a structured process of examining issues and generating a clear set of priorities and plans.

Accessing the necessary skills and resources is a key consideration in the design and delivery of successful participation programmes. The Royal Town Planning Institute suggests that planners need to recognise the importance of communication skills in the planning process and be able to demonstrate negotiation, mediation, advocacy and leadership capabilities.<sup>13</sup> In some cases it may be appropriate to make use of community engagement specialists, particularly where issues of independence and/or trust arise. Inevitably approaches

<sup>13</sup> These are identified by the RTPI as required learning outcomes in the education of town planners

have to be tailored to the availability of resources. While the use of in-house or volunteer resources can make a valuable contribution, effective consultation necessarily requires time and money. Here there is a balance to be struck between giving people enough time to reach a considered view and maintaining momentum.

Best practice indicates that the public should be engaged in the planning process at the earliest possible opportunity. This allows key issues to be identified and addressed during the formulation of plans and proposals rather than on a reactive basis. Indeed it is important that consultees understand the whole process from the outset rather than being dealt with on an 'ad hoc' basis. In this way they can develop ownership of both the process and its results. If this can be achieved perceptions of planning are likely to become positive.

### Summary

A more positive attitude towards planning is a clear aim of the Government's reforms. The introduction of Neighbourhood Plans which will be driven by local people and endorsed by a referendum makes it essential that there is meaningful engagement of communities in the planning process. While there is an understanding of good practice and the key challenges gained from public participation in planning over the last 40 years, the localism and Big Society agendas heighten the need to ensure that community involvement in planning helps deliver the Government's objective of sustainable development and growth. It should be remembered however that for consultation to be effective in demonstrating positive outcomes it needs to be initiated early in the process and wherever possible continued long after planning permission has been granted.

## 5. Devising New Local Approaches – Overview of the Case Study Communities

Ensuring that community engagement in the reformed planning system is a positive force for sustainable development will require new approaches. There is some evidence that the use of innovative techniques can help establish a consensus in favour of appropriate development and growth. This is clearly the objective of the neighbourhood planning powers and incentives contained within the Localism Bill, and the draft National Planning Policy Framework.

### *Box 1: Some Key Research Questions*

- **Defining Parameters.** What is the appropriate geographic basis for community/neighbourhood planning? Is it possible to define functional or distinct neighbourhoods? What differences exist between rural, suburban and urban areas and how should this be reflected in approaches to community/neighbourhood planning? How far should local planning authorities seek to influence the selection of area or should they let communities decide what is appropriate?
- **Resolving Conflicts.** How can one ensure that the members of the community actively involved in neighbourhood planning are representative of their area? What happens if more than one group wishes to represent an area? How should local planning authorities seek to influence the composition of a neighbourhood forum? What role can/should business/landowner/developer interests play in the neighbourhood planning process? What is the role of ward councillors as democratically elected representatives?
- **Canvassing Opinion.** What are the best ways of obtaining a cross section of community views on local planning and development? What channels of communication should be used? What information do communities need to reach a balanced judgement between the benefits and costs of development, economically, socially and environmentally? How can resistance to change and NIMBYism be dealt with?
- **Resourcing Planning.** How can the work required for neighbourhood planning be resourced? How can the process be made affordable and effective both in terms of cost and time? Can local planning authorities' budgets accommodate the demands for neighbourhood planning and if not how should they prioritise their spending to support it? Can other resources and sources of funding be unlocked? What implications arise from accepting funding from the private sector?
- **Delivering in the future.** What needs to be done to ensure that the neighbourhood planning provisions included in the Localism Bill can be delivered? What arrangements should be put in place to review and update Neighbourhood Plans in the light of local circumstances and changes in the wider economic and policy environment? How can the expectations of neighbourhood planning be managed?

The aim of this research project is to explore how community involvement in planning can help deliver more, better quality development, faster. To test this hypothesis a series of questions have been framed to be explored through a number of case studies. These are set out in Box 1.

The case studies aim to explore a cross section of circumstances across which the more locally based approach to planning will need to operate. These illustrate different approaches to engaging the community in both plan making and development management.

Using a matrix approach and drawing on the knowledge and contacts of the research team the following case studies were identified:

<b>Market context/ Location</b>	<b>Urban/ Inner City</b>	<b>Suburban</b>	<b>Rural</b>
<b>Growing</b>	Bankside (LB Southwark), Birmingham City Centre Big City Plan	Battersea Park (LB Wandsworth), Caterham Barracks (Surrey), North Harlow (Essex/Herts)	Sherford (South Devon), Chudleigh (South Devon)
<b>Stable</b>	Balsall Heath, (Birmingham)	Moseley (Birmingham) New Barnet (LB Barnet)	Tattenhall (Cheshire)

A proforma was developed to guide the data gathering process. This involved background research using publicly available documentation and interviews with key individuals involved in the planning process. In a number of cases the researchers had direct knowledge of the case studies on which they could draw. The findings from the research were assembled as case study reports which were used to highlight the key features of the community engagement process, its contribution to the planning outcome and the principal lessons which can be learnt. Quotes from the interview process are used throughout.

The following paragraphs seek to provide an overview of each case study, explaining the local context against which community participation in the planning process has been developed.

**Bankside** is located in Central London. Falling within LB Southwark, it lies on the southern side of the River Thames. The area contains some of London's most important tourist attractions, including Tate Modern, The Globe Theatre and Borough market. Over the past twenty years the area has been the focus of major development including arts and tourism institutions, new housing, commercial offices and to a lesser extent retail. Community involvement has developed over a long period starting with initial involvement from developers in the early stages (and the establishment of a Residents Forum in 1995) to formal involvement in Better Bankside, the local Business Improvement District. It has been involved in activities which might be described as "neighbourhood planning" for many years and this is being formalised through its role as a frontrunner in both business and community led neighbourhood planning.

**Balsall Heath** is an inner city neighbourhood located two miles south of Birmingham City Centre. Over the years it has been through a number of redevelopment and renewal initiatives involving housing clearance and infill with largely social housing. However the majority of the housing is pre-1919 terraces with associated problems of heating and insulation. With an ethnically mixed population of around 15,000, Balsall Heath has low car ownership but suffers from noise, pollution and severance from commuter traffic which passes through the area. The Balsall Heath Forum which was established in the early 1990's is a neighbourhood organisation which plays a key role as the champion for local people and businesses. It has been invited to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan focusing on addressing housing needs, regeneration, environmental improvement and public transport connections. A neighbourhood plan is being produced for the area as part of the Neighbourhood Planning Front Runners programme.

**Battersea Park** lies within Wandsworth which is a mixed but relatively prosperous inner London Borough. The case study is focused on a developer led scheme for the redevelopment of a former builders' merchant for flatted residential and limited retail development within a densely developed area of traditional south London terraced housing. It explores the approach of both the local planning authority and developer to engaging local residents in reaching identifying an acceptable development solution.



**Birmingham City Centre** – covering 800 hectares at the heart of Birmingham the city centre is home to the central business district, the regional shopping centre, national leisure attractions and residential communities. The case study focuses on the response of the city council to calls for a single vision and framework for the future development of the city centre. Working with businesses and stakeholders the council delivered the Big City Plan - a shared vision and strategy for the future transformation of the city centre. It provides an innovative approach through a public private partnership to provide a single strategy supporting economic growth and the delivery of high quality sustainable development.

**Caterham Barracks** comprises a 23 hectare former military site on the southern fringes of London in Surrey. Over a period of 15 years the site has been planned and redeveloped as an economically-integrated, mixed-use neighbourhood that includes housing (366 homes for sale and for rent), supermarket, offices, veterinary hospital, doctors' surgery, indoor skateboard and BMX centre, landscaping and open space. Extensive community consultation took place at the planning stage. This has been carried forward through the creation of a community development trust that now manages leisure and business facilities and creates jobs for local people.

**Chudleigh** is a small historic market town with a population of around 3,600, lying in the Teign Valley to the south east of Dartmoor. Teignbridge and Chudleigh Councils worked with CABE to develop a Community Masterplan through a participatory process. The plan sets out a vision for the growth of housing and employment in the town to meet local needs. This respects the environmental setting and historic character of the town and seeks to address the views and opinions expressed by a wide range of organisations and individuals. The lessons learnt from Chudleigh are now being applied to the nearby Dawlish Neighbourhood Planning front runner.

**(North) Harlow** involves a proposal for a major urban extension of the new town of Harlow straddling the Essex/Hertfordshire border. This was identified in the Regional Spatial Strategy as a location for the eventual development of at least 10,000 dwellings as a model of sustainable development. An independent facilitator has been commissioned by the developer, Land Securities and Places for

Courtesy of the  
Moseley Community  
Development Trust

People, to consult with local communities in East Hertfordshire and Harlow to prepare a brief for a masterplan. This provides an example of an innovative approach to engaging local people in the process of planning a large scale development project against the background of initial public opposition.



**Moseley** is an established residential area some three miles south of Birmingham city centre. Served by a local shopping centre which lies at its heart, the area has a strong local heritage, reflected in its designation as a Conservation Area. However local people are concerned about the changing character of the area including declining retail vitality, the lack of local jobs, poor environmental conditions resulting from traffic and the loss of green spaces and unsympathetic backland and infill development. The local Community Development Trust is working, with the support of Birmingham City Council, to prepare a Supplementary Planning Document to address these concerns, promote sustainable development and ensure that developers and investors understand local priorities.

**New Barnet** lies in suburban North London, an area characterised by low rise semi detached housing and plentiful green space. The New Barnet shopping centre became the focus for competing supermarket

schemes which triggered resident led opposition and the creation of a Save New Barnet Campaign. The case study focuses on challenge for the local planning authority in engaging the local community in a positive way in regeneration plans for the town centre and demonstrating the benefits which can flow from new development.

**Sherford** is a proposed new settlement on the eastern outskirts of Plymouth, located with South Hams District. Conceived as a solution to meeting the area's housing needs and addressing an acute affordability issue the project involved a externally facilitated 'enquiry by design' process. This drew surrounding villages, key stakeholders and professionals together to develop a masterplan for a sustainable new community which has attracted broad support. This has resulted in an Action Area Plan and planning approval which involved ongoing consultation.

**Tattenhall** is a small settlement to the south east of the city of Chester. The Parish Council has taken the lead in the preparation of a Parish Plan and Village Design Statement and has been selected to be a Neighbourhood Planning frontrunner. Efforts are being made to engage a representative cross section of the community. The key challenge is likely to be gaining acceptance for higher levels of growth in a place where many people like things the way they are. In this regard this case study highlights the tensions which have to be managed between growth and localism.

These case studies provide the opportunity to consider past and current experience of engaging communities in the planning process at a local level. The insights gained from our investigations are discussed in the following section.

## 6. Lessons from the Case Studies

### Better leading

The case studies reveal that there are a variety of motivations for community involvement in the planning process. These include:

- a reactive response to a perceived threat from development (New Barnet) or a recognition that change is going to occur as a

result of the cessation of site operations (Caterham Barracks and Battersea Park)

- pro-active planning by a local authority or town or parish council seeking to address the needs of a locality. This can result from the formal forward planning process (Sherford), a more general concern about issues such as the lack of affordable housing and local employment (Chudleigh and Tattenhall), or the creation of shared vision and strategy for an area (Birmingham Big City Plan)
- a desire on the part of the local community to play a greater role in planning the future of their area usually in response to major development activity or concern about the nature and direction of change (Bankside, Balsall Heath and Moseley)
- recognition by business or development interests that there is a need to understand and address local issues and concerns if development proposals are to be successfully promoted through the planning system (Battersea Park and North Harlow)

It is clear therefore that community engagement can be initiated by a range of different players. However progress is likely to be much more difficult without effective engagement with the local planning authority and/or the recognised community council or forum. While business and development interests can provide the drive to involve community interests in the consideration of development proposals the statutory planning and representative roles of local councils needs to be respected.

### **Defining the Neighbourhood**

Concerns have been raised about the difficulties of identifying the right area for neighbourhood planning. In urban areas where boundaries are less clear this may prove a challenge. However the case studies do not suggest insurmountable problems. Indeed, even where the focus of consultation has been on the creation of new communities or development, pragmatic solutions have emerged. For example, in the case of Caterham Barracks attention focused on the adjacent housing areas while for Sherford neighbouring villages were seen as representing the local community.

### *Box 2: Initiating Community involvement*

**Balsall Heath:** The Council invited the long established Forum to be the city's pilot for the Neighbourhood Planning frontrunner.

**Bankside:** Community involvement was triggered by local residents', employers,' investors' and Southwark Council's shared concern to ensure that the planned growth in the area was managed effectively and took into account the interests of all stakeholders.

**Battersea Park:** as a council officer noted, 'on larger schemes it's the developer and Council saying it is good practice to do pre-application consultation. Not just giving them an application but giving them a chance to shape the scheme.'

**Caterham Barracks:** Community involvement was triggered by concerns among the local community as to what would happen to the old barracks after the Ministry of Defence's departure.

**New Barnet:** Community involvement was first triggered by anti-supermarket sentiment. ASDA and Tesco both had plans to build on sites adjacent to East Barnet Road where the Council sees regeneration as critical but local action saw their initial applications quashed.

**North Harlow:** The promoters of development commissioned a consultation exercise to engage the local community. The aim of the consultation was to understand the range of issues affecting the local community – both in East Herts and Harlow and for the outputs to be used as the basis for a masterplanning brief.

**Sherford:** Community involvement was triggered after the LPA first considered the Sherford area as a site for housing development. They invited the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment as external facilitators to engage the local communities in designing the masterplan.

**Tattenhall:** A council officer pointed to 'an appetite to have greater control about the future of the area. We have a Parish Council that

has a record of plan making and recognises that there will be future change in the village and beyond. It wants the ability to steer that change so it takes place in the context of the local community understanding why it's happening and so it can address locally identified priorities. It's all an experiment but we at the Council are up for giving the changes our best shot.'

In Bankside the area is largely defined by the River Thames and key river crossings and was initially self defined as the area for the Business Improvement District (BID). In 2010, after a successful ballot to continue the BID for a further 5 years, the area was extended. In Balsall Heath the area covered by the local Forum is well established. While some additional areas would be logical to include for planning purposes e.g. Balsall Heath Park, this is covered by another Forum. In other instances the City Council is not keen to see extension to the core area. These issues do not appear to have arisen in Moseley where the focus of attention is primarily on the 'village' centre although the boundary of the Plan is extensive and perhaps too large for a community led approach. In the case of Battersea Park consultation efforts were focused on the immediately surrounding residents who would be affected by the development proposals in terms of traffic and access and visual impact.

These issues do not arise in the case of free standing settlements such as Chudleigh and Tattenhall. In such instances there is a strong physical sense of place although a need to recognise the wider influence of housing and labour markets.

The case studies point to the need for neighbourhood planning to adopt a pragmatic approach to the definition of the place and community. Within urban areas there will inevitably be 'fuzzy boundaries' which are perhaps best defined using established ward and community structures. Where large scale new development is proposed it is vital to engage with the neighbouring residents, businesses and communities who clearly have a stake in the future of the area. While the forum may cover a wide area, the Neighbourhood Development Plan or Order will need to be precise about the area it covers. It will also need to directly relate to land or streets which the community wish to plan, and policies will cover.

### Assembling the Community

A key challenge in securing effective community participation in planning is to achieve a representative response, including 'hard to reach' groups. The case studies reveal a variety of approaches to tackling this problem, which is clearly widely recognised. These can be characterised as follows:

- working through established democratic structures such as town and parish councils (Chudleigh, Tattenhall and Sherford)
- working through pre-existing community groups (Balsall Heath and Moseley)
- establishing bespoke groupings to represent community and/or business interests in the planning process (Bankside, Caterham Barracks and New Barnet)

It is evident that the approach needs to reflect the circumstances which prevail locally. In all cases however it is important to consider who is represented and 'go the extra mile' to ensure that the widest range of opinions and interests are canvassed. In a number of cases (Caterham Barracks, Chudleigh, North Harlow and Sherford) external facilitators with expertise in community planning were used to assist local councils and developers.

#### *Box 3: Assembling the community*

**Balsall Heath Forum** has some 1,000 members out of an electorate of 9,000. There are 12 resident elected members, 6 residents who represent voluntary and faith organisations and 4 who are co-opted. To assist with neighbourhood planning representatives of the local business community have been brought in. With such an organised group, the timetable for the production of the plan has been relatively easy to co-ordinate, and the aim is a July 2012 implementation.

**Battersea Park:** 'The developer held [a series of] public meetings. It's important to have a second and follow up meetings to show responses to the issues that were previously raised. The important time is when the developers meet residents one on one and offer to go round to their house and see how it will impact on *their* window, or

*their porch. It's not the meeting itself, but the swapping of telephone numbers at the end which is usually the most productive bit.'*

**Caterham Barracks:** Over 1000 people attended workshops and hands-on planning sessions. The sessions were divided up to cover all aspects of community development –housing, the local economy, social provision, transport, and the quality of the environment. A workshop was run over one day to find out what young people wanted from the development. Local groups were initiated to act as a forum for discussion on the site's future.

**New Barnet:** There are a number of well educated professional people. Pockets of pro-active residents exist, but the majority of people are 'reactive rather than proactive'. Residents Associations act as something of a lobbying force, albeit primarily in NIMBY form. 'As time has gone by the Council has become more sympathetic to community groups, no longer viewing them as cranks – a significant political shift'.

**North Harlow:** Open invitations were extended to the wider community through local newspapers, newsletters and web announcements. We used newsletters, drop in sessions, questionnaires, a 'Peoples' Panel', website and community forums to identify common concerns.

**Sherford:** Initial workshops saw local planning officers, promoters and landowners taking part alongside objectors, community representatives and experts (representing a variety of interests including nature conservation, sustainability, transport, minerals, education, health and emergency services). A young peoples' planning day was held in partnership with many different organisations to find out what young people thought of the development.

**Tattenhall:** The Council received help from several locals with useful skills: including Local Authority retirees and architects. The same people, with very few exceptions, have become involved in the Neighbourhood Plan. 'Attempts have been made to engage local groups – with meetings at the bridge club, tennis club, beer festival – as well as specific initiatives to engage the young, elderly and business communities'.



### Resourcing Community Participation in Planning

Recognising the time and cost involved in delivering community participation in the planning process and finding ways in which this can be resourced is clearly a key factor for success. The case studies reveal a variety of approaches.

The most straightforward approach is where a developer meets the cost of funding community involvement. This is a recognised cost in promoting development through the planning process. Indeed most local planning authorities now expect applicants to submit a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) with their planning application to demonstrate that the views of local people have been elicited and responded to. This requirement is likely to be reinforced by the requirement for pre-application consultation on major applications included within the Localism Bill.

Relying on developer funding inevitably gives rise to questions about independence and the reliability of reported findings. To a significant degree such concerns can be addressed through the use of external facilitators and transparency regarding the nature of their brief.

Public funding may be used to pump prime community involvement in plan making. For example the Chudleigh Community Masterplan was funded in part through CABE, while the Neighbourhood Planning frontrunners (Balsall Heath and Tattenham) are receiving funding support from the Department of Communities and Local Government. In an era of financial restraint however alternative resources need to be found.

Bankside represents a novel approach in that a Business Improvement District engaged local businesses and residents with planning and environmental improvements to the area. This has included work on an Urban Forest Initiative and an Urban Design Framework. While this has previously been focused on specific time limited projects, partners are currently exploring how this might be extended into the formal neighbourhood planning process through the Government's "frontrunner" initiative.

In most of the case studies volunteer involvement from residents and professionals, has unlocked a significant resource, particularly in terms of local knowledge and insight. However there are limits to what can be achieved through the use of locally employed or volunteer labour. There are particular issues with the technical capacity of volunteers to understand the plan making process and the complexity of technical drafting. This points to the need for both technical and logistical support to be available from the local planning authority or some other source

of professional expertise such as Planning Aid – however funding and resource availability in such areas can be limited.

The key lesson to draw from this is that securing effective community participation in the preparation of neighbourhood plans needs to be properly planned and resourced, particularly if documents are going to form the basis for decision making on land allocations and development management. In this regard the involvement of professional support from local planning authorities or externally funded professionals appears essential if the community's input is to be translated into effective plans.

### Developing the Plan

The key steps in the plan-making process typically involves identifying the key issues, understanding opportunities and constraints, developing and analysing options and selecting the optimum plan, including the development of more detailed policies and proposals. Communities often feel excluded from this process which tends to be dominated by stakeholders who are well resourced and have access to professional advice.

Most plans seek to start from a clear understanding of the issues facing a locality in terms of economic, social and physical development. Local knowledge and understanding is a key input but this needs to be supplemented by systematic consideration of the evidence base. Local planning authorities hold a substantial amount of relevant information which needs to be made available to local communities in an accessible format to help them understand current and future challenges and the need for growth.

Courtesy of Land  
Securities



#### *Box 4: Approaches to Plan Making*

**Birmingham Big City Plan** involves working with the business community to create a shared vision and strategy for the transformation of the city centre to support economic growth. It is built upon engagement with the wider city centre community to understand the needs of the area, and creating a plan that is responsive to this.

**Balsall Heath** received support from Council in terms of data, material and professional/technical guidance. They have avoided the more formal elements of the plan making process such as a Sustainability Assessment or Strategic Environmental Assessment.

**Chudleigh** saw a series of ‘key facts’ have being used to inform local people about the issues facing the town, particularly around the need for affordable housing and local employment.

**Moseley** illustrates the need for information from consultation exercises to be recorded in a systematic way to allow comments to be analysed.

**New Barnet:** ideas were invited from the community – some were unrealistic but many were credible. There then followed a presentation of town plan options with the most incremental approach attracting the greatest amount of support.

**North Harlow:** an open invitation was issued to residents to highlight the key issues and concerns through an iterative process. This approach engendered positive engagement with the potential for major new development.

**Sherford** saw an explanation of the process and use of stakeholder statements from official bodies to set parameters. They have made use of experts representing a variety of interests (see Box 3).

The case studies reveal a variety of approaches (see Box 4) ranging from the presentation of ‘key facts’ for Chudleigh to formal stakeholder statements to set the parameters for the ‘enquiry by design’ process for Sherford. A combination of exhibitions, workshops and surveys

are typically used to capture the views of local people. 'Open' and/or 'closed' questions can be used depending on circumstances. For example at North Harlow an open dialogue has taken place with local people about their key issues and concerns regarding large scale development. Elsewhere neighbourhood planning is building on the knowledge and understanding which has been gained from the preparation of Parish Plans (Tattenhall).

While the preparation of statutory development plans typically involves the generation and assessment of options (to meet requirements for Sustainability Assessment/Strategic Environmental Assessment) the approach to community planning appears less formal. Identifying the preferred approach typically involves understanding opportunities and constraints and capturing ideas for improving the place. This is important if local people are to feel that plans are both relevant and positive. There is some evidence that this approach is likely to lead to incremental rather than step change although the availability of incentives such as CIL and New Homes Bonus linking new development with resources for community facilities may change attitudes. For example the Dawlish Neighbourhood Plan frontrunner has used a 'ready reckoner' to help the local community understand the link between different levels of housing development and funding for local improvements. It is important that the approach is proportionate to the scale of change being proposed in an area. As such, a Development Plan style document may not always be necessary so alternative, yet equally valuable approaches such as Supplementary Planning documents could be explored.

### **Managing Conflict**

It is inevitable that conflicting views will emerge during the planning process. Indeed planning is invariably about finding the balance between competing interests 'in the public interest'. In its draft National Planning Framework the Government is seeking to provide clear guidance on how this balance should be struck through introducing a 'presumption in favour of sustainable development'. What is termed as 'sustainable development' will be subject to interpretation and debate at all levels and there will be a continued importance for mediation in decision making and the balancing of views. The Local Planning Authority will continue to have an important role in this utilising its experience and expertise here.

The case studies reveal the importance of managing both local expectations and aspirations. It is clearly far easier to achieve

community consensus around opposing unwelcome development as the examples of supermarket proposals in Moseley and New Barnet demonstrate. The challenge for local planning authorities is to direct such local engagement toward positive planning. Bankside and Battersea Park highlight how local concerns can be used to shape proposals for the benefit of both developer and local people.

A key area of potential conflict relates to the translation of national policies to the local level. Local communities are particularly sensitive to proposals which they perceive as 'over development'. This can be observed in the case studies for Battersea Park (5 storey blocks in an area of 2 to 3 storey housing) and Moseley (backland and infill development). Over development is seen as being out of character and likely to result in additional pressure on physical and social infrastructure. Both developers and local planning authorities need to be sensitive to these concerns whilst maintaining compliance with national and local planning policy frameworks. In practice this means starting from a clear understanding of the constraints (policy and financial) which apply. Indeed an open and transparent approach is a fundamental requirement for successfully engaging local communities.

Battersea Park site: improvements have been made to the flats (right) as part of the development



The example of Sherford demonstrates the benefits which can flow from the active engagement of local communities in the masterplanning process. Initially conceived as an urban extension, the masterplan delivered proposals for a high quality, sustainable, stand alone community. This helped to bring about a change in opinion amongst the local community, although some opposition remained. This serves to demonstrate the need to be realistic about the ability to achieve total consensus in planning decisions. Put simply, it is unlikely to happen.

### **Securing Community Endorsement**

The Neighbourhood Plan and Right to Build proposals contained within the Localism Bill makes endorsement through a local referendum a key element in the approval process. There is no substantive experience of using referenda in the planning system although community endorsement has been achieved for proposals affecting social housing tenants such as the establishment of Housing Action Trusts and stock transfers to Registered Social Landlords. This demonstrates that local people will accept significant change which will have a direct impact on their homes and living environment. However to be successful it is important to demonstrate that the proposals are likely to be of greater benefit to them than maintaining the status quo.

A variety of factors are likely to contribute to a successful outcome to a Neighbourhood Plan referendum. These include:

- A belief that the Plan is being promoted in the interests of the whole community rather than a particular group or individual.
- A clear articulation of the benefits which will flow from the Plan for the community and individuals who live and work in the area.
- An understanding of the likely consequences and risks of not approving a Neighbourhood Plan.
- Trust in the promoters of the Plan. In this regard the leadership of the community and engagement with as wide a range of local interests as possible is critical.

Honesty and openness are therefore going to be essential if Neighbourhood Plans are to withstand the scrutiny of the local people. Plan promoters and professionals will have a key role to play in raising awareness and understanding of the positive role which planning can play in shaping a sustainable future for communities.

## 7. Towards a New Approach – Pointers of Best Practice and Innovation

The aim of this section is to highlight the principal learning points to emerge from both the case studies and wider experience of the opportunities and challenges of successful engagement of communities in the planning process.

### **Vision and Leadership**

Planning the future of places necessarily requires vision and leadership. Individuals can be passionate about the towns, neighbourhoods and villages where they live and work. The challenge for communities, businesses and above all local planning authorities is to find a means of channelling this energy into a forward looking debate. This demands strong leadership particularly from local authorities who are being given responsibility in the reformed planning system for setting a clear context for Neighbourhood Plans. Within this framework town and parish councils and local people have the opportunity to have a far greater influence over the scale, and future pattern of development than ever before. The evidence suggests that there is a real appetite from local communities to play a bigger role in the planning process. However for this to be successful the style of leadership needs to be enabling rather than directive, helping communities to find a broad consensus on the need for sustainable development and growth. The importance of up to date Core Strategies or Local Plans will be important in providing the clarity on strategic direction and policies for those areas that desire to produce neighbourhood plans. Local Planning Authorities will have an important role in providing this continued strategic direction and support alongside setting out the parameters for planning at the neighbourhood level. The knowledge, skills and experiences of town planning professionals will be central to supporting this.

### **Widening Involvement**

To ensure legitimacy and prevent planning from becoming dominated by narrow interests, innovative approaches are needed to widen involvement beyond the usual suspects. Techniques such as Planning for Real, Community Planning Workshops and Enquiry by Design can be effective ways of reaching out across a range of local interests. However special efforts are needed to draw 'hard to reach' groups such as the young and elderly, working families and

the disadvantaged into the planning process. Experience points to the benefits of using existing community structures and networks where these exist and are capable of adopting a forward, proactive rather than reactive view. Importantly engagement with the planning process can provide a catalyst for the creation of new organisations such as Community Development Trusts to ensure ongoing involvement. Increasingly the Internet and digital media provide a cost effective way of reaching local people, particularly the young who have a real stake in the future. The role of the Local Planning Authority, voluntary groups and developers working together to provide guidance on tried and tested approaches to community involvement will be key.

### **Openness and Honesty**

Openness and honesty are key ingredients for successful community engagement in the planning process. This can only work if there is a working understanding based on trust between the various interests. There needs to be a clear understanding of the motives of key stakeholders and recognition of the constraints within which planning has to take place. Requiring participants in the neighbourhood planning process to state their position at the outset offers a realistic basis for plan making and development management which needs to be demystified with a strong focus on practical solutions. Local authorities must be upfront about the need for conformity with NPPF and Local Plan policies, landowners and developers should acknowledge the need for development to fulfil their requirements in terms of risk and reward, and communities should be clear about their expectations from the process.

### **Realism about Planning**

Acknowledging that planning involves tradeoffs between conflicting objectives and interests is important if progress is to be made. Quite simply neighbourhood planning cannot and will not deliver total consensus. However the aim should be to identify and understand local issues and concerns and ensure that as far as possible these are reflected in plans and proposals. Where judgements are required on the balance to be struck, for example in determining whether something represents sustainable development, it is important that this can be clearly articulated. In this way planning can be seen as thoughtful and positive rather than an arbitrary and negative.



### **Early Engagement**

The evidence strongly suggests that early engagement of local people in the planning process is critical, both in relation to plan making and the consideration of site specific development proposals. Landowners and developers need to be prepared to engage with local people before they have finalised their scheme. Offering a genuinely blank sheet of paper is likely to result in more positive engagement than presenting firm proposals. Independent, external facilitators can be used to overcome suspicion and secure positive engagement in the planning process. Where looking at long term development proposals innovative approaches should be considered to obtain forward looking views e.g. the use of a People's Panel as a 'proxy' community.

### **Securing Resources**

While community participation is likely to be cost effective in the long term, it cannot be delivered without adequate resources in terms of information, professional knowledge and expertise and cash. Local planning authorities have a key role to play as enablers and encouragers of community led planning. However other means of 'bank rolling' community planning need to be found. Volunteer resources undoubtedly have a role to play. However there needs to be access to finance to pay for consultation materials, events and venues. Local business and development interests are a potential source of funding either directly or indirectly. One possible mechanism might be to earmark a proportion of future s106/CIL receipts to fund neighbourhood planning. The future challenge will be around securing the funding to support the delivery of plans so that they do not become documents that sit on the shelf. This will need important national and local debate about resource allocation and mechanisms.

### **Scale of Intervention**

The approach to the planning of a neighbourhood will need to be proportionate to the outcomes sought through the process. Many communities will want to plan for their area but distinguishing between planning for 'more' development and managing change needs consideration. How well the local approach fits with the strategic direction should inform the extent of neighbourhood planning that takes place. A formal development plan document approach may not always be the most resource and time efficient means for neighbourhood planning, and all involved will have to think

carefully about what is the most appropriate method for achieving the best outcomes for the area. The use of alternative mechanisms such as supplementary guidance or site development briefs, while not statutory, if done with buy in of local authority, developers and landowners can provide effective means for delivering development that is led by local people.

### **Harnessing Incentives**

While planning is essentially involved in managing long term change to deliver prosperity, quality of life and a sustainable environment in urban and rural areas, offering incentives to address the shorter term needs of local communities should help gain acceptance of proposals for sustainable development and growth. To be effective the use of incentives needs to be explicit both in terms of the sums involved, the amount allocated to the local community and the way in which it is to be spent. Community participation in allocating and spending the money generated through incentives is likely to ensure that the benefits are fully recognised.

### **Summary**

It is clear that increasing participation by local people in the planning process is part of a long term trend which has been recognised by academics, professionals and policy makers. Both past experience and the lessons to be drawn from the case studies examined in this report point to the ongoing challenge of effectively engaging communities in collective decision making. In this regard planning is simply a reflection of the society which it seeks to serve. In the more challenging circumstances which now prevail, communities are being given the opportunity to play a greater role in shaping their future and many are responding. By following the pointers of best practice and innovation set out in this report there are good reasons to believe that a new era of positive planning can emerge.

## 8. Conclusions and Practical Recommendations for Action

The research hypothesis which this report has sought to test is “that community engagement with the planning process is critical to the delivery of more, faster and better quality development.”

While the findings of the research cannot be deemed conclusive, there is a growing consensus that early, open and positive engagement of communities with the local planning process is essential if the sustainable development of our cities, towns and villages is to be achieved. Approaches which depend on top down diktat or decision making by appeal are likely to be costly in both time and money and uncertain in outcome. In contrast, using the planning process as a tool for the active participation of local people in decision making about the future of their area should promote a more positive approach to meeting local needs for housing and jobs.

Achieving such a change will require concerted action across a range of scales and interests. The following paragraphs seek to set out key recommendations for action to ensure that the reformed planning system delivers sustainable development and growth:

### Recommendations for Central Government

1. Central government must articulate the virtues of positive planning. If local communities previously more attuned to opposing development than helping to create it are to be encouraged, they will need to see palpable ‘buy in’ from Whitehall – in the form of public endorsement. A willingness not to intervene in local planning decisions would also be welcomed.
2. DCLG must work with local authorities to ensure the resources are in place for neighbourhood planning.
3. The Government must keep the successes and failings of neighbourhood planning continually under review, particularly given the projected increase in the number of neighbourhood plans.
4. The issues that trigger neighbourhood planning will not always necessitate, or be best resolved by, a statutory development plan. Community Right to Build, for instance, may be more viable when dealing with smaller scale developments. Likewise, supplementary planning documents or informal masterplans should be considered as useful tools for planning at the local level. All stakeholders must weigh up the costs and benefits of neighbourhood planning, and be encouraged to do so by central government.

5. Most immediately, the National Planning Policy Framework must be clear, comprehensible and guiding but not prescriptive for community planners.

### **Recommendations for Local Planning Authorities**

1. The LPA should seek to identify the community planners of the future. Establishing as wide a base as possible of community planners – particularly amongst the young – must be a key task. Use of existing authority multimedia platforms will help here, as well as creative use of websites likely to draw a younger audience.
2. Local authorities should be prepared to intervene (through offering the time, where possible, of officers, and lending comprehensible planning guidelines) to ensure an effective transition period at the start of the new system, and thereby maintain confidence levels in the fledgling process.
3. LPAs should provide clear information to communities on how Neighbourhood Planning works, the process, and how it fits with the strategic policies for their area. Directing such groups to bodies such as Planning Aid is a useful first step.
4. Local authorities must ensure a 'meaningful' proportion of CIL monies go to communities as per the NPPF, and scope out priorities for using this revenue amongst local residents.
5. Local authorities should consider allocating a proportion of incentive monies collected to fund future neighbourhood plans.

### **Recommendations for communities**

1. Communities should recognise that they have much to gain from adopting a pragmatic stance on planning. In some cases it should be helpful for communities to look beyond just incremental development generated by immediate needs and instead seek to future proof the neighbourhood by planning for a much longer period.
2. To ensure maximum community buy-in, opinion as to the best uses of incentive money should be widely canvassed. This process should also prove helpful in identifying potential neighbourhood planning leaders.
3. Communities should engage with development interests at an early stage in the planning process. This will provide opportunities to resource the neighbourhood plan, utilise business skill sets (and finance) to train the next generation of planners, and potentially gain access to CIL/NHB monies at a quicker rate.

### Recommendations for development interests

1. Developers should engage with communities as early as possible. The extra delays and costs incurred in council based wrangling often amount to the amount an additional CIL (or s106) charge would have constituted, so there is nothing to be gained by being adversarial.
2. Developers must present their case in an even handed fashion. Neighbourhood plans will need to pass a referendum, and there is little to be gained by winning one such vote on a misleading platform, if it leads to further engendering of distrust between the public and ‘big business.’
3. Developers should look forward beyond consultation to delivery including ongoing partnership working such as consideration of asset endowment and the establishment of trusts or other longer term vehicles. By doing so they can demonstrate they have a long term interest in, and can become part of, the neighbourhood.
4. The involvement of small, local businesses in any proposed schemes should be actively encouraged by the private sector. Perceptions about large scale development are not universally positive, but the use of SMEs (which often possess greater links with the locality) can help secure a more sympathetic hearing from residents.
5. Developers should consider helping fund neighbourhood plans. Whilst the neighbourhood planning process must remain independent, it also needs to be resourced. Funding a plan can not only enshrine the legal framework necessary to develop, but help secure community buy-in.

### Moving Forward

The Government has set out to redefine the way planning is delivered in this country. By scrapping the regional approach of the previous administration and devolving power, ultimately, to the neighbourhood, they have placed more power in the hands of parish councils and neighbourhood groups than has arguably ever been the case. Whilst there are risks inherent in such an undertaking, this report has set out to show how such devolution can be best handled and, ultimately, contribute to national growth going forward. The future of planning in a localist landscape may currently be uncertain, but, if correctly resourced, this report has shown that giving power to the people is not only nothing to fear, but can also usher in a new age of genuinely collaborative democracy, and help drive the economy in the crucial years ahead.





# Power to the People: The Future of Planning in a Localist Landscape

As the Government implements a series of reforms to devolve more power over planning to town and parish councils and neighbourhood groups, this report offers a series of timely recommendations for communities, developers and local and national government. 11 case studies are used to illustrate recent trends in resident participation, and draw out the key lessons for future best practice.

The report shows that everybody has much to gain from a more open, collaborative approach to planning, and offers some important insights as to how this can be achieved. It suggests how development incentives can be best deployed by local and national government, and the most effective methods for the harmonisation of resident and business interests. It also suggests that by capturing the views of every element of the community including previously hard to reach groups, the new system has the potential to change perceptions of planning for the better, and produce outcomes more reflective of local feeling.

As a flagship element of the Government's localism agenda, the stakes for neighbourhood planning are high. This report provides some practical steps towards reaching the type of more consensual, pro-development atmosphere that can drive the economy forward in the coming years.



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