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## **Participant Experience of Neighbourhood Planning in England**

*Working Papers in Real Estate & Planning 01/17*

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### **Abstract**

The paper sets out evidence of how community actors and Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) in England have experienced neighbourhood planning, introduced under the Localism Act (2011). This reflects on and extends earlier nationwide research, where emerging experiences of participating groups were discussed (Parker et al, 2014; 2015). A subset of the same sample of community participants were revisited to check on their progress and experience in the intervening two years since the initial survey work was conducted. The main contribution of this article lies in demonstrating the shifting interpretations of neighbourhood planning as the participants moved through the process of producing a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). Particular attention is paid to the latter stages of NDP production which could not be captured in the original research. We also draw on data collected about neighbourhood planning from LPAs that have worked with and alongside the sample neighbourhoods; to explore the local government perspective and associated support arrangements.

**Keywords:** neighbourhood planning, localism, open source planning, support, burdens, co-production.

## **Participant Experience of Neighbourhood Planning in England.**

### **Introduction**

Introduced under the Localism Act (2011), neighbourhood planning established new opportunities for dialogic planning within a ‘collaborative democracy’ (Conservative Party, 2010: p1). This invitation has been taken up enthusiastically by a cross-section of neighbourhoods, with over 2,000 communities active across England by early 2017. The initiative allows local residents to author a statutory planning document that, subject to certain conditions, ‘gives communities the power to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and shape the development and growth of their local area’ (DCLG, 2014: no page). This article explores the ways in which neighbourhood planning has been approached and experienced between mid-2014 and late-2016, and how community views have altered over that period. Data is presented from follow-up interviews with community participants who participated in a 2014 study entitled *User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning* (Parker et al., 2014; also Parker et al., 2015 in this journal), alongside interviews with Local Planning Authority (LPA) officers directly involved in supporting neighbourhood planning communities.

The 2014 study was a nationwide research project sanctioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and commissioned through Locality using funds allocated under the Supporting Communities in Neighbourhood Planning programme (DCLG, 2013). The project was designed to gather evidence on the implementation of neighbourhood planning in order to inform future approaches and to increase its effectiveness, as well as influence the shape of the support offered to those taking-up neighbourhood planning rights (Parker et al., 2014). The resultant report set out the findings from the study and a number made of recommendations for proposed changes to the neighbourhood planning system were made. This work was timed to feed into a DCLG policy review and informed a number of alterations to government’s support programme and to adjust aspects of the neighbourhood planning process itself.

This paper sets out findings from a follow-up project that explores how a sample of the original communities have fared in the intervening two and half years, including the effect of changes to support and regulations made since 2014. Particular attention is paid to the latter stages of neighbourhood planning (i.e. independent examination, modifications, community referendum and post-adoption) as the preponderance of participating communities had not yet reached these stages in 2014. We reflect on the continuity and changes in community experiences, as

well as the experiences of LPA officers who have been tasked with supporting neighbourhood planning groups.

A wide literature now exists on neighbourhood planning and for the purposes of this working paper we elide this for the sake of space, although readers may wish to engage with this published material, which has now covered numerous aspects and issues identified with neighbourhood planning; for example: the emerging patterns of neighbourhood planning (Parker and Salter, 2016; Parker, 2017), questions of legitimacy (Davoudi and Cowie, 2013; Cowie and Davoudi, 2015), processes of co-production (Parker et al., 2015), the control and scope of NDPs (Parker et al., 2017), the role of political identities and agonistic interaction (Bradley, 2015; Parker et al., forthcoming), middle class activism (Matthews et al., 2015), community knowledge and technology (Jones et al., 2015), community capacity (Gunn et al., 2015), issues of hyper local territorial governance (Cowie et al., 2015), the intricacies of the examination process (Parker et al., 2016), and how housing is being delivered (Bradley and Sparling, 2017)<sup>1</sup>.

## **Methodology**

This research was designed to follow-up the 2014 study (Parker et al., 2014) which drew on data collected from 120 questionnaires and six focus groups with community participants that had been undertaking neighbourhood planning for at least a six month period, with the majority still at designation stage<sup>2</sup>. The findings presented here are based on follow-up interviews with participants (n=36) and also involved Local Planning Authority (LPA) officer interviews (n=16), conducted to better understand both the latter stages of neighbourhood planning and also the changes made to the regulations since 2014. Separate structured interview tools were developed to capture the experiences of these two groups, which elicited a mix of quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for a significant breadth of experience to be captured. The data also benefited from a temporal consolidation as participant experiences were building on the past research and associated data. The community sample for this study included: participants from both parished areas (58% - of which 86% were classified as rural) and neighbourhood forums (42% - of which 93% were classified as urban). A balance of participants from both 'Frontrunner' areas (47%), and non-Frontrunner areas (53%) and range of participants in the latter stages were involved: adopted or 'made' (56%) plans, referendum (8%), at examination

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<sup>1</sup> An online bibliography exists covering neighbourhood planning, see: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wPqHimKcyddD97O-rEnuTn3OVMgAmpSeE9w6Gq0\\_bBs/edit#](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wPqHimKcyddD97O-rEnuTn3OVMgAmpSeE9w6Gq0_bBs/edit#)

<sup>2</sup> A full account of the original study's methodology can be found in Parker et al. (2014: p10).

(22%) or submission (14%). Participants whose NDPs were allocating sites for housing accounted for (42%) of the sample. A good range of experiences were captured in the LPA officer interviews, reflecting the uptake of neighbourhood planning nationwide including: LPAs supporting a single community to those supporting over 40 NDPs (median av. = 8, mean av. = 12); LPAs dealing exclusively with parished areas (50%), those dealing solely with neighbourhood forums (19%) or a both (31%); an even split of LPAs with an up-to-date Local Plan and those without; and LPAs from the majority the English regions (except the East of England or the North East, reflecting the slow uptake of neighbourhood planning in these regions). Whilst all interviewees were directly involved in supporting neighbourhood planning, the majority of LPAs we spoke to (69%) did not have a full-time officer dedicated to neighbourhood planning. The research was undertaken in line with the University of Reading's ethical framework and all interviews were conducted under the principle of informed consent. Since the topics under discussion were potentially sensitive for individual participants and could jeopardise ongoing neighbourhood plans, all participants and identifying features have been anonymised.

### **User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning Revisited**

The latter stages of neighbourhood planning encapsulate the submission, independent examination, modifications, neighbourhood referendum and formal making (or adoption) of the NDP by the LPA. This section explores these stages from both community and LPA perspectives before the concluding section considers the future of neighbourhood planning as a topic of research and as an instrument of public policy. The Parker et al. (2014) study found that many participants found the process overall to be burdensome and that many did not fully understand the limits of NDPs - this key concern was reiterated in the 2016 study:

*I think [Central Government] have been misguided in stating that neighbourhood planning will allow local people to control their areas without making it clear that the real aim is to increase housing (not prevent it) and that it only relates to planning policy; not all the things that are of real local concern to local people (Local Planning Authority interview #9).*

The lack of an up to date five-year housing land supply (DCLG, 2012: para. 49) is a major concern for many communities, accompanied by a general feeling that NDPs will be ignored without this, despite the huge amount of community effort involved in gathering evidence and public opinion on local growth requirements. As such the relationship with the Local Plan and

the evidence base available at the LPA scale plays a significant role not only in influencing take-up of neighbourhood planning but of how those involved feel their efforts will be viewed by decision-makers at a later date. Affiliated to this, latter stage participants expressed concerns over potential revisions to neighbourhood plans in light of emerging Local Plans and changing housing numbers. It remains unclear as to how NDPs might be revised in light of new information (or changes in the role of housing land supply) - for example whether this means new consultation, a further referendum and so on. The status of NDPs therefore remains ambiguous against higher tier policies (particularly where NDPs had preceded the Local Plan):

*The biggest thing is the Local Plan - it's like the sword of Damocles hanging over your head, they can slice the plan at the drop of a hat. (Community interview #4).*

*... [DCLG need to] make sure they are enforceable. We've been lucky that our Council are listening to ours but I know, I've heard some councils aren't taking notice - and then what's the point? The biggest gripe is having completed one is that they're not getting used because of permitted development, central government have not clarified overriding Local Plan - so why do it?! We're in a lucky position to get the Fronrunner too, money is a big issue, we spent all the grant on the consultants so what would we do without the fronrunner money? We wouldn't have been able to do anything. (Community interview #1).*

*DCLG need to look very much at five year housing land supply issue, there's a danger without this and with the best will in the world, with allocated sites 20% above the recommendations of the Local Plan, our Plan is not enough. We've raised this with DCLG - I think they need to localise the 5 year housing land supply, here our Local Plan comprises various areas that are covered but [our local city] has no supply, so we all come unstuck - it has to be addressed (Community interview #3).*

In December 2016, this issue was confronted by Government in the House of Commons, with the Minister of State for Housing and Planning stating that the relevant policies for the supply of housing in a neighbourhood plan should not be deemed to be 'out-of-date' under the NPPF (DCLG, 2012: para. 49) where the neighbourhood plan allocates sites for housing and the LPA can demonstrate a three year supply of deliverable housing sites (as opposed to a five year supply) (Barwell, 2016).

In both 2014 and 2016, participants desired clarification of timescales and obligations of the LPA to respond, for example in setting dates for independent examination - issues which are now emerging as part of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill. The examination is the point at which a prospective NDP is assessed against the Basic Conditions. As such, it is the pre-eminent site of interaction between community aspirations as set out in a draft NDP and the

regulations as interpreted by the independent examiner. In 2016, most respondents were satisfied with the examination process despite widespread evidence of ‘rescripting’ of policies on behalf of examiners. This reflected a widespread instrumentalist attitude on behalf of participants who felt that securing *some* community benefits was better than none (Parker et al., 2015). Increasingly examinations are held ‘behind closed doors’ without a public hearing, whilst this was generally accepted by participants (some of whom felt uncomfortable in such ‘formal’ settings), a number of participants expressed the desire for greater input during examination in order to stress the meaning behind their policies. Participants’ concerns regarding examination were understandably centred on outcomes: in some instances, the examination was a key site of limiting community ambitions - particularly for communities that had not developed a close working relationship with their LPA - who could advise on policies (un)likely to make it through examination - or who had not produced a plan that adhered to the permissible scope of an NDP and/or reflected the evidence base. Thus, examinations have become a major site of rescripting, with modification very common, including policy deletion (Parker and Salter, 2016; Parker et al, 2017). Below one respondent explained how the examiner ‘struck out’ portions of their Plan:

*Our examiner was very risk averse, and ultimately rendered our plan toothless. After two years of negotiating with the LA on our target number of houses, we then had to agree that it become a minimum rather than target, because that’s what the examiner said - so our plan becomes meaningless, we left with no control and we were back to relying on the goodwill of the LA - and we know they are under huge pressure to build houses and that imperative will win out (Community interview #10).*

Similarly, another participant recalls how the scope of their NDP was reined in:

*We started off with a very ambitious plan but things got knocked on the head. Some of the important infrastructure issues we were told we could not include as they were not in the scope ... Also the examiner told us he didn’t like the way we covered some issues in the plan - we have two main settlements in the village and we wanted to maintain the difference between them with what we called the green gap (we should have called it a local green space). The owners want to develop it but the community wanted to keep it - in the end the examiner didn’t like our wording so it was struck from the plan. (Community interview #5)*

Despite these difficulties, not all communities were unhappy with the rescripting of their policies, with minor amendments often considered positive:

*[Our examiner] put in some interesting stuff, but advised us to rearrange the layout to make it simpler. We thought it was a great idea, positive - [the examination was]*

*all written, but we talked to her on the phone a few times (Community interview #22).*

*The examination was done by written representation, she visited and she suggested some minor adjustments - not too much rescripting, most of the changes were on the green views policy, she wanted more evidence for the views. The other thing was when the plan went to the District Council, some Councillors wanted the policy on a dark sky area - where we have limits on external lighting in new developments - they wanted that strengthened, which we were OK with but that was fine; just a case of adding a few lines really (Community interview #20).*

Moreover in the House of Lords debate over the emerging Neighbourhood Planning Bill Baroness Cumberlege described her own experience:

*When the examiner came in and made these enormous changes, of which we knew nothing until we received the written material that he gave us, we were completely dumbfounded. This was not the neighbourhood plan that we wanted to put to the public. It was a plan that was written by the examiner, who deleted pages and pages of our plan which we felt were informative and useful to the local community (Hansard Vol. 779 col. 432, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2017).*

These experiences echo Parker et al.'s (2016) concern that recent judgements cast doubt on communities' ability (or propensity) to produce robust policy – despite plans meeting the basic conditions. The prospect of legal challenge was recognised by both community and LPA representatives - for the latter, examiner independence required consideration by central government:

*DCLG must address the independence of examiners, they need to be appointed centrally to avoid the suggestion that they are biased in favour of the neighbourhood plan and the unnecessary and expensive legal wranglings that are associated with this. (Local Planning Authority interview #9).*

However no community participants raised the selection process as problematic - the choice of examiner was the most uniform of community experiences: almost without exception groups had a choice of three examiners given to them by the LPA (who mostly used NPIERS). A more pressing issue was the timing of the examination:

*The real difficulty is the process is so slow, you submit for examination then essentially hand the plan over to the District Council for 18 months or more before it is made. You can't change it in this period and we've had development applications that have happened in that time and we can't have a say through the Neighbourhood Plan (Community interview #6).*



A further issue was the variation in examiner approach and perceived inconsistencies from the LPA perspective. LPAs found they could not give concrete advice to communities because examiners often treat the same issues differently:

*More clarity [is needed] on the examination process - examiners vary in the way they approach plans, and there is inconsistency in reports ... Also greater clarity on the relationship between examiners and local groups/LA. Examiners have different approaches to engaging in discussions during the examination process and I think there should be more guidance on this to improve consistency (Local Planning Authority interview #11).*

*A lot of our work is managing expectations with the neighbourhood plan. Inconsistencies in examination make it difficult. Policies might look good on paper, but an examiner might have an off day - some leave in parking policies and some take out - that inconsistency is frustrating, similar policies but different outcomes. NPIERS also take some time - on one occasion we needed an examiner quickly so I went straight to an examiner rather than wait. One examiner didn't do a site visit - group were happy that incidentally because it meant that the plan was barely touched - I was quite shocked by that. We've had some bad experiences, I would say there are three examiners that I wouldn't use again (Local Planning Authority interview #10).*

As pointed out by Parker, et al. (2016: p521), who reviewed the way that examinations are being conducted, amendments made to the examination process should be undertaken 'with a view to improving communications with all concerned, ensuring that expectations are clear and that the outcomes are understood' thus emphasising the need for more open relations of co-production to be instilled.

Upon passing the examination, neighbourhood plans are put to a community referendum - a process that was largely unproblematic for communities. In line with ongoing queries over the democratic legitimacy of neighbourhood plans (Davoudi and Cowie, 2013; Cowie and Davoudi, 2015), interviewees did raise concerns about low turnout rates and in some case questioned the purpose of a full referendum. Referenda caused greater difficulties within LAs whose democratic services reported the significant administration cost, particularly in light of the reduction in central government funding to LAs for each neighbourhood planning area. Cuts to funding have been compounded by the fact that under previous funding arrangements a significant portion of funding was only administered *after* a successful referendum. Large neighbourhood planning areas and those where there were no established administrative boundaries were notably troublesome - several LPA interviewees reported that administering multiple large referenda in short succession and in a timely fashion would be impossible. This

issue may be exacerbated if the Neighbourhood Planning Bill places obligations on LPAs to fulfil this task within a certain time frame. As with examinations, a number of communities struggled with a long wait for a referendum; maintaining community awareness and publicity was deemed particularly problematic over longer time frames. Planning officers also reflected on these issues:

*We've had an anomaly this year because of the EU referendum, the Police and Crime Commissioner election and a by-election that has all created delays - it's simply a capacity and resource issue, communities don't always understand that running a referendum is an expensive enterprise (Local Planning Authority interview #16).*

*More sensible guidance on publicity around referenda would be useful. Review process - LAs will struggle to support groups reviewing plans with the level of resources from government being made available, especially in more populous areas with very high referendum costs. There might also be scope for making minor revisions without the need for a referendum? (Local Planning Authority interview #11).*

Isolated complaints were raised by interviewees questioning the necessity of a full referendum:

*We initially wanted to combine it with a set of elections to save to money but that wasn't possible. It took a lot of work on the council side to organise the referendum, lots of backroom talks. Following electoral law is too inflexible and too expensive - process went OK, but it just feels like, I don't know if it helps everybody? Residents having to go a polling station, we had 1,000 votes casts which is way more than we thought, we thought maybe 100 and we had concerns about the legitimacy of that - I'm not sure it warrants all of that official process. We wanted ballot boxes in schools, mosques and pubs but it wasn't possible (Community interview #8).*

The above response highlights a wider tension within the neighbourhood planning process whereby the legal status of plans (and coincident requirements and safeguards) is felt to be at odds with hyper-local issues. In 2014, the main issue identified during the referendum stage related to clarification on who could publicise and campaign in support of the plan and this was reiterated by a number of community participants. However the vast majority of communities were happy with the referendum process in 2016, with high 'Yes' votes resulting in many participants viewing the referendum as a vilification of their work, and many groups commending their LA and how they handled the referenda.

The status of NDPs and their authors remains particularly unclear in 2016. In most instances, 'ownership' of NDPs reverts to Parish Councils (even where largely distinct steering groups

authored the plan) - and a number of interviewees mentioned being co-opted on Parish Councils during the NDP process. However, as identified in the 2014, the role of Neighbourhood Forum's is significantly more problematic and both community and LPA respondents requested greater clarity from DCLG. This issue was compounded by the fact that the majority of groups continue to find the process time consuming, commonly taking years to reach final stages of NDP. Parker and Salter (2016) found that the average time to examination was 27 months, with many communities exceeding this significantly. As in 2014, many community respondents felt that in theory the timeframe for producing an NDP could be noticeably reduced:

*The process ought to take less than three years - LAs are sitting on these things because they don't have the time, I don't know what can be done about it but they require more people and they don't have it, the length of time is ridiculous. The residents - I wouldn't say they felt left out - but they're frustrated that it's taken so long, a year to draft it, a year to say it's ready for inspection. They are being completed over the course of years and people don't work like that. I don't expect instant gratification ... but it's taken too long. We felt pioneers in the beginning, I think more examples to work with would have shortened our initial draft - and the council, not obstructive as I say but, they took too long (Community interview #29).*

This issue was linked to future community inputs by a number of interviewees who queried whether the process required a built-in review process to address subsequent changes in the local planning landscape (such as an emerging Local Plan); for the both LPA and community interviews, it was felt that revisions should not require 're-doing' the entire process - not least for fear of participation fatigue. This was a significant issue for within LPA interviewees too - one of whom linked it to the role of central government:

*So some DCLG decisions have undermined the process. I was at DCLG a few months ago, a number of times I said we need to get away only thinking of the rights of neighbourhood planning groups, speeding up the process and so on, what are we trying to achieve? Rights come with responsibilities - there's nothing in terms of review process for Neighbourhood Forums, nothing to check they they're doing everything by the book. We have no resources to check - we've always said this but designation is not the end of the process, it should be the beginning. ... we have a City Region Neighbourhood Planning officers group, that's incredibly useful and DCLG have come up and visited that - they're good at that sort of thing. But one issue is that a lot of people at DCLG are not planners, it's noticeable from when someone DCLG comes up at Neighbourhood Planning conference and I don't think on any occasion they've been a planner, they're generally good but not a planner, some are obviously very promotional and can't go beyond promotional, so we're asking technical planning questions about legal issues, and they can't respond. Sometimes that's being them being told to do that, I know it's a deliberate tactic and I know why, but it is noticeable (Local Planning Authority interview #14).*

Despite these issues, there remains a positivity about neighbourhood planning from many quarters. Questions over neighbourhood planning's relationship to growth, democratic legitimacy, social inclusion and equitable outcomes are still to be answered, however many participants were still keen to recommend the process:

*Absolutely I would recommend the process. I feel sorry for communities that don't have the support we've had. The Government need to push LAs to support communities, they need clarity over the duty to support. At the start some planning officers didn't understand process but we had a day conference to get them up to speed with an independent consultant - it was very good and they actually grasp it now. We had planning decision in our own village refused by the LA - a developer wanted to build houses on a designated open space - totally opposed to in our NDP, it went to appeal and the planning inspector who announced his decision, dismissed the appeal for the houses and he quoted the policies in the NDP all the way through, he gave little weight to Local Plan because it's still emerging however the NDP had been through examination and so he used it, it was very satisfying! (Community Interview #3).*

Examples such as this reveal the benefits of neighbourhood planning where the requisite support is in place. To date neighbourhood planning research has underplayed the interpretations of local government, which remains crucial in understanding the promise of collaborative planning (Parker, et al., 2015).

Prior research exploring participant experience revealed that LPA involvement was critical to community progress throughout all the neighbourhood planning stages (Parker et al., 2014). Despite implied co-production, a mixed picture of LPA/community relationships emerged, with calls for LPAs to both increase and refine their support (Parker et al., 2015: 531). In this study the majority of respondents indicated that their LPA had been 'somewhat' or 'very supportive' (78%), with a significant number indicating that they could not have completed their plan without LPA support. A minority felt they received 'no support' from their LPA (11%) or their LPA had been 'obstructive' (11%) - this was felt to be very damaging by participants who cited slow decision making, failure to provide detailed guidance, or lack of dedicated resources as core issues. It is possible that a lack of support from LPAs may be influencing take-up elsewhere, particularly in deprived areas or neighbourhoods that lack a history of community development, and this should be explored further alongside an appreciation of what alternatives or supplements to neighbourhood planning might be offered to communities.

Consideration of the statutory ‘duty to support’ communities placed on LPAs in neighbourhood planning brought mixed responses from interviewees. In 2016, a significant majority (89%) agreed that earlier research work was right to recommend that the duty to support be clarified; but unsurprisingly those who enjoyed a high degree of LPA support felt that the duty to support did not need further clarification, whereas those who felt their LPA was unsupportive or obstructive felt that further guidance was still required, as exemplified by the following response:

*They should define the duty to support differently ... [the LPA] come out and meet the community but they certainly don't suggest solutions that would help us, they suggest solutions to suit themselves. They can't change their mindset from the usual way of doing things. Unless they're on board there are just going to block it - we try to get them on board because we have to. They won't comment on anything until we submit it formally - we asked them their advice but they don't tell us anything ... they give you a formal response but it's not a supportive and any time they spend on it they count that as support, they say they've spent 70 hours of officer time on our plan but that's time spent working out their position not supporting us! (Community interview #13).*

A number of community interviewees recognised that LPAs had a finely-balanced ‘dual role’ in supporting the community whilst ensuring that neighbourhood plans were deliverable against strategic issues:

*The District Council people we worked with directly were brilliant, the higher you went they less they knew. They latched on to the idea but didn't care about it - it only mattered to them in terms of the issues around affordable housing. They were in a difficult situation because they didn't have the Local Plan they couldn't say ‘well the Local Plan has this policy and so you need to this’ (Community interview #4).*

Community respondents indicated that more focused advice and support from LPAs would be welcomed, and that specific neighbourhood planning training for officers and councillors could be enhanced, including the introduction (or extension) of dedicated support and this was similar to the Parker et al. (2014) findings.

For the LPA officers themselves, balancing neighbourhood planning responsibilities with producing their Local Plan continues to be problematic. In authorities where the Local Plan was still in production or was under review, officers felt the need to prioritise this work - resulting in less time to commit to communities. Emerging Local Plans also meant that officers were less secure in providing concrete details to communities regarding housing allocations.

Most LPA's support arrangements developed organically as communities came forward, often resulting in somewhat ad hoc provisions;

*We've no dedicated officer - I'm the lead planning officer in neighbourhood planning and the only officer working in it, but I'm also working on district wide issues which take the priority. We have a consultation officer that deals council wide consultations issues but also helps neighbourhood planning groups on their consultation. So no designated officers, it's supplementary to our current roles. We have developed a neighbourhood planning protocol that we ask communities to sign (although this came too late for most of our groups) - but this make it clear to groups that resources are quite tight. We've had no complaints or issues on protocol - we were aware the quite a few LA have started off giving a lot of support with a view to getting groups started but then get dragged in to the whole process. So the protocol sets out the basically statutory functions and two things more, it says we'll do the SEA screening, and also offer a critique of their draft plan - that's the form of advice. It varies and is dependent on the district wide issues that take priority. I spend no more than a couple of hours a week, probably two on average.*  
(Local Planning Authority interview #1)

These issues were largely avoided for the LAs able to employ a dedicated neighbourhood planning officer, or in some cases, small dedicated teams. However having such dedicated support was not feasible for the majority of LPAs who participated. The issue of dedicated officers was complicated by resources and timing. Local Planning Authority respondents found it difficult to quantify hours dedicated to neighbourhood planning as the figure differed significantly from one week to the next. For a number of dedicated neighbourhood planning officers the intermittent nature of the work meant that their role was unlikely to extend beyond their present contract. In this vein, most interviewees acknowledge that funding was a significant issue: the bulk of DCLG monies are awarded at the end of the process (once a date for a referendum has been set following a successful examination), and has recently been reduced from £30,000 to £20,000 per neighbourhood planning group. In addition funding can now only be claimed for area designation (and Forum designations where appropriate) for the first five groups in an LPA's jurisdiction. There existed a 'chicken and egg' issue with regards to funding, dedicated officers required a significant number of neighbourhood planning groups to come forward (to ensure the LPA had enough money to fund a position), however in order to encourage enough groups to come forward, a dedicated neighbourhood planning position was required. The second issue regarding officers was the cyclical nature of the work, with high levels of capacity needed at certain points and very little support required at others:

*It depends the time period, apart from the Lawrence Weston which is currently at examination - at present basically no time is spent on neighbourhood planning support at the moment. It depends a lot on where they're at in the process, other*

*parts of cycle it requires as a lot of work so it takes over, for example when we have multiple groups going for designation. We couldn't appoint a dedicated neighbourhood planning officer because of the cycle of the work where it is very heavy at certain times and then very quiet, it comes and goes. (Local Planning Authority interview #2).*

This was also an issue in terms of LPA resources dedicated to neighbourhood planning:

*We can probably cope at the moment - if there's a big spike of neighbourhood planning groups or if our current groups approached draft at same stage it would become a significant resource issue (Local Planning Authority interview #1).*

Other areas found the financial management easier:

*It's not been too bad, in terms of time and staff it's very tricky but the financial side is much more manageable than we thought. It's disappointing that the central government funding has gone from £30,000 to £20,000. We have been giving £2,000 straight to the groups, because obviously we're in an urban context and the groups tend to be completely unfunded. Funding the referendum is the most expensive single part of the process - we were worried that the first referendum - where the electoral area is not ward based could cost us £70,000 (based on an estimation off the back of ward election), but in the end it didn't cost the council anything above the allocated money (Local Planning Authority interview #2).*

One interviewee noted that neighbourhood planning had been a money generator for the LPA:

*We've got so many neighbourhood plans so we've quite a lot of money, although the funding's changed now. We also do work for our groups and generate income that way - we do the statutory stuff but charge for evidence based work and we're a lot cheaper than consultants. Trying to run it as income generator for the council, for made a considerable amount (Local Planning Authority interview #4).*

Some concern that the standard allocation for neighbourhood planning groups awarded to LPAs from DCLG is sufficient for smaller groups, but too low to managed large areas:

*My understanding is, and this is a frustration is it goes into the Council coffers but it's not ring fenced, there's no special budget. This is not a problem now but because of the way the money comes in - the issue is the it comes at the end of the process (most of it after the plan is made). The 20,000 that comes in after a successful referendum will just about cover the small village, but Democratic Services have us a quote for the Morecambe referendum which will cost - if they get there - £40,000. So we might make money about of the smaller villages on that but for a larger town or if too many come forward we would have significant financial concerns (Local Planning Authority Interview #1).*

Understandably LPA interviewees noted a particularly difficulty when planning policy officers were dealing with both an emerging Local Plan and neighbourhood planning groups (in terms of approaching community) - dedicated neighbourhood planning officers found this easier:

*Yes I'd say [the relationship with the Council has] improved. They understand our needs better and we understand their limitations better, especially concerning resources. I would say it's more information sharing. I will say though I was surprised to find that the Council is completely in the hands of the developers, they can't do anything without them. For example the Council identified some development sites on the other side of the river, but the developers don't want to put their money there so they're not developing it, the Council's hands are tied' (Community interview #29).*

Convincing planning officers of the value of neighbourhood planning continues to be an issue for community groups. A frequent issue highlighted by participants was that the planning policy officers and dedicated neighbourhood planning officers were often 'on board' by the culmination of the NDP process, however once the plan was made, it was then necessary to begin the process of convincing Development Management/Control officers all over again.

*We recognise that within a planning department they see neighbourhood planning as threatening their fiefdom. It has been a Jekyll and Hyde situation with the District Council - thinking beyond what our mentor did for us, who was excellent, the Council put forward a QC for the High Court challenge - that was excellent, but once the Plan was made there seemed to be almost an attempt to deliberately misconstrue the spirit and wording of the Plan within the Development Management team. We keep them up to date on what elements are relevant etc., but there seems to be this constant misinterpretation. We were the first neighbourhood planning area in our LA but there are 32 communities following us, one of the highest numbers in a LA authority but it still hasn't changed some attitudes. I spoke recently at a meeting about an application in a conservation area, the planning officer had not paid any attention to our Plan which had specific policies about it! After I finished the Chair admitted this was a mistake, and that a new report was needed, but this is two years down the line; it's ridiculous! We've made this clear to the Secretary of State (Community interview #2).*

Some LPAs have tried to ameliorate this issue by involving the Development Management side during NDP production:

*When you build up the relationship, groups are often want us to have a look, so we do that - we get Development Management to look at it, and they say 'that won't work like you want it to' etc. - try to bring them in early, realised early quite a gap between what we in policy think is good and will work and what Development Management think is deliverable. The difficulty is obviously they have very high workloads so finding time is difficult, we don't give each plan to everyone but try*



*and get advice where we can. You can definitely see the more that you spend at this stage, the better the plan is and the stronger the policies (Local Planning Authority interview #10).*

A number of participants highlighted that LPAs have to be Janus faced, operating a dual role as both critic and interpreter of NDPs. This was highlighted in one community, where a policy had been interpreted by the LPA in a way completely at odds with the community's intention, despite planning policy officers suggesting the wording:

*... the policy on [a local site] for example, we thought it stated clearly the community desire for mixed use development and one of the clauses said that any development would need to improve the community balance. That's the big thing in the whole plan, it's what shines through the whole thing. If we had been able to put that policy in the way we wanted ... we wouldn't have had this issue, but it had to be phrased positively about mixed use. That was what the Council told us - we had an officer who worked closely with us - but at the determination of the planning application on the site, they have said because they've put in both student accommodate and [a local sports facility], they say it's mixed use - even though they know that's not what we meant because they helped us word the policy! It's because we had to put it in this positive light - but it doesn't reflect the plan which was to improve the mix of housing ... We wanted to improve all that but because the Council suggestions and that way of writing it, the neighbourhood planning has no teeth whatsoever. (Community interview #26).*

One LPA interviewee noted that:

*We've not reached this yet but the issue with examination is that it's the first formal occasion we have to put input into the plan. We want to be able to go to examination and sit on the same side as the community and say to the examiner we've made the following comments and concerns to the community and here's how they have been addressed - that's the ideal. If we are on the other side we can say we have concerns that have not been addressed. I think that's the role of the critic we offer in the protocol [an LA/Community MoU], showing the examiner how we have input to the plan, but there perhaps should be a formal input earlier in the process. (Local Planning Authority interview #1).*

LPA interviewees revealed their involvement with neighbourhood plans was often driven by the need to 'ensure a consistent methodology across all our groups' (LPA interview 3) and make sure that NPs 'cohere with our work, particularly the Local Plan' (LPA interview 4) - and make the plan workable for when they came to use it against applications. This has given rise to the desire to 'rescript' community policies - balancing the community desire with technical planning requirements:

*Yes we've tried to help with policy writing, tried to help and steer and provide background. One of the workshops was on how to write policies, what is good a*

*good policy etc. We've sat down with them and said this is why this isn't what you think it is - and this is why a planner might interpret your wording very differently. It's been challenging on occasions - especially working with people who don't have a planning background. We want it to be community based but you need to balance that with the semantics and planning speak. (Local Planning Authority interview #2)*

*...our officer has an evidence review workshop, laying out options that the community can go away and consider. They then draft the policies, send it to us, and we'll do a review. Sometimes the meaning doesn't come across in their policies so we say 'this is how we would interpret this' - you can't be ambiguous. So we don't directly write them, but we do try and help. We do have a template plan but we quite often have themed meetings with the groups, one on housing policies for example, and we show them how to lift other [group's] policies and tweak them to what they want. (Local Planning Authority interview #3)*

LPA's reported most groups using consultants, and were generally happy with the roles they paid (predominantly project management of the neighbourhood planning and writing policies). The only criticism of consultants made by LPA interviewees was a minority of larger firms using 'identikit plans' which did not adequately correspond to their specific needs or particularities.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

A growing number of communities across England now have completed neighbourhood plans, and the process continues to be taken up by new communities - yet there continues to be a mixed picture in terms of how the process has played out. The range of communities involved, and their reasons for success give some cause for concern as research has shown how some areas have experienced much (s)lower take-up (Parker and Salter, 2016). The findings presented here correspond to the pattern of findings from earlier survey work in many respects: groups still view the process as complex and burdensome, and whilst many communities appear to have a wide range of applicable skills and knowledge, technical planning knowledge is often acquired from outside. Support from LPA's, and to a lesser extent private planning consultants, continues to be the overriding variable in the speed and success of neighbourhood plans - tying success to a postcode lottery of uneven resources and support. Communities continue to seek assurances over the future of neighbourhood plans whilst clear and definitive guidance remains a priority. Some moves to address this have been made recently by government but the questions of plan durability and willingness to review or renew plans need

to be borne in mind when amending or redesigning neighbourhood planning. The positive effects of changes instigated post-2014 indicate that an ongoing process of refinement to regulations and support arrangements should be sustained. Refinements to support and guidance appear to have been well received by communities, however coverage in support remains uneven, and for communities who felt abandoned by their LPA cited slow decision making, failure to provide detailed guidance, or lack of dedicated resources as core issues. It is entirely possible that such a lack of support may be influencing take-up elsewhere and this should be explored further and steps taken to ensure a consistency of coverage.

Parker et al. (2015) detailed the numerous instances where ideas, policies and priorities that emerge from within neighbourhoods were being ‘rescripted’ to ensure conformity to a bounded form of collaboration. This process has also been highlighted in several cases since then, for example in Henfield, Sussex, Swanwick, Amber Valley and Idmiston, Wiltshire (see Parker et al., 2016) where plans have been withdrawn or even voted against by the community at referendum and this brings the questions of how the latter stages of NDP production have fatally undermined community ownership.

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