

WHO REALLY RUNS OUR NEIGHBOURHOODS?

Abstract

Looking at the progress of the government's not-knowingly-undersold neighbourhood plans: are they really helping local people take charge of their neighbourhoods? And if not, who's really benefitting?

Our Neighbourhood Planning Week Special

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has designated December 8-12 as a week when you can “celebrate the fantastic progress of neighbourhood planning so far”. To ease you into the festive mood, DCLG have helpfully set up [a Facebook page](#), where revellers can ‘like’ the positive difference that neighbourhood planning has made.

With such an enticement, you’d expect the whole country to erupt in spontaneous, orgiastic *planfesting*. But the last time Localism Watch checked, Facebook’s Neighbourhood Planning Week page had generated a paltry 53 likes – light years behind the likeability of Beyoncé (66.4m), Man Utd (62.2m) and even Pope Francis (1.38m). The only event listed so far is a Facebook Q&A with planning minister Brandon Lewis between 12.30 and 1.30 pm on Tuesday 9 December. “He’s looking forward to some hard-hitting questions and your thoughts on the neighbourhood planning process.” More about Brandon later.

How timely, then, that this edition of Localism Watch resources should be all about lifting the lid on neighbourhood planning. How localist, how democratic is it really? Thanks to neighbourhood planning, have communities, central and local government and the development industry put their longstanding differences behind them and are now working together? And specifically, what has neighbourhood planning done to crack the conundrum of the English housing crisis?

Who’s doing the planning, anyway?

If neighbourhood plans were designed to streamline the planning process and resolve animosities between councils and their local communities, this doesn’t appear to be happening. In 2012, the government’s 50 page [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF) replaced all previous England-wide planning guidance. It created a new layer of neighbourhood plans and gave local planning authorities a deadline of March 2013 to align their existing area-wide local plans to the NPPF’s contents.

If by that date the authorities had failed to update their plans - or indeed didn’t have a valid local plan, - the government ruled that there should be a ‘default setting’ for them to approve any application for ‘sustainable development’, a term that it has consistently refused to define. Local groups preparing the new neighbourhood plans are required to ensure that these documents comply with their council’s area-wide local plan: but if the local plan doesn’t comply with the NPPF, or if there isn’t a local [plan](#) in place, then the contents of the neighbourhood plan should take precedence. Confused? You should be. The government certainly is. By its March 2013 deadline, [only 7% of England’s local plans](#) were aligned to the NPPF. And [52% of councils](#) didn’t have a local plan at all

Since then, there has been a deafening silence, both with regard to the level of compliance between the various layers of the planning 'hierarchy' and how well the various players in the planning process are working together. The trade journal [Inside Housing](#) recently estimated that only 61 out of England's 346 planning authorities have a 'conforming' local plan in place, and 40% still don't have one at all. Indeed, because the NPPF requires all local plans to provide for a 'deliverable' 5 year supply of housing land in their area, many plans that are currently valid are fast approaching their sell-by date. While some councils enthusiastically wish to encourage housing development in their areas, many don't – not least due to the political repercussions of 'swamping' long-established communities with new dwellings, new residents and new lifestyles. And because housing is the thorniest problem in the English planning system right now, differing stances on new development will almost certainly lead to tensions between councils.

The lack of a local plan in an area makes it more difficult for communities to progress neighbourhood plans. This is exacerbating local tensions in places as widespread as [Mid Sussex](#), [West Yorkshire](#) and [East Staffordshire](#). And councillors in Hull [have blocked a local forum's bid](#) to progress a neighbourhood plan, due to the area's size: it covers two electoral wards.

More worrying still, the absence of a statutory local plan encourages predatory undertakings to pursue waves of speculative planning applications, on the grounds that they constitute 'sustainable development'. [Gladman](#), the 'strategic land promoter' whose name features prominently in this piece, has been offering farmers the chance, on a 'no win no fee' basis, to increase the value of their land by a multiple of 50 or 60 by applying to develop greenfield sites for housing.

No wonder then that the government is panicking. In November, planning minister [Brandon Lewis](#) suggested to *Inside Housing* that a local planning authority "could conceivably decide that (they) don't want a local plan and they will rely on the NPPF." He added that while this would not be "necessarily ideal", there would be "no role for the government" if such a decision was taken.

As the respected planning commentator [Andrew Lainton](#) observes, "This is a council of failure in every way. A failure to plan, a failure to meet need, a total failure of the NPPF to meet its sole real objective, to scare authorities fearing a free for all into getting a local plan." Lainton goes on to say, "If the planning minister doesn't really believe in local plans then he doesn't really believe in planning. Rather in Green Belt he believes in doing nothing, and elsewhere letting the market rip. He is the minister for sprawl. This really is the stupidest statement ever made by a UK planning minister."

Localism Watch is therefore delighted to report that the DCLG has quickly moved in to place the minister's remarks in their true strategic context. [A spokesman for the department](#) said: "80% of councils now have a published local plan, and we want all councils to have an up to date local plan. As the minister explained, the National Planning Policy Framework already has detailed provisions for how planning decisions should be considered when a council does not have a local plan. This provides a very strong encouragement for slow-coaches without a plan to get moving on finalising theirs."

So that's all right then. Still confused? Keep in touch with Localism Watch, and we'll try our best to shed light on things.

Once it was a 'Baker's Dozen': now it's 'Pickles' Ten Per Cent'

In a Parliamentary Question, Laura Sandys (Con, Thanet) invited the Communities Secretary to praise the government's efforts in promoting localism, and in particular, neighbourhood planning. Responding, [Eric Pickles boasted](#) that "10% of England is now covered by a neighbourhood plan".

By their own admission, neither the government, nor Locality (their franchisee for promoting neighbourhood planning), nor the Royal Town Planning Institute keep official, up-to-date statistics on this matter. Localism Watch has been closely monitoring progress through a range of unofficial 'crowdsourced' compilations, such as [this](#), and an ongoing scan of online council and local newspaper sites.

The reality is that neighbourhood plans are very difficult to progress in large urban areas, the vast majority of which do not have constituted parish or town councils. [A recent London Assembly review of localism](#) concluded that the capital's "complex network of mixed communities with diverse interests seems to make even defining neighbourhood areas a difficult and time consuming process – and this is the first stage of the process.

England's 9,000 parish and town councils serve mostly rural, semi-rural or urban fringe communities. Together, these contain just 25% of the country's population. Only 1,200 are currently designated as 'neighbourhood plan areas' by their local planning authorities. The overwhelming majority of these, however, are still at a preliminary stage, with not even an outline draft in place. A mere 37 have actually completed the complex process of designation, plan preparation, consultation, examination, local referendums and formal adoption as statutory neighbourhood plans. By no stretch of the imagination – let alone Eric Pickles' ample waistband - can these 37 neighbourhoods be said to constitute "10% of England". Statistical inflation at its most acute?

Targeted support to communities – or throwing money at a problem?

The government is offering a further £10.5m in direct support and bridging grants to encourage more communities in England to make neighbourhood plans. Eligible groups will not have previously received a grant and/or received less than the £7000 limit during 2013-15. These groups will have either yet to seek formal designation from their council, or whose plans are at/about to reach their pre-submission consultation stage. The final round of Expressions of Interest opened on 4 November and will close once the £10.5m has been allocated. As with previous funding opportunities, the government's franchisee, Locality, is [marketing these in terms of heroic enthusiasm](#). But given the rather sorry rate of progress with neighbourhood plans so far, is this more a case of a process-driven government throwing money at a problem, rather than a desire to engage with people's needs and aspirations face-to-face?

Is the government trying to fix the results of neighbourhood plans?

Ann Skippers is a distinguished town planner. She served as the RTPI's president in 2010. But [speaking at a recent planning barristers' event](#), she admitted that her work as a neighbourhood plan examiner had dried up since she failed the Slaugham (W. Sussex) neighbourhood plan in January this

year. Skippers was also satirised at a subsequent planning event as the only examiner who had failed a plan. Describing the process by which examiners are “matched” with neighbourhoods as resembling a “beauty parade”, she said: “There seems to be a tendency to only appoint examiners who have a track record in passing [neighbourhood] plans. Given the backlash I have experienced, I have a sneaking suspicion that no other plans will ever fail.”

Neighbourhood plan examiners are first chosen by the local authority and must then be consented to by the parish council or neighbourhood forum submitting the plan. Slaugham’s was the only neighbourhood plan submitted to date that has not been passed for a local referendum. Skippers failed the plan for its inadequate strategic environmental assessments relating to green land designation, and its poor evidence in support of housing targets.

Localism and the digital divide

It’s almost 100% certain that you’re reading this article on your computer screen, tablet or smartphone. But neighbourhood planning has not fully come to terms with the ‘digital divide’. This isn’t just a case of people not having access to the internet (which is still true for around 15% of residents in the Midlands), but of the mental divide in thinking about digital engagement methods versus face to face engagement methods. As [Michael Kohn of Stickyworld](#) argues compellingly in *The Information Daily*, “there is an inevitable debate about effectiveness of one method over the other, rather than a more generic debate around engagement quality or participation opportunity.” This debate obscures the “clear opportunity for engagement organisers of combining both approaches to achieve their objectives.” Kohn sets out a number of practical solutions for crossing the digital divide: something that none of us, whatever our background, can afford to ignore.

You can never satisfy the developers: reports from around the country.

[Over 90% of developers responding to this year’s Planning Consultancy survey](#) said that green belt policy imposes undue constraints and needs ‘reviewing’. A further 60% claimed that neighbourhood planning was making it easier for locals to resist development, up from 40% in the 2013 survey. Landmark Planning managing director Peter Wilkinson said the “pernicious” operation of green belt policy was a huge development hold-up and needed “a major overhaul”. Indigo Planning managing director Philip Villars said a review of all green belt boundaries was “long overdue”.

According to Spawforths chairman David Rolinson, some councils had not reviewed their green belt for generations. “Some such as Wakefield have recognised the need for review and have full plan coverage reflecting this. Others are less supportive and this needs to change”. Carter Jonas partner Nick Taylor said reviews may need a “strategic overview” across several boroughs. Other major developers argued that neighbourhood plans were “often used. . . to prevent rather than shape development”, and that government intervention in areas where neighbourhood plans are well advanced “adds further to the risk and cost of appeals”.

Residents in the Cornish seaside resort of St Ives have been criticised for using their draft Neighbourhood Plan to [curb the activity of ‘grockles’](#)- outsiders who buy up second homes and inflate local house prices. This has led some to re-name the village ‘Kensington-on-Sea’. The plan aims to limit new local housing development to primary residences, and for half of these to be ‘affordable’. Across the West Country, it is reported that ‘a revolution against second homes is

brewing': [locals in the Devon villages of Lyton, Lynmouth and Salcombe](#) (the latter dubbed 'Chelsea-on-Sea') are experiencing similar problems in balancing the need for tourist income with affordable housing.

Planning minister Brandon Lewis has once more [stepped into the breach](#). "National planning policy is clear," he said. "Councils should plan for a mix of housing. Any planning conditions must be reasonable and enforceable. Trying to control private ownership via the planning system will require intrusive inspectors to monitor the usage of every home and state surveillance of every property." He added that "owning property is a human right and a fundamental British liberty", and said it would be better to get more homes built.

Although he framed the creation of neighbourhood planning around the principle that "local people know best" about their areas, Eric Pickles' decisions on developer challenges to housing provision in these documents have been rather ambiguous. He upheld an appeal against volume builder Gladman Developments in the case of [Winslow Neighbourhood Plan](#) (Bucks) and made a similar decision in relation to farming land near [Devizes](#) (Wiltshire). But he [allowed a developer to build](#) homes in a Leicestershire community where progress on a neighbourhood plan had stalled.

The web is awash with reports of how neighbourhood plans have generated conflicts between developers, local authorities and communities. A volume builder has [challenged Rutland council](#) for allowing a neighbourhood plan to go to referendum. Parallel cases have recently arisen in [Basingstoke](#) (Hampshire), [Henley](#) (Oxfordshire), [Purton](#) and [Pewsey](#) (Wiltshire), [Shireoaks](#) (Nottinghamshire) and [Warton](#) (Lancashire).

[Herefordshire Council has turned down an application by the Church Commissioners](#) for a housing scheme that would have increased the size of the village of Bosbury by 50%. Over 80 of the county's 138 parishes are at some stage of neighbourhood plan preparation. And at [Rendelsham](#), Suffolk, an inquiry is taking place into the local council's decision to redevelop the village's theatre and sports centre for housing. By contrast, residents in [Saltash](#), Cornwall appear to be happy with the 1,000 new homes allowed for in their neighbourhood plan

Who's really winning in Winsford? Certainly, not the statisticians. And possibly, not the locals.

The 'About' section of DCLG's seldom-visited Neighbourhood Planning Week Facebook page suggests that the 37 local referendums we highlighted at the start of this piece show British democracy at its best. "All of these," it proudly proclaims, "have won resounding victories as local residents have turned out in large numbers to agree the plan written by their neighbourhood plan group."

Most readers of Open Democracy's 'Our Kingdom' pages will be only too aware of voter disengagement at English local elections. In May 2014, [Hull registered the worst turnout of all](#), with a mere 26.3% of electors bothering to cast their votes. So if DCLG's press office is as connected with communities as it claims, you'd expect that a referendum on a neighbourhood plan, written and led by local people, would have them queuing round the block.

So let's have a look at Winsford's neighbourhood plan, [which passed at referendum](#) on 23 October and was formally adopted by Chester and West Cheshire council on 19 November. With a total electorate of 22,810, it's the largest of England's 37 neighbourhood plans to be adopted so far. Its stated aim is to improve Winsford's image, transport links, shopping centre and community facilities, and outlines where more than 3,000 new homes and 35 hectares of employment land will be in place by 2030.

The chair of the plan's steering group, [Cllr Brian Clarke](#), said: "By saying yes, the people of Winsford have chosen to take control over the future development and prosperity of their town. The vote marks the beginning of a bright future for Winsford, truly becoming 'the only town you'll ever need'." What's more, at November's National Planning Awards ceremony, the firm who prepared the Winsford plan beat other consultancies to win [the Locality-sponsored award](#) for Neighbourhood Planning/Consultation in Planning.

Things, however, are not quite as they seem. The vote came despite a 'no' campaign by local groups including Save Rilshaw and Save Winsford Flashes. The [Save Rilshaw](#) website asked locals to 'ban the plan', as it would "swell the town's population by approximately 9,000, destroy acres of open countryside and productive farmland." It also argued that due to a lack of jobs in Winsford, most newcomers would commute to work, bringing to breaking point the local traffic infrastructure, which was already struggling with current demands.

Of the [58 online submissions](#) to the plan, 43 were objections, for reasons broadly in line with those put forward by the action groups. Strangely, the list contains not a single letter of support for the plan from a local resident. Most of the other submissions were technical responses from 'statutory undertakers' – organisations like United Utilities and Network Rail, with a responsibility to ensure that any future developments take account of existing and planned infrastructure. Among the select few who wrote in support was Gladman Developments who commented: "It is imperative that the Winsford Neighbourhood Plan embraces the NPPF's aspirations to plan positively to support local development."

So what of the referendum itself? How many of Winsford's 22,810 electors voted to give themselves 'control over the future development and prosperity of their town'? 2,620 said 'yes' and 1,160 said 'no'. That's a total turnout of around 16.5%. Whatever the relative strengths of the arguments put forward in Winsford, or wherever people might place themselves on the political spectrum, a neighbourhood plan that has been hailed at the highest national level as an example of best practice secured the electoral support of just 11.5% of local adults. The Hull voting figures cited earlier seem almost North Korean by comparison. Is it any wonder, then, that DCLG's extravagant claims are generating so few Facebook 'likes'?

If there's any minor consolation to be gained from this sorry tale, it's this: at the same time as they rubber-stamped the neighbourhood plan, [Chester and West Cheshire Council turned down Gladman's application](#) to build up to 215 houses at Winsford. One of the councillors remarked: "The problem with this application is that it is piecemeal - it is covering a small part of this piece of land, and not planning what should happen to the rest of it. It is not planning it in the way the Neighbourhood Plan had envisaged."

Sometimes, it all gets too much . . .

A parish councillor at Winscombe and Sanford in Somerset stormed out of a council meeting and tendered his resignation by e-mail, after a quarrel over the status of the area's neighbourhood plan, in which he accused another councillor of being "undemocratic and immoral". More details of this lively exchange of insults are [here](#).

Let's take stock: what are we to make of all this?

We've got a National Planning Policy Framework that everyone must observe: but it's just 50 pages long and won't define what 'sustainable development' is. Then there are local plans, that councils are required by law to enact and keep up-to-date— yet only a minority have done so. And then there are neighbourhood plans. But people have found that these are more appropriate to rural areas and small towns than the large urban communities where the vast majority of us live. Even then, only 37 of England's 9,000 town and parish councils have a neighbourhood plan in place. On top of that, we've got a planning minister who apparently doesn't believe in planning.

Seems to us at Localism Watch that the English planning system is looking more and more like a poorly-designed layer cake. Neighbourhood plans are its soggy bottom.

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