

Neighbourhood Planning Users Research Revisited

Executive Summary

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Neighbourhood Planning

Neighbourhood planning (NP) was first outlined in 2010 as part of the Government's stated commitment to transferring power to local communities through the creation of a new set of community rights, including the creation of a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). The formal provisions were set out in the Localism Act (2011) with detailed regulations issued in 2012 and subsequently updated in 2014 and 2016. In Spring 2014, a nationwide research project was conducted entitled *User Experiences of Neighbourhood Planning* when there were estimated to be over 1,000 groups involved in neighbourhood planning. The subsequent research report by Parker et al. (2014)¹ gives a number of insights into how neighbourhoods were experiencing NP. The report summary can be found here:

<http://mycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/User-experience-executive-study.pdf>.

A follow-up study *Neighbourhood Planning Users Revisited* (NPUR) was conducted in the latter half of 2016 and this summary document gives an overview of the findings of that project, which went back to some of the initial 2014 sample, as well as undertaking interviews with local authorities actively engaging with NP.

The Research

The NPUR research was funded by the University of Reading Impact Fund with the aim of exploring how the perceptions of neighbourhood planning had developed since the 2014 research, how participants experienced the latter stages of neighbourhood planning (which were not covered by the earlier work as the majority of participants had not yet reached this stage), and to explore both communities' and planning officers' experiences of support arrangements (including the utility of the NP tools and templates available).

To fulfil these aims the research drew on 52 interviews including both community participants (n=36) and planning officers (n=16) from Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) across England. All community participants from the original research were contacted to ascertain the progress of their plan (n=120), with almost half having not yet reached independent examination (n=59) and so not in a position to contribute towards the research. Four communities whose plans had 'stalled' were invited to participate after they highlighted particular circumstances relating to their limited progress. This meant that 65 participants from the original study were invited to interview. A further four neighbourhood forums not involved in the original study were also invited to ensure that sample adequately represented the experiences of participants from neighbourhood forums. In total, 69 community participants were approached and a total of 36 interviews conducted via telephone (a response rate of 52%).

¹ Parker, G., Lynn, T., Wargent, M. and Locality (2014) *User experience of neighbourhood planning*, Locality, London.

In total, 40 planning officers were contacted from LPAs known to have at least one made or advanced neighbourhood plan. In total 16 interviews were undertaken with planning officers, all of whom dealt directly with neighbourhood planning communities (a response rate of 40%).

Characteristics of the Neighbourhood Areas and Local Planning Authorities Surveyed

The community sample comprised of different types of groups located in a variety of neighbourhoods:

- i. The majority of groups had reached independent examination stage or beyond (i.e. categorised as ‘advanced’ 89%), with over half of the plans being adopted or ‘made’ (51%);
- ii. The sample was drawn from both parished areas (58%) and neighbourhood forums (largely urban areas) (42%). Rural areas accounted for 53% of the sample and urban areas 47% - the majority of parished areas were classified as rural (86%) whilst the majority of neighbourhood forums were classified as urban (93%);
- iii. All interviewees were preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). No interviewees were actively preparing a Community Right to Build Order (CRtBO) or a Neighbourhood Development Order (NDO) at the time of the research;
- iv. The majority of neighbourhoods surveyed had populations below 10,000 (75%) and 47% of those surveyed were ‘Frontrunner’ areas (47%);
- v. The sample was drawn both from groups whose LPA did have an up-to-date Local Plan (50%) and those that did not (50%). Only 22% of the LPAs had a Local Plan in place when the relevant neighbourhood planning group first started;
- vi. The sample was drawn from groups allocating sites for housing (42%) in their NDPs and those that had not allocated sites (58%).

The Local Planning Authority sample also displayed a range of characteristics, as explained below:

- i. A wide range of experiences were explored from LPAs supporting a single community to those supporting over 40 groups, the average (median) number of neighbourhood planning groups per LPA was 8 (mean = 12);
- ii. The sample reflects the uptake of neighbourhood planning across England with respondents coming from across all the English regions (except the East of England or the North East, reflecting the slow uptake of neighbourhood planning in these regions);
- iii. The majority of LPA respondents had at least one made (adopted) neighbourhood plan (63%);
- iv. The sample was drawn from LPA respondents dealing with both parished areas and those dealing with neighbourhood forums;
- v. The majority of LPA respondents had an up-to-date Local Plan in place (63%);
- vi. Less than a third of LPA respondents had a full-time officer dedicated to neighbourhood planning.

The Drivers and Motivations for Undertaking Neighbourhood Planning

In 2014, the majority of respondents shared two key **motivations** for starting a neighbourhood plan: i. reinvigorating the local area (usually through providing a vision for the future), and protecting the desirable characteristics of the area. This research revealed no change to these motivations, and the statutory weight of NDPs remained a significant draw. There was some evidence that knowledge of **other planning tools** had increased. Although no participants were actively pursuing CRtBOs or

NDOs², two participants reported pursuing each of these tools before deeming them unsuitable and a further participant reported that the community would be submitting a CRtBO on completion of their NDP.

There was a mixed response from participants regarding **changes in the scope or ambition** of their plans. Equal numbers of respondents felt their plan had increased in scope or ambition (28%) or decreased (28%). A small majority felt their plan's scope had remained fairly constant (39%) and a further two respondents felt that their plan had increased in some regards but decreased in others. For those that initially thought that NDPs were a good vehicle to address a particular site or reinforce a conservation area, the scope tended to increase as they realised that NDPs could address wider issues across a whole neighbourhood. Participants for whom the scope had decreased indicated that this was largely due to NDPs being unable to accommodate the many and various community aspirations expressed. This reflects a development of understanding of NDPs, and their intended use, after embarking on the process.

Overall Experience of Neighbourhood Planning

Just over half of respondents indicated that they would **undertake the process again** knowing what was involved (58%). Far more indicated that they would recommend the process to someone else (83%). Many participants reflected that future neighbourhood planning groups could learn from the experiences of earlier groups. This may also reflect improvements in the support arrangements and refined tools and templates available (see below) and yet this should be tempered a little; given that the sample is comprised of NDP groups who have successfully navigated the process.

In the 2014 study, 72% of respondents indicated that the neighbourhood planning process had been more **burdensome** than they expected, this rose to 92% in this study. The most common complaint was the length of **time needed** to complete an NDP, which may explain the increase between the two studies. Notably, the three respondents who felt the process was not more burdensome than expected had all made extensive use of planning consultants. As in 2014, the majority of respondents reported that they had overcome the difficulties encountered, often with the aid of consultant support or the local authority or both.

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

- The most common response was that all communities should have access to **dedicated support** (either a neighbourhood planning officer from the LPA or a consultant) and definitive sources of advice on key issues;
- Specifically, participants wanted support on **plan writing and technical documents** (i.e. Sustainability Appraisals and Strategic Environmental Assessments);
- The final unifying theme echoed the 2014 findings as participants desired a strong message of support from DCLG over the longevity of neighbourhood plans - specifically clarity was sought over NDPs' status '**post-adoption**' including 5-year housing land supply (or similar).

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

- a. **Area designation:** in 2014 delays around designations was a significant problem for a minority of the sample - this problem persisted in 2016 especially for Forums but not exclusively.

² These were introduced alongside NDPs. CRtBOs are Community Right to Build Orders and Neighbourhood Development Orders (see Parker et al 2014 report for details).

Issues arose where local identities did not match existing Parish or ward boundaries although both community and LPA respondents largely felt these were local rather than regulatory ones.

b. **Evidence gathering:** assembling evidence was largely unproblematic for participants, although some respondents noted the need for specialist inputs concerning Sustainability Appraisals and the levels of evidence required more generally. Evidence gathering was a key site of specialist input, largely in the form of advice. As found in 2014 some delays occurred during evidence assembly relating to a general lack of resources, time and volunteers - however both community and LPA respondents noted that this was an area where LPAs were able to help significantly. Several interviewees indicated that some evidence was not available and toolkits and templates were cited as useful to help with this stage³.

c. **Plan writing:** in 2014 respondents asked for improved guidance on writing plans with a widespread desire for proformas or templates. The 2016 findings demonstrated that **plan and policy writing remained a difficult task** for many, but that templates, previously successful NDPs and consultant input were all highly prized.

d. **Community engagement:** As in 2014, community engagement was regarded as largely unproblematic for participants, with 97% indicating this process went 'well' or 'OK'. A number of participants saw **community engagement as a major source of strength** for their Plan, whilst 'piggybacking' on previous and ongoing engagement work remains a useful tactic. Unlike in 2014 further advice and guidance was not requested by participants in 2016 - this may demonstrate that additional material created post-2014 has assisted..

e. **Independent Examination:** In 2014, clarification of timescales and obligations of the LPA to respond (and now emerging as part of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill 2016), alongside the production of simplified guidance on the examination stage were suggested. In 2016, most respondents were happy with the examination process - although it was notably a site of 'rescripting' of policies. The recruiting of examiners was viewed as quite straightforward.

f. **Referendum:** In 2014 the main issue identified during the referendum stage related to clarification on publicity and campaigning in support of the plan - but by 2016 the vast majority of communities were happy with the referendum process. Respondents from LPAs noted that this was a particularly **expensive** part of the neighbourhood planning process.

What might make Neighbourhood Planning more Attractive to Communities?

As in 2014, a faster process was desired by a significant number of respondents although, in a change from the previous research, the most popular response in 2016 was ensuring that NDPs are enforceable after adoption. Respondents wanted a clear message of support from DCLG over the **weight afforded to NDPs**, especially where no five-year housing land supply exists at LPA level. This was particularly important to those who had gone through Judicial Review but also those waiting on rulings before deciding whether to submit certain policies. Such comments are a reflection of the mix of judgements and decisions concerning NDPs emanating from the judiciary and the Secretary of State over the past two years.

A second factor identified by participants that might make neighbourhood planning more attractive to other communities was the production of **clear advice**. Participants felt that there was a large amount of advice available, but desired definitive advice on particular issues (e.g. the need for a Strategic Environmental Assessment and how to word Plan policies). In general respondents desired this advice

³ This issue has emerged in recent research exploring examination of NDPs, see Parker, G., Salter, K. and Hickman, H. (2016) 'Caution: examinations in progress. The operation of neighbourhood development plan examinations', *Town and Country Planning*, 85(12): 516-522.

to come from their LPA rather than other sources. Similar points have been discussed and set out in subsequent outputs (e.g. Parker, Salter and Hickman, 2016).

Capacity and Skills of those Producing Neighbourhood Plans

As in 2014, respondents noted the wide range of skills and knowledge present in their communities. The most commonly cited inhibitors to process were a lack of support (28%), a lack of financial resources (25%) and a lack of capacity (22%). Very few respondents cited internal disagreements (14%) or conflicts of interest (11%) as factors inhibited progress. Partners - particularly **LPA officers - are still seen as having a key role** given the range of skills and technical factors needed to produce a neighbourhood plan.

Supporting the Neighbourhood Planning Process

As in 2014, the evidence strongly suggests that, in principle, neighbourhood planning can be undertaken by most communities if effectively supported, and in particular if the relevant Local Authority is supportive.

The Local Authority Role

In the 2014 research the role of the LPA in terms of input and attitude was deemed to make a significant difference to the neighbourhood planning. In 2016, 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 lack of support from LPAs may be influencing take-up elsewhere and should be explored further.

The 'Duty to Support' (DtS) brought mixed responses from interviewees. A significant majority (89%) agreed that the 2014 report was right to **recommend that the Duty to Support be clarified**; unsurprisingly those who enjoyed a high degree of LPA support felt that the DtS did not need further clarification in 2016, whereas those who felt their LPA was unsupportive or obstructive felt that further guidance was required. A number of community interviewees recognised that LPAs had a finely-balanced 'dual role' in supporting the community whilst ensuring that NDPs were deliverable against strategic issues.

More generally, and as in 2014, respondents indicated that more focused advice and **support from LPAs** would be welcomed, as well as a perception that training for officers and councillors about neighbourhood planning could be enhanced - including the introduction (or extension) of **dedicated support**.

The Role of Specialist Input - Consultants

In the 2014 study, the role of consultants was identified as important in many cases. In 2016, **75% of respondents had used consultant support** (up from 70%) and all respondents indicated their support had been 'quite useful' (22%) or 'very useful' (78%). A significant majority of those that used planning consultant indicated that they could not have completed the process without outside help (63%). Of particular importance to communities was the **face-to-face support** provided by consultants, particularly during plan writing stages and beyond. The most valued consultant roles included technical inputs on policy writing and dealing with technical matters such as Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Guidance, Tools and Templates

In 2014, many respondents stated that neighbourhood planning guidance required improving through consolidation and more specificity. At that time, some existing guidance was seen as confusing or it

was difficult to apply the existing guidance to specific circumstances. There was considerable support for more templates, and comprehensive toolkits were seen as a means to overcome uncertainty across all stages.

In 2016, 64% of respondents indicated that checklists, **toolkits and templates introduced after the 2014 report had helped** (a further 28% felt they could not comment). A number of respondents indicated that best practice and peer-learning via tools and templates was the most improved aspect of neighbourhood planning. There was a clear message that **templates were best employed in the early stages of neighbourhood planning** (in particular community engagement and evidence collection). Despite fears that templates might stifle creativity and local innovation, this was not reported by respondents in the 2016 study.

Respondents indicated that **Local Authority guidance was almost always well-received** and particularly welcome in the early stages; ensuring groups set realistic timeframes and were aware of key milestones. This aligned with LPA respondents who reported that ‘expectation management’ regarding timings and outcomes was the most important message to impart to participating communities at the beginning of the process. A significant minority of community participants still harboured worries concerning the relationship between guidance (both LPA and consultant derived) and subsequent outcomes at examination, with some respondents calling for greater consistency between examiners.

Conclusion

The overall conclusions of the 2014 research were confirmed in 2016 with neighbourhood planning continuing to be successfully undertaken by a range of communities. Subsequent other research has shown however that some areas have experienced much weaker or slower take-up⁴. Groups still viewed the process as complex and burdensome, involving technical planning knowledge that many communities have to acquire from outside. However many communities appear to have a wide range of applicable skills and knowledge. Support from Local Planning Authorities (and to a lesser extent private planning consultants) continues to be the overriding variable in the speed and success of neighbourhood plans. As before, communities 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.

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⁴ Parker, G. and Salter, K. (2016) ‘Five years of neighbourhood planning: a review of take-up and distribution’, *Town and Country Planning*, 85(5): 181-188.