

Just Neighbourhoods? Under-representation in Community-Led Planning activity in the UK

JN Working Paper #5: Policy symposium summary

February 2026

Introduction

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This short paper reports on the reflections of a one-day symposium held at the University of Reading in early February 2026. This was convened as part of the *Just Neighbourhoods?* (JN) research project. The event featured presentations, a panel discussion and break out discussions. The research team wish to express their thanks to the participants who attended and contributed on the day.

In the spirit of the open access approach of the research team, this paper sets out a summary of discussions held during the symposium, and concerning two areas or sets of questions:

Q1. How can and should planning and related strategies reflect underlying issues facing / communities at scale? What prevents this?

Q2. Context of 'Pride in Place' direction – how will this / could this / or should hyper-local 'planning' be encouraged? Why / Why not?

The purpose of the deliberations was to break open issues of how and whether plans should confront deprivation / injustice in the light of emerging findings from the project (see also the prior JN working papers #1-4), and how to ensure planning activity (in terms of process and then formalised through a community-led 'plan' finds a place in the context of serial 'waves' of regeneration funding e.g. the Pride in Place Programme (PiPP). This was discussed in light of the research findings and tentative action areas presented on the day. Below we have organised the inputs and discussions into themes. Appended here (Annex I) are the longer lists of written points

captured at the event and for information we have also included, at Annex II, the themes that were identified via the JN literature review relating to issues and obstacles already recognised in scholarly output. That table in Annex I, plus these summary notes should be of use to policymakers when reflecting on the role and benefit of community engagement in the deliberations over priorities and linkage to expressed and informed priorities.

Discussion themes: Question area #1

Many agree that plans have a moral responsibility to address issues facing the places they serve, yet to what degree of specificity? And should they discuss matters which they cannot deliver against?; or deliver within a pre-determined timeframe? In that light, participants discussed the first question on *the role and need for neighbourhood scale planning in deprived areas* – and this elicited four general themes.

1. *Normative principle of planned action*

Firstly, the principle of creating effective plans at the neighbourhoods scale did not provoke any resistance. There appeared to be widespread agreement that *organising priorities, shaping policy and helping to orient funding appeared a logical step*. It was recognised also that plans can be usefully considered across: i. things plans and strategies *can* do (i.e. their scope), ii. What they *should* do (principles) and also iii. What they *must* do (that is a moral orientation that links to the circumstances of individual places). It was also understood that ‘planning’ is one aspect of what is important in responding to underlying issues in neighbourhoods. However, there is a critical distinction between planning *as process* - in considering and reflecting on issues and solutions – as opposed to ‘planning’ as *a distinct category* i.e. the narrower parameters of the land use planning system.

Asserting what ‘plans’ must do in and for deprived areas seems an important step forward. In this regard participants were interested in how to organise plans in order to integrate experience and values like justice and equity, into planning processes (deliberation) and outcomes (reasoned actions), while it was also acknowledged that deprivation vs. quality of life is not always aligned at present. The groups realised that basic pre-conditional questions relating to scope - ‘what issues should the plan cover?’ – as well as control of scope – ‘who defines these issues?’ are important concerns. Participants queried what other *priorities* are linked to government agendas? And why does it have to be this way in relation to housing, health and wealth?

Moreover, it was perceived that there may be some unwillingness to change on the part of national and local government and valid questions were raised as to how the recommendations of the research can relate to wider government agendas around housing, health and wealth. Alongside this there was a recognition that local planners also lack power – that regulatory framing is held quite tightly at the centre. Such barriers were also linked to serial change over time and possible ‘recency’ bias because of a lack of institutional memory.

The discussions tended to focus on obstacles and issues to be considered including a need for greater attention to approaches taken. Below are the subsequent distilled themes from the two question areas (and see Annex I).

2. Data, power and policy

Discussions recognised that the process (the ‘how’ question) is not the only issue, (or even the outcomes) but also *what* data counts or is elicited. This point also reflected concern over difference between community understandings of ‘their’ place and planners’ understandings; the latter perhaps being based more on statistics, and the former more on storytelling and lived experience. It was argued that communities connect to their places via narratives rather than ‘data’. As such greater thought over how to collect data and the basis for revalidating *types of data* seems useful (in terms of process) and how this is reflected in policy (outcome), with the latter pointing towards what a place wants to be (future regarding). People within the neighbourhoods should be more involved in defining what the issues are and not simply reliant upon attempting to change numbers, for example related to deprivation. This also surfaced when considering *weighting of issues* and their meaning in particular places and contrasting ‘reach’ with significance (i.e. what communities actually value).

Alternative ways to plan are also seen as playing a useful role; with a straightforward and possibly rolling ‘log’ of *community priorities* being spoken of (and which comes close the Neighbourhood Priority Statement (NPS) approach piloted in 2023 in England).

Vertical integration or recognition also came up - how the community is reflected in strategic decisions was flagged. This speaks to a *translation challenge*: from high level downwards and neighbourhood upwards movement, or a recognisable pull through and linkage of policies and actions through the scales. This point was reinforced by remembering that policies and decisions being considered across scales are actualised in real places – neighbourhoods.

3. Dynamics of Participation

Some participants raised the question of ‘*fear*’ as a motif and explainer for the current situation - both for communities and planners. This speaks to questions of confidence in process and ability to plan; of a target culture and a ‘*deliverability*’ emphasis for planners and for communities a familiar consultation fatigue; coupled with ‘plan fatigue’, i.e. so many plans/strategies, but so little change. Also, obstructive politics and a fear of participating in activity that may not lead anywhere were aired. The gap between what people say they want and what happens is seen as problematic and saps enthusiasm to engage.

Conversely, some saw part of the problem being that participation in the main is unappealing and could be fun. Both of these were also linked to issues of *lack of creativity* but also the theme below – the influence of national policy parameters. Moreover, the familiar theme came up: that people are mistrustful of how or whether their inputs will make any difference to outcomes. This speaks to a need for better traceability given that appears to be a loss of voice or impact as scale increases in order to respond to rational withdrawal, that is non-engagement if a return is not likely.

Start points around which to build more holistic thinking were seen as good step; the use of *neutral frames for community planning*, such as green space could provide a foundation for further deliberation and planning work (as in some of the project case studies). The discussion gave rise to the idea that for some deprived areas there is a possible condition of what was characterised as ‘learned helplessness’; of wanting others to improve matters. This could well be a product of policy design and ineffective participation.

Lastly it was said that people tend to feel protective of their neighbourhoods and this can act as a brake on *willingness to discuss change* - even if that change may appear to be objectively positive. These points do chime with the call for better support and facilitation.

4. Influence and constraints of national policy and the role of the plan

There are *multiple barriers* seen in processes, including the dominant / default consultation model and the need for community voice to fit within those existing models and structures. Constraining influence of national policy and procedural rules. NPPF, tests of soundness and ‘basic conditions’ for NDPs. There were perceived barriers in the framing role of *national policy* which may act to inadvertently screening out matters across the Justice, Equity, Deprivation and Inclusion (‘JEDI’) frame used in the research.

On a broader level the issue of *planning culture* was raised – awareness and training about the importance of social and spatial justice in and through plans, and particularly in deprived areas needed a greater profile. Discussion was also had regarding the *role of the plan* – how can it be used; as delivery mechanism or lobbying tool? Equally this may impact on scope and what is set down. Lastly, the need to *better alignment of plans* (i.e. neighbourhood scale and local / SDS and similar) was seen as an issue to be addressed. Currently they appear to want to achieve different things and not integrated well or influence each other progressively.

Discussion themes: Question area #2

In terms of the second question on the relationship to funding or regeneration programmes (such as PiPP), further points were aired, centring on three themes or groupings:

1. Methods and how to elicit genuine community preferences

This topic continued on the themes of *participatory design* and the importance of reflecting on who is asked, what questions are asked, the different needs and priorities of different groups. However, there was suggestion of better networking across areas too with the creation of a *community of practice* amongst deprived neighbourhoods / those dealing with regeneration funding such as PiPP (noting emerging ideas of a ‘neighbourhood network’ via PiPP). This might involve live conversational learning from across the PiPP areas to support neighbourhood boards and communities.

Planning should be portrayed as the force for enabling the change people want and protecting the parts of their community they don't want to change. What (of) value do we want to maintain/grow as a way of combatting social inertia/fear of change?

There was a recognition that realising quick-wins in this space is needed to try and influence PiPP beneficially, and linkage to other evaluations and recommendations of previous place-based programmes could be useful in combination. Moreover, there was a question-mark concerning oversight of PiPP and whether or who is logging the PiPP baseline data.

People are often afraid of change, but change is inevitable. A key way to frame this could be to ask: what (of) value do we want to maintain/grow as a way of combatting social inertia/fear of change? Formal CLP is not the only way forward; and might in fact be absent in how communities get together and discuss the future of their place. It was seen that Pride in Place could be a resolution for the first question, e.g. people have pride in their place despite its IMD ranking – and so 'what role for planning' in that situation was presented as a challenge.

In terms of a suggested recommendation for special planning zones - there was a view that some pilot areas, trialling in one or two visionary PiPP areas could be useful; and measure not only the benefits but also any changes in quality of life in those areas.

2. Optimisation of scale and people's concerns /needs

There was discussion around planning helping create pride in place and the Pride in Place Programme (PiPP) enabling good planning and its implementation. There was a point made about the 'theory of change' for this - what does good look like and how to transform place planning. It was noted that PiPP is at a different scale at phase 1 and phase 2. 'Pride in place' may be useful as an overarching concept that planning can contribute to absorb community planning activity – which can then 'feed' the narrative instead of submitting to it.

3. Learning from past programmes

Discussion considered to what extent will the evaluations and their recommendations of previous place-based programmes be taken into account in upcoming hyper-local programmes – why are we not seeing change from previous evaluations? Consideration of how PiPP and other place-based programmes can learn was thought useful participate – and via live conversational learning and whether there is scope to trial a special planning arrangement in one or two visionary PiPP areas.

Concluding points

The themes that emerged bear a great deal of correspondence with the early literature review that the project undertook (see working paper #2 and Annex II). Some participants endorsed the findings and areas for action identified by the research team on the day (details of this are on the

JN webpage), and indicated that the research team should try and reach as many people as possible and organisations the conclusions and recommendations in the research.

The discussions overall evolved into considering how the research could be most influential and what the event also helped consolidate were the emerging findings of the research. A consensus appeared to be that very local policy and plans should better reflect the lived experience and deeper issues faced in deprived areas. This echoes some existing literature that has examined plans in both the UK and the US – as well as through the JN research specifically.

The research more widely has shown that issues of justice, deprivation, equity and inclusion appear infrequently in neighbourhood scale plans and, where this does, communities are interested in specific questions of, for example; affordable housing or green space; matters of everyday quality of life and for them this constitutes what we have termed ‘everyday’ justice’ (Lynn *et al.*, 2025). However multiple studies have shown issues and deficiencies in process and in outcomes; which more generally constrain engagement and ability to achieve inscriptive justice – that is to see what matters written down, taken seriously and acted upon or at least absorbed into higher level plans and policy outcomes. Many deprived areas examined in the research and shown in prior studies, have not taken up or been adequately supported to engage with planning at the neighbourhood scale and findings and recommendations emerging from the research reinforce a need for greater facilitation.

Indeed, some, if not all of the emerging recommendations, which were outlined during the symposium appeared to gain approval. A clearer exposition of these ideas will be set out in the final project report - which is due to be published in March 2026, and will be available on the JN project website at: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/justclp/just-neighbourhoods/>

Annex I: Lists of points raised - in summary

There were many points elicited, and below these have been left in raw note form.

A. Red group

Q1. Can and should plans and strategies reflect underlying issues facing communities at the neighbourhood scale

- Tokenism and lack of trust that participation is worthwhile
- Removal of rights not helping (and need to mandating)
- Inertia and not knowing where and how to begin – confidence
- Learned helplessness
- Need to log / register community priorities
- What constitutes success?
- Plans not ‘living’ documents
- Role of independent residents forums
- Lobbying tool – ownership/consult/communities??
- Forms of data and hyper-local data (types/value)
- Lack of creativity in plan process
- Needs deeper engagement to fulfil this
- Framing role of national policy
- Translation challenge: high level down and neighbourhood upwards.
- Green book role and CBA
- Obstructive politics and fear of participating
- Willingness to change?
- Fear of non-delivery by Planners
- Lack of institutional memory - ‘recency’ bias
- Culture has to be in the system

Q2. Encouraging hyper-local planning through programmes such as PiPP.

- Plans vs Projects situation
- Issues of speed and rapid response - counter-productive/ unwise
- Lack of coordination – planned approach superior
- Joining up issues and actions/ funds
- Need for ‘anchor’ organisations at neighbourhood scale
- Lack of Participatory approach absent in national level guidance
- Need to adopt legislation similar to future generations act (Wales)
- Use of known tools such as community mapping
- Risk of underspend / time/cycle of funding
- Poor targeting (pork barrel?)

- Not many LAs involved
- How funding is packaged and divided up (and timed)
- Bid culture not helpful
- Break treasury hold on resource
- Use Participatory Budgeting
- Lack of specificity in deprived areas
- Lack of community 'ownership'
- Definitions of community
- Challenges of representation / inclusivity
- Use of direct democracy to aid legitimacy
- Need to account for volunteer time and expense (equity)
- Some examples e.g. Derry Community-led partnership
- Planning could bias approaches taken unless oversight retained by communities
- Lack of example of use of NDPs – Research Gap

B. Blue group

Q1. How can and should plans and strategies reflect underlying issues facing communities at the neighbourhood scale

- Add "must" to the above question – there are things plans and strategies CAN do, SHOULD do and MUST do.
- Communities connect to their places via narratives as much as (or instead of) through data, etc.: where the place came from, where is it now, where is it going?
- But narratives and storytelling are not valorised in the plan-making process, may indeed not even be considered
- How can we integrate experience, values like justice and equity, into planning?
- There are multiple barriers in processes, including the consultation model; and the need to fit within those existing models and structures.
- Deprivation vs. Quality of life not always aligned
- The metaphor of the Impact approach in academia was suggested – contrasting reach (might be things like IMD in this context) with significance (what communities actually value).
- Possibility to use things like the Robroyston, etc. case study and the use of green space as a neutral frame for community planning as an exemplar – that then being a foundation for further work.
- How align CLP with development plan?
- Consultation fatigue, plan fatigue, plans not implemented
- The idea proposed in our recommendations about giving small zones freedom was considered to be a powerful one.

Q2. Encouraging hyper-local planning through programmes such as PiPP.

- Renewable energy planning/delivery seen as an example of balancing different priorities from different stakeholders
- Need optimisation of scale and people's concerns
- Re PiPP – different scale at phase 1 and phase 2.
- Formal CLP not the only way forward; might in fact be absent in how communities get together and discuss the future of their place.
- Pride in place could be a resolution for the first question, e.g. people have pride in their place despite its IMD ranking.
- issue of participation design and who is asked, what questions are asked. need to facilitate and probe to build a more nuanced understanding of what communities need
- Question of different needs and priorities of different groups.
- People are often afraid of change, but change is inevitable – planning should be portrayed as the force for enabling the change people want, and protecting the parts of their community they don't want to change.
- What (of) value do we want to maintain/grow as a way of combatting social inertia/fear of change?
- Pride in place as overarching concept that planning can contribute to – feed the narrative instead of subsuming it.

C. Green group

Q1. Can and should plans and strategies reflect underlying issues facing communities at the neighbourhood scale

- Questions about how the community is reflected in strategic decisions
- Loss of voice or impact as scale increases
- Planning as one aspect of what is important in responding to underlying issues
- What issues? Who defines them?
- Apply lessons from across the UK
- People feel protective of their neighbourhoods
- Processes should be fun (and then what?)
- There's an evidence gap between what people say they want and what happens
- The discussion evolved into considering how the research could be most influential.
- Who are the community informers?
- What people and organisations should consider the conclusions and recommendations in this research.
- Help others to voice the conclusions.
- What other priorities are linked to government agendas? Why does it have to be this way in relation to housing, health and wealth.
- Questions of how can the overcome the barriers to the JN recommendations.

Q2. Encouraging hyper-local planning through programmes such as PiPP.

- evaluations and recommendations of previous place-based programmes
- Is there a way for a live conversational learning from across the PiPP areas to support neighbourhood boards?
- What quick-wins might there be in this space
- Create a community of practice
- Combine the recommendation for a special planning zone with trailing in one or two visionary PiPP areas – measure not only the benefits but also any changes in quality of life.
- Who's logging the PiPP baseline data?

Annex II: Themes revealed though the JN literature review

The table below provides a condensed summarisation of key themes across the academic literature relating to community-led planning. Also see JN working paper #2 which discusses the literature more fully.

Literature Theme (x9)	Key terms
<i>Leadership, motivation & actors</i>	Leadership from within places; History (legacy) and context/setting; Motivation; skills (navigation of situation); capacities; information; facilitation; knowledge and ability; endogenous leadership; certainty/trust; place attachment; change agents.
<i>Resources / capacity / knowledge / time / support</i>	Capacity(uneven); communication(skills); facilitation; institutional design; technology; Partnerships; time inputs (and calibration to group/interest); Support; constraints; relationships; targeted/ /specific resources; social capital; assembly of resources needed.
<i>Co-production</i>	Scope/control; trust; motives; private sector; joint visioning; outcome focus; conflict management; inclusion
<i>Tools, frameworks, technologies</i>	Mobilisation(social); support; flexibility; degrees of control; fit to purpose / gap identification; non-profit/intermediary-actors; community enterprise; context/setting (impact of); visualisation/photos; role of arts; visioning; backcasting; participatory budgeting; gentrification (danger of); Outcome orientation; intermediaries (e.g. tech); data tools; limits of tech; ongoing engagement (open); living labs.
<i>Just Planning / Justice</i>	Justice as central tenet/value; accountability; control; representativeness; power relations; communication (weakness); knowledge development as empowerment; social innovation; rules to support inclusion; right to the city (and see WP1a – Theoretical frame)
<i>Priorities and scope (inc. participant types)</i>	Funding parameters; groups differential knowledge/understanding (and priorities); use of tech and minorities; facilitation; legal constraints; youth; social barriers
<i>Politics</i>	Co-option; intra-community division; state roles; paternalism; identities; priorities
<i>Power</i>	Motives of instigators; knowledge claims and validation; Definition and imperfect representation; Contexts/settings; engagement between stakeholders; Format of participation; dangers of post-politicisation (and see WP1a - Theoretical frame)
<i>Community assets & participation</i>	Scope of participation; imperfection; assets as focal points; Social infrastructure; property-led regeneration; rights; public institutions