The moral economy of localism in England: neighbourhood planning as neoliberal 'apprentice piece'

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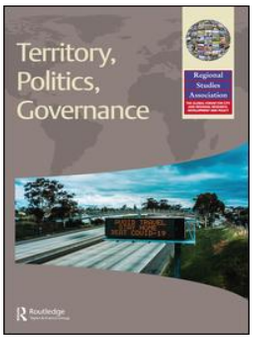

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The moral economy of localism in England: neighbourhood planning as neoliberal 'apprentice piece'

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ABSTRACT

The design, operation and modifications to neighbourhood planning are viewed here as a quintessential neoliberal project. This paper argues that the political policy construction and modification of neighbourhood planning in England is a quintessentially neoliberal project. It discusses the moral economy of the localism agenda where it is argued that the criticisms levelled at neighbourhood planning during its first few years have proven to be accurate and, over a decade since the policy was introduced in 2010, evidence of its failings has mounted. Yet, despite this, the UK government continues not only to pursue the policy and extol its virtues to local communities, but also actively require its success as an 'apprentice piece' of neoliberal policymaking.

KEYWORDS

neighbourhood planning; localism; moral economy; ethics; gift; neoliberal

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1. INTRODUCTION

Critical planning and geography literatures have long examined the dynamics of people, place and power that shape, and are shaped by, citizen–state relations, and particularly under conditions of neoliberalized political economies (cf. Peck & Tickell, 2002; Thornley, 1991). Within this broader tradition, this paper reflects on the growth in attention to the geographies of voluntarism (DeVerteuil et al., 2020; Fyfe & Milligan, 2003) and the experience of volunteers in the context of neoliberal policy spaces (e.g., Higgins & Larner, 2017; Newman, 2014; Williams et al., 2014). The spatial and institutional rescaling enacted by localism and neighbourhood planning (NP) in England have been a focus for both the geography of state–citizen relations (Clarke, 2013; Sturzaker & Gordon, 2017; Wills, 2016a, 2016b) and conceptualizations of the governmentalities of communities (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2013; Sturzaker et al., 2022; Wargent, 2021). These all highlight the growing expectation by UK government that individual citizens as 'free' agents volunteer their time and energy to service political work to meet state objectives. As we depict, the terms offered are helping maintain a simulation of working neoliberalism.

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Whilst the role and impact of neoliberal ideology and policies on planning has been well-documented (Gunder, 2010; Lord & Tewdwr-Jones, 2014; Sager, 2011), we contend there has been more limited emphasis on the moral/ethical and political dimensions of such agendas. Therefore, this paper critically questions both the moral and ethical basis of NP in England since its introduction by the Coalition government in 2010. In particular, we present NP as the policy centrepiece, or in our terms 'apprentice piece'[1] of the localism agenda, and highlight the political work done to mobilize and sustain community engagement with statutory land-use plan-making in England through this policy apparatus.

As we show, many of the initial criticisms levelled at NP during its first few years have proven to be accurate, with over a decade of research findings extending the evidence base (Parker et al., 2020a). Yet government continue to pursue the policy and extol its virtues to local communities as part of the gift of 'community rights'. Upon the launch of NP, the then-Planning minister Greg Clark went as far as describing NP as 'perfectly conceived' (Clark, 2011), and furthermore that it would 'encourage greater involvement and from a wider range of people'. This is seen in recent governmental announcements regarding planning reform that signal NP retention, a continuation illustrating a governmental belief in the value of neighbourhood plans and promise to 'strengthen the role of neighbourhood planning' (DLUHC, 2022, para. 19).

These factors lead us to three related points that this paper seeks to highlight. First, that the government commitment to NP, despite its issues and failures, represents the sustenance of a simulacrum, with proponents maintaining the ideological credentials of the policy despite actually existing outcomes on the ground. Second, that this is bound up with the NP project as an 'apprentice piece' of neoliberal governance. Last, the policy failure, particularly in urban and more deprived areas, brings into question the moral and ethical basis of a continuation of NP in the form pursued in England since 2011.

This framing leads to the contention that whilst other critiques of neoliberalized forms of localism and volunteering have highlighted forms of *experimentation* by the state in public-service delivery, the example of NP appears more as a *demonstration* of (neo)liberalized policy by the state. The difference being that a demonstration does not require actual policy success on the ground, but rather seeks to project success, in order in this instance, to legitimize ideological ideals. The NP project therefore may be depicted, after Baudrillard, as a *simulacrum*; a simulation of successful neoliberal governance, where the simulation is defined as a reality without reality, much as the map is said to define the territory (cf. Poster, 2001). In this case the policy by design, that is, the neighbourhood plan, is not necessarily realized in terms of substantive influence, but rather attempts to bring plans into being that may bear little resemblance to the promise of 'accomplishment' exhibited by the apprentice piece imaginary.

In this reading NP represents an attempted form of government 'self-legitimization' and (citizen) control where their policy imaginary is translated into actions on the ground. Power, and the rationality it serves, shapes how NP has been designed, presented and modified in England rather than technical evidence (Flyvbjerg, 1998). As such we seek to draw attention to the pressing moral and ethical consequences of employing such governing practices through volunteers, where the state is primarily concerned with imposing a world view and maintaining the core neoliberal credentials of responsibilization, growth and market orientation rather than local citizen 'empowerment' over planning outcomes (unless they promote more growth).

The basis of this critique rests on understandings of the accompanying 'moral economy' (Sayer, 1999, 2015), and calls to highlight morally dubious instantiations of policy. By invoking the conception of the 'Gift' (Mauss, 1954), the unjust political work projected on volunteers and the uneven social–spatial outcomes untouched by NP is brought into view. As Sayer (1999, p. 71) notes, 'the point of a focus on moral economy is to bring out what is so easily overlooked, that economies are strongly influenced by moral norms and that changing such norms is fundamental to any alternative organisation of economy'. We contend that NP is offered as a social–political

gift by government to local communities under the badge of 'community rights' to mobilize volunteers into a specific form of responsible citizenship – and this is bounded to the service of particular ideological goals. These require inducement, and as Mauss (1954, p. 66) argued, rather than being an archaic and abandoned form, 'the theme of Gift, of freedom and obligation, of generosity and self-interest in giving, reappear in our own society like the resurrection of a dominant motif long forgotten'.

In order for the UK government to achieve its desired policy goal – of empowered liberal citizenship taking control from the state – the policy needs to be sustained by citizen take-up. As such we can understand NP more practically as a 'policy of mobilization'. That is, a policy expressly requiring reciprocation from citizens in a context where the policy has been crafted as a demonstration, rather than a functionally effective means of empowering people and producing 'successful' outcomes. Thus, the policy relies both on unruly publics (Felt & Fochler, 2010) and the governmental craft involved which has critically required a simulation that enables defensibility as a workable neoliberal policy. This representation of NP is one of a simplistic fait accompli of liberal rights for citizens.

Wargent (2021, p. 582, citing Lemke, 2001) recognizes that:

> the theoretical strength of the concept of governmentality consists of the fact that it construes neo-liberalism not just as ideological rhetoric or as a political–economic reality, but above all as a political project that endeavours to create a social reality that it suggests already exists. Neo-liberalism is a political rationality that tries to render the social domain economic.

As such, the construction of NP in England (between 2011 and 2022) attempts to create this social reality without moral/ethical regard for the citizen volunteers that are needed to mobilize and sustain the agenda, nor the significant personal commitment required (Parker et al., 2020b).

The main contribution of this paper is therefore to highlight the performance management of NP; where what matters is that it *appears to work* as a neoliberal policy of citizens accepting rights and responsibilities from the state, even where it has been demonstrated to be largely failing in producing widespread take-up and improved planning outcomes (Wargent, 2021). This allows the characterization of NP as a neoliberal 'apprentice piece' policy which can be viewed as a simulation intending to shape socio-economic reality. What then matters to political supporters is that the idealized image or simulation is shored-up in order to exhibit its purported benefits to volunteers. As we conclude, the exploitative features and exclusions produced by NP in this policy imaginary raises serious questions over its moral and ethical credentials. Whilst this particular case is drawn from the English planning system, the moral and ethical basis upon which governments across the globe attempt to 'empower' their citizens and orient them towards specific ideological ends clearly needs further research. The basis of exchange and inevitable manifestations of co-production needs to be better understood and scrutinized as part of this endeavour (Mitlin & Bartlett, 2018).

2. VOLUNTEERING AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING IN ENGLAND

Public engagement in planning activity in the UK has a long history of boundedness, and arguments over the democratic credentials and inclusiveness of planning practices continues in the present day (e.g., Brownill & Inch, 2019). As a project to actively involve citizens in planning, and specifically plan-making, NP was formally introduced as part of a suite of 'community rights' under the 2011 Localism Act (as applied to England) although the pilot activity was commenced in 2010. The legislation was a product of the Conservative-led coalition government's (2010–15) localism policy agenda and a decentralization strand of the more amorphous 'Big Society' which valorized the role of communities and volunteers, placing them centrally in the development of

neighbourhoods (Lister, 2015; Wargent, 2021; Williams et al., 2014). The significance of NP was its status as the first citizen-led tool to confer statutory power on the outcome of community planning processes with the promise of a community-led statutory plan offered that carried legal weight in local decision-making.

A nascent NP was promoted by Eric Pickles as Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in 2010 (renamed MHCLG – Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and now DLUHC – Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities), just a month after taking office: '[we] will continue the overhaul of the planning system: to put the community back in charge of how their area develops. … We want to make sure people can take control and take responsibility in their street, their estate, their town' (Eric Pickles, speech at the Queen's Speech Forum, 11 June 2010).

During the initial development of the NP policy, a tension within the Conservative Party emerged over the purpose of planning and communities. On one side were the proponents that genuinely viewed NP as a significant new way of going about planning that would allow local communities a greater say in shaping places. This was a sentiment expressed in the *Open Source Planning* paper produced by the Conservatives in 2010. On the other side was the view held by HM Treasury that the role of planning was to help facilitate economic growth (and housing development). These two conflicting positions could not be sustained, and the former view eventually had to give way to the latter (widely viewed as in 2013 with Pickles' announcement of a compromise in the form of 'muscular localism'). This matters because whilst NP may not have initially been conceived as a neoliberal project, in terms of well understood market orientation and growth logics, it was very quickly absorbed into the neoliberal cause that offered an important strand of liberalism claiming to enable citizens to 'self-help' (Parker et al., 2022). The resultant conjunction can be best understood as a responsibilization of neighbourhoods that offers some promise of beneficial gift exchange.

According to the UK government, 'Neighbourhood planning is not a legal requirement but a right which communities in England can choose to use' (MHCLG, 2019a, para. 2); and it is worthwhile pausing to reflect on an a priori assumption of liberal governments who see *rights as freedoms* – that is, a right is viewed as a guarantee offering the individual scope to act. However, this is in contradistinction to a right that can be actualized. This suggests that the citizen response to a right granted is at least as important as the right itself, whereby the 'right to' is not the same as the 'ability to' exercise agency. Relevant here is to highlight that the NP policy reflects the liberal assumption that responsibility rests on the individual to use the 'freedom' offered. It is this assumption that creates a practical gap between those who have the existing resources to act upon a right/freedom and those who are in some way hampered and for whom the freedom is practically constrained. Wargent (2021, p. 572) sees the turn to localism witnessed in the UK since the 1990s 'as a "moral" response to perceived alienation of local communities', and one which has been propelled by a mix of centralized states, globalized economies and a world increasingly defined by marketization (Hickson, 2013).

Authors such as Parker and Salter (2017) and Parker (2017) have highlighted the skewed and uneven take-up of NP towards rural and more affluent areas of England since 2011, with NP activity in urban and disadvantaged areas much less prevalent (see also Sturzaker et al., 2022); along with many neighbourhoods 'stalling' in their progress, because either it is too difficult or NP lacks sufficient benefit (Parker et al., 2020a, 2020b). The crucial link we seek to make here is therefore to cast NP as a politically motivated *policy of neoliberal mobilization* – that is, NP is only de facto available to the most able citizens, despite being presented and consistently deployed by government as a de jure right available to all. Yet, although and despite these issues, if judged by levels of uptake alone, NP is the most successful and radical innovation in UK neighbourhood governance in a generation with over 2600 neighbourhoods formally initiating a plan by early 2020.

The evidence available shows that only 8% of completed plans by 2020 were in urban areas (Parker et al., 2020b) and with only 17 plans having been started in 'left behind places' as highlighted by OCSI/Local Trust (2019) – places which form part of the focus for the widely touted 'Levelling Up' agenda in the UK. Government has needed to bolster the reciprocal relations required to sustain the policy – particularly within urban and more deprived areas – to highlight the effectiveness of NP; and efforts to target those not taking up NP and others that have 'stalled' progress feature as priorities in governmental research and policy debates.

Despite this take-up response, the number of community groups initiating a plan is used by government to justify its approach, for example, 'Through a neighbourhood plan, communities can set a vision for the development of their area and provide sites for the homes, green spaces and employment they want to see. I want to see more communities using their neighbourhood plans … ' (Kit Malthouse, Planning Minister, May 2019; cited in MHCLG, 2019b, p. 2).

This represents a political doubling-down on NP by government – but where the surface level statistic of NP take-up obscures difficulties and belies more critical perspectives on volunteering more generally. Such issues have become more prevalent as active participation in civic society has been used by governments as part of wider policy agendas. Often policymakers desire new forms of voluntarism which 'govern through community' (Rose, 1996), using significant periods and levels of unpaid work, which raise questions about exploitation and the ethical basis of responsibilizing people to service government policy objectives (Hustinx et al., 2010).

NP is shaped by an aim to 'deresponsibilize' the state through what has been termed a form of 'neoliberal localism' (Newman, 2014). Indeed, the technologies employed to convince people to volunteer are central to a Foucauldian assessment of neo-liberalized volunteering (Zamora & Behrent, 2016) and some see such policies as requiring the mobilization of 'little platoons' in the service of neo-liberal goals (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 390; see also Richter, 2010). As such the creation of a statutory right to create a formal land-use plan has been classed as a form of 'spatial liberalism' (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013, p. 29) that governs the conduct of citizens in planning.

Thus, the 'local' is 'increasingly [being] promoted as the key site in and through which freedom and choice can be best deployed to achieve government's ends' (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2013, p. 559), with volunteers becoming *necessary* rather than useful or incidental to the delivery of public policy objectives (Lie, 2009). Despite the positive policy framing of empowering citizens through the introduction of new rights, the production of NPs involves a considerable amount of unpaid work by volunteers. Fyfe and Milligan (2003, p. 298) have highlighted how recourse to forms of volunteer effort has been viewed as somewhat of a 'panacea to many of the problems faced by neoliberal states'. Here the localism agenda, and particularly NP, have been presented by the government as offering local empowerment as part of a 'double-devolution' (Conservative Party, 2009, 2010), one which requires a form of hybrid volunteering that cuts across standard typologies. The NP literature highlights how participants need to fashion plans to meet the 'basic conditions' set out as the basis for the quasi-judicial test to determine the administrative legitimacy of the plan (Bradley, 2018; DCLG, 2014) which serve to bound the freedoms offered and undermine the claims to empowerment.

The policy has given rise to an extensive literature both warning of possible issues in theory and detailing findings derived from empirical research in practice. This work has highlighted that the UK government since 2010 have largely assumed that the time (Smith et al., 2010), capacity (Mace & Tewdwr-Jones, 2017) and willingness to engage (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2013) are available to respond to the voluntary 'opportunity' to produce an NP. Furthermore, questions have been raised over its claims to representativeness (Davoudi & Cowie, 2013) and legitimacy (Gunn & Vigar, 2015) as a self-selecting process that claims to represent local wishes. Such questions are overlain with difficulties for those able to participate, pointing to wider limitations of

voluntarism (Parker et al., 2020b) and the time/cost and bureaucratic burdens (Parker et al., 2015). As well as the possibility of excluding already marginalized groups in society (Apostolides, 2018; Sturzaker & Nurse, 2020) while 'advantaging' others (Brookfield, 2017) that re-enforce existing spatial inequalities.

Moreover, a crisis of trust in planning has been highlighted, where public trust in local planning authorities and developers is significantly low (Grosvenor, 2019) and is characterized by dissatisfaction and conflict over decisions. In this context, the wider public perception and lack of trust in planning decisions and local developments is a factor in prompting NP (Padley, 2013; Ramsey, 2021) as volunteers taking 'control' (responsibility) as valorized in (neo)liberalized ideology.

The critique presented here rests on two main parts. First, NP and its embrocation in gift (exchange) relations; and second, the moral economy of NP. It is necessary to set up an understanding of the citizen–state 'Gift' relations underpinning NP first in order to highlight our exposition of ethical issues that follows in arguing for a moral economy.

3. PART 1: NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING AS GIFT AND STATE–CITIZEN RECIPROCATION

The Gift was introduced into anthropological studies and sociological discourse by Mauss (1954) who was concerned to relate historic gift exchange relations to that of modern rights and obligations (Mallard, 2019, p. 100), which he characterized as 'apparently freely given, yet coercive and interested'. Mauss set out the idea of the Gift as requiring some form of reciprocation and that it is intensely *relational*. This perspective simultaneously offered up a critique of liberal philosophy, with three key issues in view:

- that the liberal concept of the individual as independent is impoverished in its failure to recognize the experience of people as social beings;
- liberalism neglected how social relations alter with changes in the mode of production; and
- a negative concept of liberty is central to liberal thinking, and this fails to appreciate the moral role of political participation.

When applying this concept to the question of NP as a community right a more careful unpacking is needed. Gift involves three elements: giving, receiving and reciprocation. Sahlins (1974) produced a threefold typology of reciprocity: generalized reciprocity; balanced or symmetrical reciprocity; and negative reciprocity. Generalized reciprocity is where individuals treat others in the same way that others have treated them. Balanced reciprocity is where a direct exchange in which something is traded or given with the expectation that something of commensurate value will be returned within a reasonable time. Lastly, negative reciprocity is when an action that has a negative effect is returned with an action that has a similarly negative effect. This typology indicates the cultural dimensions of exchange behaviour and the reproduction of behaviour within a cultural field. Sahlins (1974, p. 120) contends that material imbalances exist in ongoing gift relations, depending on the system. Thus, a norm of reciprocity can actually reproduce exploitation and exclusion (issues that are reflected upon in the final sections).

Gift helps in deconstructing exchange and the social obligations of exchange relations. Layton (1997) observes that exchange involves the generation of social relationships, and that the significance of the Gift depends on the culture and network in which it takes place. Carrier (1991), Harris et al. (2013) and Adloff (2022) all discern that the gift exchange signifies a relationship that includes emotional and social dimensions. As a result, sustaining a gift relationship necessarily involves a *moral dimension* that flows beyond the contractual. Titmuss (1970) argued that a gift relationship is essentially a moral transaction, as opposed to the economic

underpinnings of a contractual relationship. His work examined the effectiveness of a system based on apparently altruistic exchange, which proved more reliable than a market-based approach. The purpose of the gift relationship affects how it endures; at least one party will attempt to sustain it for the length of its moral purpose. The dependency on voluntary time and past efforts to initiate and sustain NP can be understood as an attempt by government to sustain a gift relationship with the exchange for greater rights and other incentives within the framework of neoliberal logics.

Some policy initiatives clearly reflect characteristics of gift exchange and involve a search for a new form of 'state–citizen' relations. In such instances it is the reciprocation that acts as the guarantee – the relation – between the state and the individual and this can become long-term. This means that the gift exchange replaces or sometimes reinforces legal structures (and the performance of obligations entailed in legislation), and instead relies on a combination of mobilizing technologies, including moral entreaties. Hetland (2020), in support of this line of argument, applies Gift to environmental citizenship and argues that such an exchange takes place in forms of citizen-science volunteer scenarios. This follows the argument that all kinds of resources, whether tangible or intangible, can form a gift (Sherry, 1983). The utility of the NP 'gift' lies here less in the symbolic exchange of rights and responsibilities between government and neighbourhoods, or any prestige citizens may glean, but in the actualization of effective planning aided by material exchange of funding and support (which is counter to the evidence here).

The gift relations persisting between citizens and government are neither rigidly contractual in nature nor based on mutual trust (as per familial and personal relationships); rather Gift occupies an in-between or interstitial space where exchange relations are entered into even in the context of pre-existing *mistrust* between parties. Citizens, as potential volunteers and recipients in gift exchange, may not trust the national or local government, but may still accept the reciprocal obligations entailed in NP as a means to gain some control over development in their area; as well as being induced using other means, including financial incentives (Matthews et al., 2015; Wargent, 2021) and other support packages. Conversely the national government may not trust public citizens to freely act 'responsibly' (i.e., according to their priorities) without having some clear structuring rules and expected outputs in return for the community right – which limits the scope and scale of NP.

This example of (balanced) reciprocation from the Planning minister in 2016 illustrates this point in relation to NP specifically:

> As more communities take up the opportunity to shape their area *we need to make sure planning policy is suitable* for a system with growing neighbourhood plan coverage. Building on proposals to further strengthen neighbourhood planning through the Neighbourhood Planning Bill, I am today making clear that where communities plan for housing in their area in a neighbourhood plan, those plans should not be deemed to be out-of-date. (Gavin Barwell, written ministerial statement, 12 December 2016; added emphasis)

Characterized as a structuralist perspective, the Gift has given way to more complex and fluid post-structuralist theorizations of social relations. Yet the relevance of Gift here is less its explanatory power of the world as it exists, but rather the light it sheds on how policymakers *attempt* to order the world and align or mobilize others to their will (e.g., in the case of the above ministerial statement designed to support local housing development). Indeed, these insights were to become key in the development of Foucault's work on governmentality (Foucault, 1991; Shoshana, 2022). Mauss also saw that the Gift is critically about *prestige* via exchange, and the theory had influence on Bourdieu in terms of his development of Mauss' original concept of habitus, and also in his work on social distinction (Bourdieu, 1979).

While coming closer to questions of the exchange relations involved in formal policy, these accounts do little to respond to instances where the form or 'value' of the initial offer is complex, or in some sense less than fully satisfactory or unbalanced. This observation gives rise to questions over what reciprocity can be expected and to what efforts does the gift-giver go to in order to maintain the relationship? For instance, by ensuring that further exchanges make amends (or appear to make amends – as with modifications to NP policy and practice). Such a perspective comes close to recent debates over affective governmentalities (Shoshana, 2022) on the one hand, and something akin to 'Stockholm syndrome' on the other (i.e., how are volunteers sustained in what can appear an exploitative relationship?). This requires considering how governments wishing to induce voluntary action and (balanced) reciprocation need to design, package and maintain the NP Gift – given it is in their interest to do so; the policy's success requires ongoing mobilization and reciprocation to demonstrate 'success'. As Sturzaker et al. (2022) remark, the efforts on the parts of both local and national government to maintain relations in NP is part of a process of maintaining political legitimacy where 'output' (the policy and its effectiveness) is in tension with the 'input' (the responsiveness of the policy to citizens).

As Hetland (2020, p. 259) states, where 'a long-lasting relationship between the participants and the activity undertaken' is required, it is important that 'these kinds of relationships do not primarily build on a one-way motivation to contribute, but on a reciprocal relationship wherein all parties gain something'. That is to say that the gift relationship must be beneficial to both the policy originator as donor and volunteer as recipients, which becomes muddied within neoliberalized framings of volunteering.

Davoudi and Madanipour (2013, p. 554) recognize the technologies of agency that are called upon to help realize NP given, in their reading, that 'technologies of agency are those mechanisms that liberate individual freedoms and skills and redeploy individual's capacity as "free subjects" to meet government's objectives'. This links to assumptions of liberal philosophy and the apparently rational choices that participants make to engage with NP, whereby:

> the government has sought to engineer the planning system to incentivize economic rational choice in favour of development but how, in so doing, communities are also required to make a series of rational choices as to whether it is worth engaging with the new institutions of localism including neighbourhood planning. (Mace & Tewdwr-Jones, 2017, p. 186)

Indeed, the new identity as citizen-planners confers a degree of prestige for at least some, and the promise of greater control, even if constrained, is designed to appeal to self-interested (i.e., rational choice) calculation.

These findings have promoted government to take action in order to counter the range of issues presented in the research literature and encountered in practice during the first few years of NP; the UK government responded by adjusting funding and support arrangements and clarifying the legal position that neighbourhood plans would have in decision-making. Whilst limited evidence is available, we do know that few urban and deprived neighbourhoods have either taken up or completed an NP, despite government redeploying financial support money to such areas since 2015. Over time the justification for information and support in aid of the exercise of community rights has been subject to extended attention and prompted active modification. As an example, part of the UK government's repackaged offer for participants has been increased funding for categories of neighbourhood who are:

- allocating sites for housing;
- including a design code;
- a business neighbourhood plan;
- a cluster of three or more parishes writing a single plan;

- a neighbourhood area with a population of over 25,000;
- a designated neighbourhood forum (i.e., urban); and
- a group based in an area which has a high level of deprivation.

Thus the UK government seemingly attempted to address the question of take-up (tacitly accepting that a 'right to do' is not the same as the 'ability to do'), yet, despite these efforts, crucially this has not led to any substantial changes to NP uptake. This is important because by only taking the *incentivization* route, such as offering additional funding to support challenging elements of policy work, government miss a wider point that some deprived communities will still weigh up the rights offered and obligations entailed as being too onerous on them as volunteers (i.e., an unwanted gift). Indeed, such piecemeal funding is only likely to induce the already wealthy and educated individuals with the time, inclination and status to accept community rights.

Such policy modification responses has done little to alter the underlying basis of NP, yet incentives to continue participation (i.e., either to receive or reciprocate) have been a primary inducement, such as increasing funding and issuing iterated guidance and support arrangements. Without recognizing the limits to volunteerism, a reconsideration of the (neo-classical) conception of liberal rights as freedom to act is less likely – and a policy myopia regarding NP helps explain why such issues have not come into central view by government. For state–citizen relations, the concept of the Gift helps to demonstrate that it is not just the individual freedom to act that is important (such as by incentivizing individuals with power, funding or status) but also to recognize the wider context and relations that set up the obligations and trade-offs for exchange and volunteering across heterogeneous people and places.

For government the main criteria for the success of NP as a policy has been in terms of citizen take-up, because this surface level statistic allows them to point to a successful policy of mobilization and maintain the necessary political support for this neoliberal apprentice piece. What matters less here are deeper questions around substantive challenges and outcomes, whilst what does seem to matter is that it *appears* to be a successful policy. This explains why financial inducements and technical support to undertake NP have been the primary mode of government repackaging of the policy over the last decade, rather than a more radical rethinking of the effectiveness of the policy for citizen volunteers and actual planning outcomes.

The deployment of Gift helps highlight both the exploitative and exclusionary potentials of NP and to reveal the weaknesses of neoliberal citizen mobilization policies. Returning to Sahlin's (1974) typology, NP volunteers would expect a balanced reciprocation from government for their acceptance of the Gift, but in many cases the challenges involved in producing a complex document and managing the relations involved leads to a negative reciprocation, for example, a failure to produce an implementable plan. This may appear naive on the part of neoliberal politicians, who typically assert that citizens are required to do more, and recourse to a familiar rhetoric of 'you only have yourselves to blame' if this does not happen, acts to consign failure on volunteers (akin to a 'blame the victim' mentality). Even more dubious is that such failure during the process is less important than a volunteer group actually starting the process (accepting the gift-offer) because this aids the desired positive take-up statistics; in other words, volunteers can fail, but this is only an issue if they fail to accept NP and fail to aid the simulation of the policy 'success'.

This account highlights how such policy 'gifts' are assembled, packaged, and maintained for specific purposes to achieve policy objectives, and the ability to claim success in political terms. However, for the majority of communities whom the government ostensibly claim to want to engage in NP activity, this can be understood as a gift-offer that cannot be used by its recipient. It is either refused (i.e., it is understood that it cannot be reciprocated), or accepted (but reciprocation proves problematic). This can be seen by recourse to the evidence that the financial

incentives used including increased funding for different aspects of NP have not made a difference to the socio-spatial take-up of the policy on the ground.

As such we contend that the continuing relevance of the notion of the Gift is to provide a means to examine the basis of exchange and the capacity to respond to rights 'gifted' from governments; and that the conceptualization of gift relations here provides a lens to consider what it is that neoliberalized governments expect from citizens in pursuit of their policy objectives. Engagement on the terms offered emphasizes growth and personal responsibility. This has come into even sharper focus since recent research has shown that NP take-up is on a significant downward trajectory (Parker et al., 2020a) as fewer volunteers accept NP. Over the past decade the rights offered by NP has remained largely intact, and we view such modified offers as a *repackaging* of the same model of NP. This leads to a moral dilemma over whether it is legitimate to expect those already excluded from the economic benefits of such a neoliberalized system to give up their time to further the political work and objectives of the state towards (unequal) growth. This leads us to now consider the moral and ethical credentials of NP.

4. PART 2: MORAL ECONOMY AND THE ETHICS OF NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING

The discussion of practical citizen–state relations underpinning NP, which has used the construct of the Gift, takes us onto a reflection on the moral dimensions of NP as a policy agenda. We have argued that the take-up of NP is a poor quantitative measure of its policy 'success' as used by government, as is pointing to the amount of (extra) funding provided for communities. Where such inputs and contexts are open-ended, have no guarantee of success and are burdensome there are also moral questions to be answered; as prompted by Sayer (2015, p. 291), who makes the case that:

> Defining exploitation just in quantitative, value terms may seem more 'scientific', but it doesn't in itself tell us what's wrong with it, namely that it takes unfair advantage of others and fails to treat them as ends in themselves. This leaves us in a weak position for criticising existing institutions.

In this respect, adopting a moral economy perspective brings us closer to an ethical critique of the institutions of localism and NP as mobilized by the UK government. Particularly given a moral economy perspective: 'examines and assesses the moral influences on, and implications, of economic activities, and how economic practices and relations are evaluated as fair, unfair, good or bad by those involved in them' (Sayer, 2015, p. 291).

Noxolo (2011) states that the 'notion of moral economy focusses on the ways culturally produced values and norms mediate economic transactions' (pp. 208–209); and highlights the challenge for (neo)liberal governments where the connotation of volunteering as: 'either unpaid or underpaid amateurism (in often unspoken contrast with commoditised, professionalised labour) has become increasingly difficult to sustain as the phenomenon of volunteering develops an increasingly ambivalent relationship with both the state and the market' and where the 'privatisation of welfare provision draws more and more on the delegation of state responsibilities to the 'shadow state' activities of the voluntary sector …' (p. 206). This leads to questions over the moral basis of NP as a policy reliant on unpaid volunteers that requires significant and open-ended time and resource inputs from its participants.

In tracing the genesis of this perspective, Edelman (2012, p. 55) explains that E. P. Thompson's use of 'moral' in his discussion of moral economies of place in 18th-century England:

> conflated two interrelated meanings of the word. … The first is 'moral' in relation to 'mores' or customs. … The second meaning of 'moral' relates to a principled stance vis-à-vis society, the world, and especially the common good, with the latter defined both in terms of customary rights and utopian aspirations.

While questions of morality tend to be conflated with discussions of ethics, some draw a distinction, favouring morality as being the acceptable conduct represented in the codes and institutions of a society or a division/group in society. This sets up morals as commonly accepted 'good' practices in and for society.

When discussing *ethics*, the standard view is that the actual conduct of the individual is in question; that is whether actions can be judged right or wrong, or at least be questioned in moral terms. When discussing policy these distinctions blur as what is then in question is the morality of and basis for action vis-à-vis policy, and the ethical behaviour of those responsible for creating and implementing such policy. Moreover the initial assumptions, evidence and experience of that policy may mean that the moral underpinnings of the policy may become less secure as time elapses; and where these become unstable or misaligned the ethics of pursuing the same course becomes more questionable. As we argue here in the NP case, while the government may have initially believed and held various ideologically inspired policy goals for NP in the period 2010–13, the reality of a neoliberal policy environment geared to promote growth and housing through communities quickly became evident. Claims to citizen 'empowerment' through NP weakened over time and the growing evidence of policy failure and significant burden on volunteers have mounted and which vindicate early criticisms of NP.

The levelling of ethical scrutiny at NP here rests on two key points. The first in terms of policy assumptions made around offering a universal right without acknowledging the issues of inviting open-ended political work by laypersons; and second, an associated potential for misleading people into investing unreasonable time and effort. The following quotation from a neighbourhood planner in England highlights this issue well:

> I think it was very presumptive of government that neighbourhood planning could be done largely as voluntary effort … it is pretty cheeky to expect that this type of professional work be done largely through voluntary effort … places that don't have volunteers of the right skill-set are really going to struggle. (Parker et al., 2020b, p. 649)

The issue here is that enabling policies such as NP reflect attempts to 'nudge' citizens towards civic action (Brown, 2012; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) and, as adopted by the UK government since 2010, present a series of supposed moral 'goods' as part of a framework of 'choice' where the value of volunteering is promoted as open to all whom accept it – regardless of the costs to enter the game.

The second ethical issue rests on questions of exclusion masked as empowerment and the possibility of de facto 'double exclusion' (Hastings & Matthews, 2015; Parker, 2008), as a product of efforts to include that only reach certain (sub)sections of society. Such (2013) points out that the ability of different groups to respond to governmental calls to voluntary action is infused with limitations. Volunteering and civic action is a characteristic of those well-armed to help themselves, which raises some serious questions about the equity of NP. It is unclear who can *actually* participate in NP in terms of giving and receiving its assumed benefits. This is an important point as the policy exhibits obvious exclusionary potential given that there is much evidence that time is unequally distributed among different social groups (Burchardt, 2010).

NP attempts to normalize and make morally acceptable extensive volunteering to deliver political work and justify policy approaches. Furthermore, this is part of a wider attempt to reorganize socio-economic relations to reset the 'moral norms' indicated by Sayer (1999) to enable

iteratively different economies. NP requires the time, effort, and resources of local citizens in pursuit of objectives not of their own design and with open-ended, uncertain, and limited potential outcomes derived from the exchange (gift) relationship. Instead, the neighbourhood scale has been (socially) constructed as a bounded policy space for the mobilization and (re)production of active citizenship aligned to ideologically informed goals of responsibilization, growth and markets, whilst couched in liberal democracy.

In order to be both morally legitimate and ethically/practically sustainable as a form of citizen volunteering, the neoliberalized assumptions underpinning NP need to be reconciled with the evidence or otherwise abandoned; neither of which are recognized by government and remain likely to shape future state–citizen relations. This has underscored questions concerning *who* NP is for, *what* it is for, and *how* the UK government conceive of neighbourhood planners in mobilizing and inducing engagement in this quintessentially neoliberal policy initiative.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has sought to present three related points that together critically question the moral basis of maintaining NP in England in the form sustained since 2010. We have argued that the government commitment to NP represents a simulacrum through which its political proponents attempt to maintain the ideological credentials of the policy despite actually existing outcomes demonstrating policy failure on the ground, which is bound up with presenting the project as a successful 'apprentice piece' of neoliberal governance. This reading brings into question the ethical basis of a continuation of NP as pursued in England, which displays signs of both policy failure and social exclusion.

This critique of NP, with more than 10 years of experience and an extensive literature and empirical base, reveals how it exhibits typical features associated to neoliberal governmentality, while lacking substantive benefit for the citizens and neighbourhoods it claims to empower with such 'rights'. We see this as not just ethically unjust, but also unsustainable, given the practical challenges involved in planning work, even at the neighbourhood scale. It is demonstrably fit only for those already able to exercise agency and only in the way required by the policy architects. When viewing such state–citizen relations through the lens of Gift relations and moral economy, the impact and effects on volunteers is justifiably considered suspect.

The 'geographies' of volunteering, allied to evidence regarding the actual ability to exercise community 'rights' for some neighbourhoods, positions NP as a problematic policy; one which has been characterized as 'failing' (Wargent, 2021), 'ossifying' (Wargent & Parker, 2018) and 'ethically questionable' (Parker et al., 2020b). Much of the research on ethics concerning the built and natural environment has focussed on particular decisions that are made, however little has actually attended to the environment in which they operate (although Hendler, 1995, highlights how ethical positions are reflected in day-to-day planning practices). As such this paper calls for closer inspection of the moral and ethical dimension of citizen mobilization policy and their attendant obligations in practice. Especially when consideration for a new cadre of citizen-volunteers invited into the planning system through NP appears scant.

Government attempts to sustain the policy despite an ongoing, open-ended, and unequal exchange relationship raises serious moral questions over the burden of work assumed by unpaid volunteers, let alone more marginalized and disadvantaged communities across England. For those able to engage in NP this political work can be exploitative, and for those that cannot participate it is exclusionary. Clearly just because a citizen can or does participate, this does not mean that they are not being over-burdened and over-promised. Conversely, criticizing non-reciprocating communities for refusing or failing the requirements is also morally questionable. The implications of government actively encouraging and setting-up thousands of community volunteers across England to fail highlights the human cost and missed opportunities of NP. This is

particularly acute when the NP policy is primarily designed to further a governmental agenda for housing delivery and growth – and which often conflicts with the actual motives of volunteers to engage in NP.

Whilst NP can mollify some communities, the possibility of exploitation or exclusion is ever present and seldom acknowledged in neoliberal policy that puts mobilization and observation of ideological tenets before consideration of people and place. In this way, despite claims to a progressive localism, NP is still maintained by the UK government on its own terms and wills into reality a new moral economy and exchange relationship that structures state–citizen relations in practice.

This paper has cast NP as an 'apprentice piece' of neoliberal governmentality – showcasing and testing at scale the key features or craft of neoliberal thinking in application and which seeks to elide evidence that undermines this imaginary. Here NP has been presented as a working neoliberal localist policy rather than one that is substantively effective or indeed 'real' in Baudrillard's terms. This set of factors tends towards viewing NP's status as a simulacrum; a hyper-real policy that exists to demonstrate a set of ideological state priorities rather than the priorities of local neighbourhoods. What matters to its progenitors is that it appears to work, for example through levels of take-up or via the amplification of the voices of supporters, rather than considering who benefits and what the outcomes are on the ground.

Instead, government attempts are made to maintain the exchange relation required to protect or keep the simulation of the policy intact, rather than improve plan-making outcomes or ease the burden on citizen volunteers. This simulation acts to perpetuate an unethical policy relationship and maintains the simulacrum of the idealized neighbourhood plan imagined to deliver *inter alia* more freedom and control, more development and housing, and a better environment, via volunteers. This view is attenuated by the significant austerity and resource limitations placed on local authorities and concomitant increasing role of private sector expertise in delivering planning (Parker et al., 2018), with NP seen as a 'market' for planning consultants and more broadly the digitalization of planning.

The UK government's 'Levelling-Up' agenda reflects a similar approach; where (deprived) communities are assumed to accept funding in exchange for the pursuit of growth, regardless of the very real socio-economic challenges faced by such communities and places. In light of such policy criticisms, the future of NP is being considered at a time when the UK government is attempting to pursue a 'Levelling-up and Regeneration' agenda; one that continues to cite empowerment of local communities through a spatial policy approach geared towards growth. As the Town and Country Planning Association (2021, p. 5) bemoans:

> throwing pots of money at localities … is an extremely wasteful use of public money, if not combined with strategic thinking, whether in plans or in some shared public conversations about regional disparities. Spatial and locational fairness and efficiency must go hand in hand. … Levelling Up is a slogan not a policy – with careful planning nowhere to be seen.

This is concerning if the lessons presented here of basing state–citizen relations and localist policy on (neo)liberal ideology is to be heeded.

Yet most pernicious is how NP can actively place local communities and volunteers in *conflict* with one another if individuals and groups are *encouraged* towards growth. Adloff (2022) challenges the claim that gift relations are only motivated by self-interest (*Homo economicus*), or simply enacted because they are embedded in socio-cultural norms (*Homo sociologicus*), and instead argues for a 'politics of conviviality' (led by *Homo donator*); as an alternative to the pursuit of growth and which recognizes the crucial role of mutual trust in developing progressive relations.

This reading has critically reflected on the uneven geographies of volunteering in NP in England and the moral and ethical issues that have been produced in practice through this specific (imagined) neoliberal policy construction. Yet clearly there are many other types of planning policies and tools that claim to empower citizens but that are constructed and mobilized to manage such inputs by both national and local governments (e.g., Parker et al., 2022, for an overview of governmental logics and planning negotiation; and Dobson & Parker, 2023, on the power enacted through planning texts and documents). Such work highlights a need for further critical discussion on the legitimacy of the relationships offered and maintained between the state and citizens and as a necessary step in presenting the case for change and rebuilding trust in public institutions.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTE

1. An apprentice piece is a showpiece item where the artisan demonstrates their prowess, often in miniature, of the range of skills and techniques required in their profession, their craft.

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