

locality

# User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning in England Research

Prof Gavin Parker with Tessa Lynn, Matthew Wargent and Locality



Executive Summary



# Executive Summary

## Neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood planning was first outlined in 2010 as part of the Government's commitment to transferring power to local communities. From early 2011 the Government supported over 200 neighbourhood planning frontrunner communities. The formal provisions for neighbourhood planning were subsequently set out in the Localism Act (2011) and detailed regulations were issued in 2012. At the time of the fieldwork for this report in spring 2014 there were estimated to be over 1000 groups that had either started or expressed an intention to embark on neighbourhood planning.

This summary gives an overview of the full report produced by Parker et al (2014) and which is available on the My Community Rights website.

For more information on neighbourhood planning, see:  
[www.mycommunityrights.org.uk/neighbourhood-planning](http://www.mycommunityrights.org.uk/neighbourhood-planning).

## The research

Research was undertaken in May and June 2014 to understand user experience of neighbourhood planning. This involved gathering evidence from communities undertaking the process of developing a neighbourhood development plan and/or Neighbourhood Development Orders, (NDO) and/or Community Right to Build Orders (CRtBO).

The aim of the research was to inform future approaches towards neighbourhood planning, including how to improve it and increase its effectiveness, as well as the shape of future support offered to neighbourhoods.

A total of 120 respondents undertaking neighbourhood planning were surveyed (via telephone interviews) from a sample frame of 200 areas which met the criteria of having sufficient experience of the neighbourhood planning process, to provide feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the system.

It is known that the take-up of neighbourhood planning in non-parished areas has tended to be slower than in those with a parish tier. To ensure that there was sufficient data collected from forums (i.e. non-parished areas) the sampling strategy included all known forums as long as they had been active in neighbourhood planning for at least six months and/or had been designated as a neighbourhood forum by their local planning authority. This resulted in 50 of the 120 achieved sample (42 per cent) being eligible forum areas. The remaining seventy of the achieved sample were from parished areas. The latter were drawn from those neighbourhood planning areas that had experienced at least the pre-submission consultation stage or in a small number of cases those that had been involved in neighbourhood planning for at least six months. The response rate from the telephone survey was 69 per cent.

The research also drew on six focus groups convened with key types of neighbourhood planning groups operating in differing contexts. The themes discussed were both general issues and specific areas for deliberation, issues that reflected the focus group context, as well as points emerging from the telephone interviews and wider evidence and existing experience of neighbourhood planning.

# Characteristics of the neighbourhood areas surveyed

The sample comprised of different types of groups located in a variety of neighbourhoods and with various population sizes, as explained below:

- i. Sixty per cent had reached pre-submission consultation stage or beyond (i.e. categorised as 'advanced').
- ii. The sample was drawn from both urban and rural areas, reflecting the boosting of the sample of forums. The majority of parished areas (64 per cent) were classified as rural, with the remainder classified as 'urban areas'. Only 10 per cent of the neighbourhood forums were classified as rural (a total of 70 of the interviewees were therefore from urban areas).
- iii. A majority of all areas surveyed had populations below 10,000 (68 per cent).
- iv. All of the interviewees were preparing Neighbourhood Development Plans, with two also using a Community Right to Build Order and one using a Neighbourhood Development Order.
- v. Of all the groups interviewed 58 per cent were definitely seeking to allocate sites for housing in their plan, and a further 17 per cent may allocate sites for housing
- vi. Just under half (45 per cent) of respondents had been involved in neighbourhood planning for over two years (prior to June 2012).

## The drivers and motivations for neighbourhood planning

For the majority the two key motivations for starting a neighbourhood plan appeared to be:

- *reinvigorating the local area* (usually through providing a vision for the future), and
- *protecting the desirable characteristics of the area.*

Sixty eight per cent of all groups reported that they had wanted to have a greater say in planning and development in their own areas and to help shape a future vision for the neighbourhood. This was their main motive for embarking on neighbourhood planning.

Interviewees were asked about whether their groups were familiar with or had considered using other planning tools. The findings did not indicate any lack of knowledge of other planning mechanisms. Some groups had made the decision to use neighbourhood planning because of the control over the process and the statutory weight a Neighbourhood Development Plan provides.

# Overall experience of neighbourhood planning

Fifty seven per cent of parishes, and 53 per cent of forums stated that the process of neighbourhood planning had proved to be what their group expected.

Over 90 per cent reported that the process had gone 'well' or 'OK'. The majority reported that they had overcome the difficulties encountered, often with the aid of consultant support, or the local authority, or both.

While the majority of respondents did perceive the process as burdensome, 59 per cent thought it proportionate to the task of developing a plan which would have statutory status. When asked about their experience of different stages in the process, the majority of respondents found that each stage had gone 'well' or 'OK'.

Overall, feedback from the open questions and focus groups confirmed that participants viewed neighbourhood planning as an initiative with merit and further potential, although not without challenges and difficulties.

When asked to make suggestions on how perceived burdens could be eased, respondents reported that:

- a greater understanding of the effort required, and the scope of neighbourhood planning, at the beginning of the process would be useful;
- local authorities could be more proactive in encouraging neighbourhood planning in their area;
- the production of toolkits and appropriate guidance would be helpful.

Suggestions for changes at the key stages of neighbourhood planning can be summarised as follows:

- Area designation:** delay from the local authority was seen as holding up the process for a minority of the sample. There was also a plea made to clarify guidance on how to implement area designation more smoothly.
- Evidence gathering:** for some, delays or problems with assembling evidence for the neighbourhood plan was seen as relating to a general lack of resources, time and volunteers. Several interviewees indicated that some evidence was not available. Toolkits and templates were cited as ideas to help with this stage.
- Plan-writing:** respondents asked for improved guidance on writing plans and there was a widely held view that there should be proformas or templates available. Additionally, there was a wish to have more clarity on what supporting documents were required. Other suggestions included having a proforma for a neighbourhood development plan available at the beginning of the process and having access to standard policies.
- Community engagement, consultation and publicity:** this went well for most groups but it was noted that little advice or guidance on community engagement was available. Further advice and guidance on this dimension of neighbourhood planning was recognised as being useful.

- e. **Examination stage:** clarification of timescales and the obligations of the local authority to respond, alongside the production of simplified guidance on the examination stage. Suggestions included introducing the opportunity for the examiner to discuss their thinking directly with neighbourhood planning groups.
- f. **Neighbourhood Referendum:** the main issue identified for this stage was highlighted by some focus group participants and this related to clarification on publicity and campaigning in support of a neighbourhood plan in the run up to the referendum.

## What might make neighbourhood planning more attractive to communities?

Respondents were asked 'what might be done to make neighbourhood planning more attractive to communities?' Almost half (49 per cent) stated that a better explanation of the process would make it more attractive. Some 44 per cent felt that more face-to-face advice would help in this respect, while 39 per cent of the interviewees responded that a faster process would make neighbourhood planning more attractive. Many appreciated the time it takes to build relationships and momentum within a community (i.e. 'it cannot be rushed'). There was a concern among a small group of interviewees that, if the process was made faster, care would be needed to ensure that quality did not decrease.

## Capacity and skills of those producing neighbourhood plans

Eighty two per cent of those responding had been able to access the skills and knowledge needed for neighbourhood planning. There are a wide range of skills and knowledge that can be drawn upon from within the community, but importantly partners are also seen as having a key role given the range of skills needed to produce a neighbourhood plan. It would appear that lack of skills introduced delay rather than totally impeding the progress of plans.

## Support with the neighbourhood planning process

The evidence from this research strongly suggests that, in principle, neighbourhood planning can be undertaken by most communities if effectively supported, and in particular if the relevant local authority is supportive.

## **The local authority role**

It was stated, in both the interviews and the focus groups, that local planning authority input and attitude made a significant difference to neighbourhood planning progress. Overall perceptions of support by the local authority to communities participating in neighbourhood planning were positive, with 82 per cent of survey respondents stating that their authority had been 'very' or 'somewhat' supportive. Numerous examples were cited where local authorities had enabled good progress but in other cases, whether deliberately or not, they had slowed down or frustrated neighbourhood plan progress.

Respondents indicated that more focused advice and support from local authorities would be welcomed. There was also a perception that training for officers and councillors about neighbourhood planning could be enhanced.

It was perceived that support and understanding amongst local authorities varied, and a mix of reasons were offered by participants for this. Further work to explore attitudes, capacity and behaviours amongst local authorities may be a useful supplement to this research.

The development of more structured partnerships and agreed demarcation of roles and actions should be considered. Establishing a memorandum of understanding, or protocols, to outline the commitment, responsibility, and mutual roles between the local authority and the neighbourhood planning group (the Qualifying Body) would also help to clarify expectations. In addition, dedicated liaison staff also appears to be one option that could assist with this dimension of neighbourhood planning. Some argued that there should be clearer guidance and some more clarity and specification about what to expect from local authorities under the duty to support.

## **The role of specialist input**

The role of consultants was identified as important in many cases, 68 per cent of respondents had used consultant support. Particular importance was placed on face-to-face support. This was preferred by most neighbourhood planning areas, particularly during plan writing stages and beyond. The most valued consultant roles included technical inputs on policy writing and dealing with technical matters such as Strategic Environmental Assessment.

## **Guidance, tools and templates**

Many interviewees, and focus group participants, stated that guidance on neighbourhood planning needs improvement; both by consolidation and making it more specific.

Feedback from the focus groups in particular, suggested that some existing guidance was confusing or that it was often difficult for qualifying bodies to apply the existing guidance to their specific circumstances. The improvement, and/or focusing such guidance appears to cover a wide range of topics. The clear message from those involved in the research, however, was that more attention to topics such as community engagement were desired, as well as technical aspects, such as writing planning policies and Strategic Environmental Assessment.

The further development of thinking on the implementation of a neighbourhood plan, and the next steps for neighbourhoods, were seen as an opportunity. There appeared to be little advice and knowledge exchange on issues arising post-referendum stage. This could include information about other resources, approaches and vehicles to assist neighbourhoods to realise their ambitions as expressed in their neighbourhood plan.



Tools and templates were discussed by the research participants with varying degrees of specificity. There was considerable support for more templates, and comprehensive toolkits were seen as a means to overcome uncertainty across all stages. It was felt that these should provide a greater level of clarity and certainty for Qualifying Bodies to help them progress. Specific ideas included:

- i. Improved *project planning* to assist groups to organise, reflect on needs and create a realistic schedule. This could be conditional on the release of support funding.
- ii. The production of *indicative templates* for neighbourhood planning tasks and stages should be considered; including model policies, but that such templates or proformas should not constrain neighbourhood planning groups (in common with the sentiment expressed about guidance not being overly prescriptive).

## Conclusions

The overall conclusion of the research is that the experience of those actually involved neighbourhood planning has shown that it is proceeding well for the great majority of groups. Whilst complex, most groups appear to be relatively well prepared for it from the outset and it has not been significantly more burdensome than they anticipated. The use of key local individuals and teams, as well as funding to support the activity has, on the whole, acted to enable urban, rural and more or less deprived neighbourhoods to embark on neighbourhood planning.

The full report offers further detail on a wide range of proposed areas for improvement, reflection on the nature of neighbourhood planning as a coproduced activity, and an assessment of the evidence gaps which may require further consideration.

