

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

**Executive Summary**  
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## Executive summary

The report presents the findings and recommendations of the *Just Neighbourhoods?* research project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The project examined how community-led planning (CLP) operates in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods across the UK, and the extent to which this activity contributes to advancing justice in place-based decision-making.

The report sets out the rationale for the research, the methods employed, key findings, and implications for policy and practice, including recommendations. This is the principal synthesis of the research. A series of supporting working papers and additional materials are available on the project website: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/justclp/>.

### Scope and purpose of the study

The focus of the project was to better understand the experiences of communities under-represented in planning activity, and what factors influence how communities engage with forms of CLP. The research was designed to inform both policy and practice, as well as residents. The research aims were to identify:

- How communities are approached to participate in CLP
- Who does and does not participate in CLP and why
- How the design and practice of CLP shape both the plans produced and their outcomes in terms of local social and environmental justice
- And, to produce research outputs that help communities, practitioners and policymakers have a greater understanding of how CLP can produce more just outcomes

### Research and policy context

The project covered England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and sought to reflect the variety of neighbourhood scale planning tools that exist across the UK nations. The focus was specifically on neighbourhoods ranked highly on the relevant indices of multiple deprivation (IMD). There were several key rationales for this focus:

- A widespread consensus that social justice needs to be addressed in deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods
- Many known issues and challenges, both substantive and processual, concerning CLP in deprived areas
- There are significantly different forms of neighbourhood scale planning across the UK, with little research focussing on deprived neighbourhoods
- The current context of policy change and learning, with a refreshed approach to neighbourhoods in the UK emerging, set against a disparate legacy of tools designed to plan more effectively with communities

The research comprised: a synthesis of existing international academic literature relating to community-led planning; a content review of 107 plans across the UK drawn

from the top 20% of deprived neighbourhoods (using country level IMD); and an exploration of dynamics and issues on the ground within ten case study areas from across the UK, drawing on around 160 interviews plus meetings, visits and documentary reviews.

## **Key findings and recommendations summary**

### ***Headlines from the literature review***

Nine main areas were distilled from the literature review, providing a clear indication of the types of issues and obstacles recognised. These form a basis for informing improved policy design and operation of planning at the neighbourhood scale and covered questions of *justice, leadership, resources, co-production, processes and tools, community assets, priorities and scope of activity, and questions of power and politics*. The full span of themes and sub-themes provide useful context and pointers for future programme and policy design (see [Annex I](#) of the report).

### ***Key points derived from the plan content coverage***

The research team assessed 107 neighbourhood scale plans conceived under the ‘community-led’ label across the UK, which had been produced in and with areas with significant deprivation. The key points were:

- Virtually all the plans reviewed recognised challenges associated with justice, equity, disadvantage, and inclusion, albeit to varying extents, or with a lack of systemisation
- The assessment showed *indirect* linkage of policy and aspiration which can be tracked back to justice, equity, deprivation, and inclusion themes. Where this occurred, the plans frequently only partly addressed problems or did so in a fragmented way; some prefer to focus on what is perceived to be ‘everyday’ matters that can improve quality of life
- The lack of linkage to known issues of deprivation highlights the need to pursue what we label here ‘inscriptive justice’ - that is: to ensure that important issues are set down and explicitly linked to actions that address these matters

### ***Lessons from the case studies***

The lessons drawn from the study are of particular importance for the constituent UK national governments and for local authorities seeking to improve engagement and co-production of priorities and actions with more deprived neighbourhoods. Our recommendations explicitly highlight who in particular should attend to our findings and suggestions. The ten cases drawn from across the UK help deepen understanding of the actual dynamics and context for CLP activity. These show the contexts of, and efforts to, plan in and with deprived neighbourhoods, alongside the frustrations involved with prevailing tools and institutional arrangements, or reasons for non-engagement. We found that:

- Across the cases, where communities had developed or worked in partnership with local authorities and/or consultants to create neighbourhood scale plans, it was found they are not always seen as a reliable means to achieve goals – past

local experience and an urge for speed can partly account for this. Important matters need to be set out clearly rather than avoided or deemed ‘undeliverable’; the approach in Colwyn Bay came closest to this wider aim, and used some innovative methods of engagement, actively involving children and targeting participation

- Recognition of the importance of confronting problems and challenges and identifying who and how to address them is fundamental – even if the plan itself cannot deliver the necessary change – maintaining the visibility of the plan and indicating where, why and when who can assist is necessary
- Plans are often used to influence future development but are not generally viewed as an effective tool to influence ‘everyday’ quality of life; several cases showed this across the nations, notably in Doncaster where particular economic opportunities were prioritised over community-led efforts to pursue renewal via initiatives conceived via CLP
- There was frustration over ‘decisions from above’ which appear to contradict community interest even where hyper-local action or priorities are established; there is a need for better recognition by government and local authorities that poorly planned or coordinated projects can make a situation worse. Relatedly, ensuring co-ownership of problems and solutions needs attention, as does more consistent arrangements that sustain deliberation of alternatives to develop a shared vision
- Support and facilitation are highly valued by local residents – but there remain questions over who pays (and the fairness of ‘one offs’ with particular neighbourhoods) – which can influence the basis and scope of the activity. This indicates that commissioning and the basis or terms of reference for such activity needs attention; those commissioning or holding budgets need to be accountable at the inception stage

## **Overall conclusions**

Our conclusions range from promoting the unfulfilled potential of effective planning at scale, to the need to more overtly address social and spatial justice in plans, and moreover, to inscribe those matters explicitly – linking plans to actions.

The research highlights the mixed picture of how CLP lacks clear terms of reference for effective co-production and implementation. When focussing on deprived areas, there is a need to review existing planning tools and confront questions of local politics and power imbalances. The research shows how fragmented planning is at neighbourhood scale, and how easily community interests can be undermined or overlooked in deprived areas – not least when effective community engagement is translated into action. Decisions and actions taken without greater community co-ownership can be profoundly felt, causing harm to governance relations, the social fabric, and trust.

This points to a need for neighbourhood scale planning to have greater status, and institutional actors should demonstrate how they have responded to community-led plans and their aspirations. The findings and conclusions, set out in the report, led us to shape eight areas of recommendation - aimed largely at national governments as well as local institutions.

## **Recommendations for policy and practice audiences**

Further explanation of the recommendations is found in the main report, however we set out the eight main recommendations in brief below:

1. Budget holders and those commissioning plans need to **re-examine terms of engagement and scope of hyper-local plans – these should be co-produced and mutually agreed**, not, as is usually the case, imposed by national and local governments. Pre-determining what a plan will cover and how it will be prepared constrains voice from below and can reproduce top-down solutions; this also speaks to a need for greater institutional embeddedness for forms of citizen participation
2. National governments should look at how place planning can be effective in conveying bottom-up knowledges and evidence, reflecting a ‘total place’ approach in which **existing tools** (i.e. Place Plans, Local Place Plans and Neighbourhood Development Plans) **can be usefully amended or repurposed** as hyper-local planning can develop objectives that are co-produced and help orchestrate actions that are understood and owned by all
3. Community planners – alongside intermediaries and local and national government – should **ensure that the plans inscribe the issues being faced at scale and make clear linkages from issues to policy and on to action**. Clear communication back to communities about how institutional actors can respond should form part of the process. This breaks open a limiting factor of ‘deliverability’ as plans should show what needs to be tackled as well as what is seen as achievable in a shorter frame
4. When formulating and integrating policies relating to local place **National governments should afford greater status to community-led plans** as repositories of aims, issues and priorities that can feed into budget prioritisation as well as be useful for informing many stakeholders (including a wide range of topics from health and policing); at present plans are too often paid lip-service but not fully considered by decision-makers
5. National governments as budget holders should **resource intermediaries** with neutral positioning vis-a-vis institutional actors and community interests, explicitly recognising that communities need (paid for) support in plan-making

processes; this builds from experience of organisations such as social enterprise consultancies, who have amassed a great deal of relevant experience and are important facilitators who can act as a bridge between expert and lay actors to provide maximum useability of community-led plans, but are limited by budget capacity

6. Support organisations and local authorities **should recognise that there are community assets and leaders present within communities** and ensure that they are supported to work effectively on both community-led plans and implementation with others; this reflects a recognition of the important role of non-elected, as well as elected, citizens in mobilising the voice of neighbourhood residents and the limits of extensive participation as opposed to those who can maintain community voice through a process
  
7. Local authorities and other institutional actors engaging with residents as volunteers need to **adopt responsible agency and greater reflective practice**; those tasked with supporting, co-producing or overseeing CLP should be mindful of how their actions affect longer term morale and likely future engagement of residents; clear lines of responsibility and communication are needed to sustain a long-term set of beneficial co-production relations. This could translate to mutually agreed processes and terms of engagement which are fair and equitable, with basic adherence to feedback about how different inputs are used
  
8. Government could **consider trialling special planning and associated institutional arrangements for deprived neighbourhood areas** – for example using Pride in Place neighbourhoods as a launching point. This represents one way forward to ensure that a long-term total place perspective is brought to bear; this should feature mandated CLP in those areas alongside powers and resources to enable prioritised actions. This stems from established practices of intervention in the UK, where regeneration of some areas is deemed necessary via special vehicles (such as Development Corporations). Further work on how a neighbourhood scale zoning could be devised is needed, with a view to shaping these areas as a socio-economic regeneration spaces that feature co-produced plans and priority statements

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## **Nuffield Foundation**

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds and undertakes rigorous research, encourages innovation and supports the use of sound evidence to inform social and economic policy, and improve people's lives. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project (WEL/FR-000024064), but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Foundation. Find out more at: [nuffieldfoundation.org](https://nuffieldfoundation.org).

## **The research team**

The Just JN researchers have been working on neighbourhood scale planning for many years and were responsible for the reviews of neighbourhood planning in England in both 2014 and 2020. The team comprises:

- Professor Gavin Parker, University of Reading (Principal Investigator)
- Dr Tessa Lynn, University of Reading
- Professor John Sturzaker, University of Hertfordshire
- Dr Matthew Wargent, Cardiff University

## **Project website and resources**

The working papers and other resources, including imagery and materials relating to the case studies, are available to view on the JN project website, which may be accessed at: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/justclp/>.