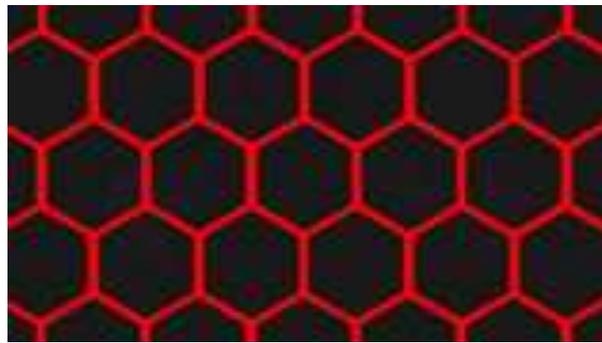


# Neighbourhood Planning HIVE report: experiences of participants



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## Preface

This report has been developed as a follow-up from the Neighbourhood Planning HIVE which took place on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2018. This represents a further iteration of work undertaken at the University of Reading since 2014 in seeking to understand issues and solutions to more effective neighbourhood planning (see Parker et al, 2014; Parker and Wargent, 2017a, b; Parker and Salter, 2017). The HIVE event involved a selected group of 35 active neighbourhood planners working on a series of key areas of concern in Neighbourhood Planning. The work was overseen and facilitated by Prof Gavin Parker with Kat Salter and Mark Dobson plus three student volunteers.

The authors wish to acknowledge the time and input of the HIVE participants as part of this co-produced research effort.

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## 1. Introduction

Neighbourhood planning (NP) has gained considerable momentum since its introduction in 2010-11 when the first vanguard/frontrunner areas were announced. Since that time over 2,300 groups have been active with the number of 'made' neighbourhood plans ever increasing. While government and others have been quick to point to the success of NP, there is considerable evidence that shows that neighbourhood planning carries significant burdens and difficulties. If NP is to develop an internal momentum that is self-sustaining, a number of the difficulties need ongoing identification and attention. Some issues are for national government to address, some for local government, some for neighbourhoods and steering groups and some are shared issues that require cooperative effort rather than regulatory change or new resources.

The neighbourhood planning HIVE was designed to bring together neighbourhood planners actively engaged in the process to discuss and share experience and knowledge. The activity produced was supplemented by a layer of previously collected survey data from participants, and this was mixed with existing knowledge to create a frame for deliberation during the HIVE.

The participants were:

- all active neighbourhood planners;
- the majority were from Parished areas (reflecting NP take-up generally);
- the population of areas represented ranged from 350 to 30,000;
- at all stages of Plan development - with an emphasis on later stages.

The purpose of this report is to pull together responses from all HIVE participants and serve as a collective note of HIVE. The report will be used to form the basis of further recommendations via a more detailed report (which will synthesise this with past iterations of findings in 2014 and 2017), that will be sent to Government and other stakeholders, as part of the ongoing effort to improve community participation in planning - which is a feature of the research philosophy at Reading under this topic heading.

## 2. Method

The approach underpinning this report is one of co-production, which mirrors the anticipated sensibility that neighbourhood planning stakeholders operate with. This involves partners co-evolving policy and practice. In this instance between academic researchers and NP practitioners.

The approach is intended to aid processes of mutual support and peer learning, which are recognised as important and valued in neighbourhood planning. The HIVE event was specifically designed to reflect the issues of importance to those attending.

In order to shape the HIVE coverage a pre-event questionnaire was produced and completed by participants and other eligible neighbourhood planners unable to attend on the day. This data was then analysed and pre-existing understandings of those topic areas were assembled to inform the HIVE. The submissions received also aided the research team to form a sample of groups to be invited to the HIVE event. The participants were, as a result, taken across urban and rural neighbourhoods and most were well advanced in their neighbourhood plans with some having completed the process (i.e. reached 'Made' status).

The HIVE day centred around a series of 'workshops' centring on the key themes seen to be priorities for attention. Each HIVE group was between 6-8 people who deliberated each of the topic areas one by one using series of structuring questions to shape the discussions. Each HIVE featured a note taker and facilitator and the sessions were audio-recorded for the purposes of fair representation of views in this and related outputs.

### *HIVE Questionnaire survey*

The pre-event questionnaire assisted the organisers to shape the agenda for the day and helped determine the sample group to be invited to the HIVE. The questions were wide ranging and the was designed to take approximately 30 mins to complete. The questionnaire was offered through survey monkey and prepared following the ethical research guidelines operated by the University of Reading. A summary of key responses are set out as they relate to the key themes across Chapters 4-7. This survey tool was still open (by late June 2018) via the NP website and may be viewed:

[www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning](http://www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning).

### **The HIVE event**

The event centred around a series of four topics areas discussed through five sets of participants who were selected, through the survey, to ensure a diversity of stages, areas and views were expressed.

The HIVE discussions centred on the following four themes spanning a full day of activity:

- The role and relationship of the **Local Planning Authority** - in terms of their duty to support and the approach taken in this co-produced effort;
- The **evidence base** for the Plan - what is evidence, how to access or commission this, how to ensure quality and how to use evidence in the development of the plan;
- **Implementation** of the Neighbourhood Plan - how the Plan will be used and kept up to date;
- **Support and resources** - how citizen-planners are assisted, informed, and sustained through a taxing process.

These topics were leavened by three structuring questions which acted to guide the discussions. The topics are discussed in

the following Chapters (4-7) after a brief overview (Chapter 3) of key research themes and issues that have permeated the research literature on NP so far i.e. 'what we know so far'. This latter section is brief but a richer assembly of outputs is found on the website: [www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning](http://www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning)

All our research is guided by our research ethics policy, see: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/DataProtection/imps-d-p-dataprotectionandresearch.aspx> If you have any concerns please contact one of the authors.

### 3. Neighbourhood Planning: What do we know so far?

#### 3.1 Introduction

Since 2010-11 neighbourhood planning has attracted a considerable amount of attention from researchers. Numerous aspects of the endeavour have been questioned, including the four broad themes expressed below. This feedback has produced a series of responses from government and support organisations to try and address perceived weaknesses or difficulties. These relate to the process and as well as the basis upon which NP has been developed.

Initially Government made a series of assumptions about the ability and willingness of communities to pursue neighbourhood planning, and offered a limited support package and minimal guidance. This was part of an experiment in an 'open source' approach to planning activity but also a policy that was launched at the height of 'austerity'.

This approach did not fully recognise differential capacity or specific obstacles facing different places. Instead the support offer was rolled out on a first come, first served basis. Since 2011 it has become more apparent that the difficulty of navigating NP and ensuring that a Plan that can withstand external challenge has been under-estimated. Our past research has indicated that support, response of Local Authorities and difficulties with technical aspects of NP have been primary issues. These, coupled with wider research, have indicated numerous points which can be grouped into some key themes:

- **Plan Quality** - and its robustness, both as a product of preparation and of external change;

- **Inclusivity** of Plan making - the quality of engagement and of evidence;
- **Innovation** and constraints - the difficulties of creating novel policy;
- **Conflict and relations** - the challenges of taking on topics that arouse passions and impact on numerous interests;
- **Peer learning** - a desire to learn from others but also questions about 'whom to learn from?';
- **Advice and guidance** - this has been fragmentary and groups complain of inconsistency and uncertainty.

Below we provide a brief synopsis (see also Parker and Wargent, 2017a, b; Parker and Wargent 2018).

#### 3.2 Quality and robustness of the process

Concerns have been raised regarding the ability of 'lay persons' to write implementable planning policies (Parker et al, 2015; Parker and Wargent, 2017a, b) with many groups seeking professional input. This has resulted in concerns regarding re-scripting and the loss of community ownership (Parker et al, 2015). Support from the Local Planning Authority is considered to be critical, however, there is a mixed picture of Local Planning Authority / community relations emerging.

The examination is a key stage in the process which has resulted in the majority of Plans facing substantial modification (Parker, Salter and Hickman, 2016). Every effort should be made by groups to ensure the submitted Plan meets the requirements and that the policies are written clearly and concisely - supported by a robust evidence base.

#### 3.3 Inclusion/diversity in process and policy

The decision as to whether to develop a neighbourhood plan rests with communities. Only those with the time, skills, resources and motivation are likely to engage in the process (Davoudi and Cowie, 2013). Concerted efforts must be made to engage with the wider community with open consultation and debate to be encouraged (Vigar, Brookes and Gunn, 2012).

Groups need to ensure that the Plan represents, as far as possible, the views of residents, businesses and those employed within the area, with specific attention to be paid to engaging with ‘hard to reach’ groups. A range of methods should be used to get as many people involved as possible, with ongoing engagement through the development of the Plan.

### **3.4 Innovation and Neighbourhood Planning**

Neighbourhood Planning provides communities the right to shape the future development of their area and to address the specific issues facing their locality. Some examiners have expressed frustration that communities are not being bold enough in their aspirations which is resulting in missed opportunities (Parker, Salter and Hickman, 2016).

While the jury is still out on whether neighbourhood planning is delivering additional housing, attention is being placed on the positive and innovative outcomes of the neighbourhood planning process. Research by Bradley (2017) has found that by invoking a sense of community identity, through the inclusion of “place identify” frames such as “market town” or “village life” neighbourhood plans may be able to win community support for development. Furthermore, some neighbourhood plans have taken the opportunity to advance socially and

environmentally sustainable solutions and to prioritise local issues such as heritage, identity and local housing needs including providing housing for older people, young families and households with disabled residents (Bailey, 2017; Bradley and Sparling, 2017; Field and Layard, 2017). Thus neighbourhood plans may deliver different ways of ‘doing’ planning with different considerations and a range of motivations and aspirations that are fundamentally distinct from explicit business models of the large UK house-building companies.

### **3.5 Peer learning for practitioners**

Neighbourhood plans have to meet a series of legislative requirements and are constrained in what they can and cannot deliver. This has led to concerns from local authority planners as to the extent that communities are ‘empowered’ to shape their area and their ability to influence local development. Furthermore, national government view neighbourhood planning as a tool to deliver growth and a mechanism to promote greater housing delivery within localities. Conflicts can thus emerge between the ‘empowerment’ and ‘growth’ agendas as well as the influence of knowledge held by ‘local heroes’ and that by ‘remote officials’ (Stanier, 2014). These differing views and perspectives on neighbourhood planning can lead to distrust between communities and local / national government.

### **3.6 Conflict and relations**

Neighbourhood planning has the potential to cause tension within and between local communities, as well as with the local planning authority, because of the emotional connections to people and place. Conflict can emerge when defining the

neighbourhood area boundary, in relation to broader questions regarding the representativeness and legitimacy of those engaged in the process and due to differing views and opinions on the ‘future’ of the locality.

The mediating influence of local authorities, consultants and examiners on neighbourhood plans (to make them compliant with national policy and ready for public referendum) can work to dilute and re-frame the ambitions of local communities and their intended outcomes creating friction between the key actors (Parker, Lynn and Wargent, 2017). Furthermore, whilst neighbourhood planning offers a new and accessible community outlet for local politics (Bradley, 2015), there are concerns that apparent consensus might actually hide different local views, opinions and knowledge about the locality (Vigar, Gunn and Brooks, 2017). This is particularly the case when working within ‘super diverse’ communities that often characterise urban areas (Colomb, 2017).

### 3.7 Support and guidance

We explore this topic in chapter 7 but so far the wider topic area and linked issues have been live ones. The Neighbourhood Planning User Report work produced in 2017 (Parker and Wargent, 2017a, b) confirmed that the production of **clear advice was critical**. 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 to come from their LPA rather than other sources - given possible confusion. The initial 2014 NP users study (Parker et al, 2014) also highlighted a need for appropriate standardisation where it is possible i.e.

templates for particular tasks - some of this has been done and see planning Aid England’s support materials: <https://www.ourneighbourhoodplanning.org.uk/resources/documents>

### 3.8 Summary of legislative changes to Neighbourhood Planning

In general there has been a shift away from the envisaged “light-touch” approach with NPs having been subject to developer challenges and as a result being tested through the High Courts. This process has confirmed that NP policies and proposals have to be backed up by robust evidence and due process has to be followed. This has prompted government to respond to a variety of issues, given they have remained committed to NP. Thus the NP regulations and support arrangements have been amended over time. Some reforms have been oriented to speed up and simplify the process, including the introduction of time-scales and provision of funding to support groups. Other measures have been introduced to bolster public confidence in the utility of neighbourhood planning.

For examples the continued support for NP has led to a reorientation of national policy so that weight of NPs is ensured at the latter stages of Plan production - i.e. prior to referendum and being ‘made’. The housing allocations issue has dogged many NPs and equally have beleaguered Local Plans. The shift to a standardised housing methodology (OAHN) has been trailed and this has implications for NP groups given the housing targets and allocations for their area may alter.

Clarity from the LPA is being addressed as the LPA have to identify strategic priorities and policies in the Local Plan. From end of July 2018 LPAs must also clarify in their Statement of Community

Involvement (SCI) the support and assistance they will offer to groups.

There are three situations where variations or options to modify and review Plans once 'made' exist - the NPPG responds to uncertainty about when and how to do this effectively (see NPPG - para 85) but this will need good cooperation between LPAs and the NP groups.

### 3.9 Survey findings in overview

Here we give a general appraisal of the questionnaire findings given that the range of questions posed went beyond the workshop topics. Some material that is specific to those topic areas are found in the relevant chapters (4-7).

In general terms the questionnaire responses highlighted issues already known to the research team. 50% of respondents reported that the NP experience was as expected. Others that it involved more work than envisaged and it is a long, arduous process. Many of these experiences reflect those captured in the "User experience" report (Parker et al, 2014) and in wider academic debate - issues with lack of clarity and guidance (with many relying on external advice and support), concerns on how to ensure the Plan reflects the differing views of the community and does not get hijacked by a particular interest group (i.e. NIMBY's) or the usual suspects.

Ongoing challenges in writing planning policies referred to by one participant as "dark art and witchery". While unwilling to confirm the magical properties of Planning, the authors noted that 54% of respondents reported that their experience of developing a neighbourhood Plan has modified their views on the value of neighbourhood planning.

Participants highlighted the flexibility to address issues of importance to their community as an important part of the design of NP. However, many felt that in practice NP was limited in scope - constrained by the legislation and framing of Neighbourhood Planning and the limited focus on land-use planning issues.

Furthermore, the respondents saw NP as a complicated and long-winded process. Producing a NP is resource intensive and reliant on both social and financial capital. The financial costs incurred range from £500 to £30,000 and which in many cases costs were expected to rise.

The number of 'active' volunteers range from 5 to 20 - many reported the number of volunteers was sufficient. While low numbers caused problems for some, others reported that having a "core" of volunteers ensured uniformity in approach and another group found it easier to progress once the numbers reduced. Some reported numbers have dwindled over time as interest waned.

70% of respondents reported unexpected benefits of engaging in NP - benefits beyond the Plan included:

- Understanding the views of local residents and what they value;
- Community spirit - involvement of the community and uniting residents
- Better relationships with LPA;
- Increased knowledge of planning process;
- Widening skill base.

Furthermore, as NP sits within broader planning hierarchy and problems have arisen due to the changing policy landscape - some respondents had found their Plans subject to developer challenge, often with bruising results. A newer aspect of the responses related to emerging concerns regarding implementation of the Plan - these centred on two aspects: will NPs be considered during planning application processes? Secondly, when and

on what basis should neighbourhoods amend, refresh or start anew with their Plan. This is discussed in further detail in the Implementation chapter (Chapter 6).

### 3.10 Synthesis

Thus, the literature that has burgeoned since 2012 has identified the multiple burdens on communities and indicated the type and organisation of support necessary. Questions of inclusivity and quality of engagement have been recognised and overall the context of multiple factors of change have acted to slow or otherwise frustrate effective neighbourhood planning. Together it has been difficult for active communities to keep up-to-date with the changes, especially considering the frequent reforms and amendments to NP since its introduction, with emerging local plans, and with staffing change in LPAs. In order to help with at least some of the above one idea that gained favour during HIVE was to establish a more coherent 'One-stop shop' for groups to access information on legislative changes.

The HIVE, as we explain below, sought to explore these types of challenges.

The research referred to in this chapter can be viewed, or sources located, on: [www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning](http://www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning)

Two of the three report authors have recently completed a book to alert and inform neighbourhood planners about how to navigate NP more effectively, and discuss the types of issues set out in this chapter and the report more generally:

**Parker, G. Salter, K. & Wargent, M. (Winter 2018) *Neighbourhood Planning in Practice*. (Lund Humphries, London).**

## 4. Role and relationship between the Local Planning Authority and NP groups

*The role and relationship of the Local Planning Authority - in terms of their duty to support and the approach taken in Neighbourhood Planning as a 'co-produced' effort.*

### 4.1 LPA relations and experiences

Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) have a key role in neighbourhood planning and remain as important decision-makers in the process. They must fulfil a series of legislative duties associated to key steps and have a broad 'duty to support' NP groups. However, the duty to support is not prescribed and this has caused some issues. As time has passed some degree of clarity has been evolving and some measures to nudge LPAs under this heading has emerged. The NPPG (National Planning Practice Guidance) provides a steer in this regard, indicating that LPAs need to:

- Be **proactive** in providing information to communities about Neighbourhood Planning;
- Fulfil its duties and take decisions as soon as possible, and within statutory time periods where these apply;
- Set out a **clear and transparent decision-making timetable** and share this with communities engaged in NP
- Constructively **engage with the community** throughout the process including when considering the recommendations of the independent examiner
- Should also **provide constructive comments** on the emerging neighbourhood plan prior to submission and discuss the supporting documents.

How these are applied remains moot and details are all important. Further work

may be needed given that the supportiveness of the LPA has a direct impact on ability of groups to progress their Plan. The HIVE discussion was designed to explore this area further using the following three questions:

*Q1. What is your experience of working with the LPA?*

*How do you get to the point where the required assistance and support is provided?*

*Q2. What is it that neighbourhood planning groups need from LPAs (given that NP is 'community-led')? What is the basic offer that you can't do without?*

*Q3. How can this offer be improved or supplemented?*

*Ideas, alternatives and guarantees?*

These questions were developed to explore what the most important elements are under the broader heading - what is it that NP groups 'can't do without' and what are the main 'failings' of support?' (see also Chapter 7).

Variation in support and willingness of LPAs to engage fully with neighbourhood planning is widely recognised now, and a number of reasons have been cited including: availability of resources, broader commitments and priorities, their consideration of the value of NP and possible concerns about impact of NP on their ability to deliver strategic planning. Issues relating to LPA capacity and resources were acknowledged by HIVE participants and different priorities, staffing and resourcing levels, knowledge of NP (often groups have more expertise than the LPA), seniority of staff and continuity in support were all raised. **Change** emerged as a pervasive issue, as discussed later, and in chapters 6 and 8, given the destabilising effect this has on NP groups - and exacerbated by serial factors of change.

## 4.2 HIVE findings

When asked about the supportiveness of LPAs there was a mixed response with around a third of participants seeing their LPAs as giving limited support or deeming them ‘unsupportive’ - a smaller number thought they had been very supportive. For some, LPA support had improved over time. The lack of prescription has played a part in the variation in the type and quality of support offered by LPAs and this was endorsed by participants.

Most saw the LPA as performing a rather hands-off advisory role and overall in the workshops it was felt that the LPA needed to better structure their support. Given that needs vary across neighbourhoods it was felt that to be effective at least some of the support and advice has to be **tailored to suit conditions and needs**. Moreover, a proactive and positive approach should be present and from that disposition there is more scope to work collaboratively.

On hearing the mixed response from the survey, participants thought that clearer standards or minimum offers were required - some citing a better use of NP resources which could assist (i.e. how the £30,000 burdens money was used). This, however, reflected a broader concern about **how and on what basis funding and resources** were used by government, consultants and LPAs in support of the activity.

Respondents raised a number of questions in their responses relating to LPAs and support, including:

- *Querying what support LPAs are required to offer - ‘what is actually statutory and what is discretionary?’* This highlights an ongoing confusion about what to expect from the LPA (and what to ask for);
- *How to involve / garner support LPA when they have other priorities e.g. progressing the Local Plan.* This also

highlighted a possible lack of confidence amongst some groups in liaising effectively with LPAs, some of whom may be less enthusiastic about NP.

- *How to develop a good working relationship with the LPA* - indicating the known importance of trust as some community members are distrustful of LPA advice. This is linked to the prior point and highlights again that advice and support has been mixed; both in how it has been forthcoming and in its quality / consistency;
- *How to locate best practice in LPA support arrangements from other participants.* Moreover how to identify the hallmarks of such practice and understand the context in which this operates (and how or where this does or doesn’t apply).

Sharing data/evidence as well as improving the quality and frequency of communications was indicated as relevant given the uncertainties that change can bring for NP. Participants in the HIVE wanted **clear advice** from the LPA and in particular wanted to know, from the outset, ‘what is the remit of the NP’ (e.g. with regards to housing numbers). In areas where the NP is being prepared in advance of the Local Plan it was felt the LPA should publish their **evidence base** online.

Groups are somewhat reliant on LPAs to assist and the stand-off or gap at the heart of that conundrum about knowing what is needed (see Chapter 7). This presents an issue that surely comes back to education and clarity in support ‘rules’. However, others raised concerns about LPAs being too prescriptive, especially in rural communities that are facing a ‘sustainability trap’ and would benefit from *additional* housing beyond that which the LPA identify.

There was also some discussion over how much LPA support was actually desirable with respondent arguing that *'Having too much LPA involvement may be just as bad as not having enough'* and another reporting that residents in their area are suspicious of too much LPA involvement as they see this as the Council trying to influence local thinking. This underlines that the **support or input that is preferred is procedural and relating to necessary input materials rather than help with output.**

Other responses in the HIVE overall covered questions of consistency - that **LPAs change their advice** mid-way through the process - either due to changes in their Local Plan or because it is the first time they have looked at what the group are doing e.g. telling them after preferred sites are identified that none of the sites are suitable. One group reinforced findings from other research by the authors which stresses the importance of the relationship with **individual LPA officers** - this can mean that NPs groups are left adrift if such officers leave the Authority.

This relates to an overarching issue of **Change** which became a notable theme here (and this permeated all workshops). In exploration this was recognised as having multiple dimensions and combinations and is a source of considerable frustration. The changes include:

- Changing national policy and regulations;
- Parameters for meeting basic conditions changing (often due to High Court decisions);
- Changing Local Plan status and the relationship with the LPA over the Local Plan
- Changing LPA staffing and associated disruption;

- Variable levels of knowledge and experience of NP in LPAs - which meant that support was often fragmented or did not instil confidence;
- Many areas are facing restructuring - through merging and reorganisation of LPAs. Such changes are creating concerns and the impacts on neighbourhood planning activity are unknown.

The topic of change is further reflected upon in the final chapter here.

There were several practical ideas that emerged, including notably desiring a proactive LPA and specifically citing a need to **engage with groups at the start** of the process. Also that existing resources should be highlighted better, for example a list of the available evidence would save time and repetition of effort by NP groups as well as help avoid gaps or weaknesses in evidence marshalled in support of a Plan - the ideal place being on the LPA website.

It was understood that the LPA have other priorities too, but some NP groups felt that they would like to be engaged in more **strategic** matters that also impact on their community. This point highlights how the NDP faces in two directions simultaneously - to the community and to the LPA in seeking to reconcile both needs and views and NP groups need to be enabled to understand *both* sets of needs and issues

There was an indication that **peer learning** from other NP groups was more beneficial than relying on LPAs. This underscored a feeling of mistrust or lack of confidence in many LPAs when it came to Neighbourhood Planning. It also reinforced the need for trust to be built and how individual relations are critical in this regard.

In line with previous recommendations it is perceived that bespoke **Memoranda of Understanding** (MoU) can assist in

structuring the relationship. In terms of mechanisms such as the MoU its was recognised that a highly standardised approach may be flawed - each group is likely to have different needs (outside of any standard elements of support).

The policy iteration relating to the **Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)** was seen as only a marginal improvement as the SCI could also be worded opaquely. Research looking at SCIs after July 31<sup>st</sup> 2018 (i.e. the date for NP support to be published in each LPAs SCI) would be useful.

Slightly beyond the remit of the discussions but clearly important are related questions of **intra-community relations** and in particular the Steering Group and Parish Council / forum relationship - which also came up in discussions expressed in chapter 6 where continuity post-‘Made’ status and implementation of the Plan were scrutinised.

**Overall there is inconsistency of support and a lack of certainty over what LPAs should provide. Further work on what constitutes an effective and appropriate Duty to Support is needed.**

## 5. Evidence in Neighbourhood Planning

*The evidence base for the Plan - what is evidence, how to access or commission this, how to ensure quality and how to use evidence in the development of the neighbourhood plan.*

### 5.1 Evidence in Neighbourhood Planning

A strong evidence base forms the foundation of a Neighbourhood Plan. The initial contention that NDPs could be based on a 'light touch' approach has been eroded - in part as a result of challenges by the development industry. There is now a clearer recognition of the need for a robust evidence base. What this means in practice is less clear.

The HIVE discussions centred around the following questions:

*Q1. What has been your experience of this aspect of neighbourhood planning?*

*Primary and secondary data*

*Q2. How did you determine what was needed and what constitutes robust evidence?*

*How did you assemble the evidence? Are there gaps?*

*Q3. How can this stage be improved or supplemented?*

*Ideas, information and training?*

The literature on NP has already highlighted that an inadequate evidence base to justify policies is a key issue identified at examination stage (see Parker, Salter and Hickman, 2017). This research reported that 90% of examiners had examined NPs where the evidence base was lacking - including topics such as the Sustainability Appraisal/SEA, housing need and housing allocations and local green space. Weaknesses in the evidence base can lead to the modification of policies, deletion of policies and in some cases failure of the Plan.

Experience has also shown that evidence is not only required to support the policies in the NP but also to demonstrate due process and to explain why and how decisions have been made. Again, weaknesses in the approach, or a lack of transparency, had led to NPs been challenged in the High Court in terms of process and the use and analysis of evidence.

There have been moves to clarify issues around evidence include the recent NPIERS guidance on the examination process which explains the difference between evidence and opinion (NPIERS, 2018).

There is no 'tick box' list of evidence required to support a NP as this will depend on the scope and focus of the NP and the issues to be addressed in the NP policies. Participants were asked about how to identify, commission and use evidence and also overwhelmed by the numerous sources of evidence; with one raising the question of '*How to get through the muddle of so much information / evidence you don't know where to start*'. Some participants wanted a structure for the Plan to assist their early thinking.

The application of evidence in the NP has been clarified over time:

- A proportionate robust evidence base should support choices made and the approach taken;
- Groups need to draw upon evidence to explain the intention and rationale of policies - including the policy justification;
- Evidence is also required to support decisions that have been made and to ensure transparency of process e.g. if allocating sites for development (including housing sites) an appraisal of options and an assessment of individual sites against clearly identified criteria should be carried out. It is likely that more than one approach could be adopted when assessing sites so groups will also need to explain which method was taken forward and why;

- Evidence must be plain and context specific;
- Community views do not in themselves constitute ‘evidence’ - opinions can provide a steer on areas and topics for which evidence should be gathered (to support or rule out);
- There are specific requirements and advice available on the evidence required for particular policy areas e.g. Local Green Space, housing need assessments, SEA and site assessment;
  - These can be found in the NPPF, NPPG and supporting guidance and in documents produced by Locality, Planning Aid England and other third sector organisations.
- Groups should also take opportunity to discuss Local Plan strategy for their area and strategic policies of relevance - some LPAs identify a specific housing target for named settlements or an overall target which NDPs across the district or unitary area should deliver. Similarly, some issues may be addressed at a strategic level e.g. Affordable Housing targets and %s.

## 5.2 HIVE findings

HIVE participants expressed several key points or features in relation to this topic area. Concerns were expressed that there is a lot of evidence to look at and there was uncertainty about how this could be filtered down, how its relevance should be determined and how it should be analysed. As discussed above, groups saw a role for the LPA in **organising information** and material and providing information about evidence i.e. ‘what, where, how.’ At present much time and effort is expended by groups on gathering evidence that the LPA may have to hand, however, LPA websites are often poor or very difficult to navigate making it hard for groups to access this information. A single **authoritative source** or ‘bundles of information and evidence’ created for NP

groups and published on the LPA website (which were criticised for opacity or incoherence) would help establish early the evidence that exists and to identify other elements or evidence that may be needed.

Others felt that a template for evidence gathering would be useful as this could help groups to identify potential sources of evidence. Planning Aid England have produced such support material, see:

[https://www.ourneighbourhoodplanning.org.uk/storage/resources/documents/How\\_to\\_gather\\_and\\_use\\_evidence.pdf](https://www.ourneighbourhoodplanning.org.uk/storage/resources/documents/How_to_gather_and_use_evidence.pdf)

However, the lack of wider awareness of such material indicates that work may need bolstering or reasserting as per previous comments.

With some groups there was an ongoing confusion about **opinion vs evidence**; an apparent need for tutoring on evidence meaning/import is therefore identified. These points appear to resolve back to a need for **research methods training**. This centred on questions of **standardisation of terminology** to ensure that **communications** are clear and well understood by lay people.

This also links to questions and uncertainty over what does constitute a ‘robust’ evidence base and related concerns over how to judge the validity of information, how to select appropriate evidence and how to determine if it is up-to-date. There was some hesitancy on relying on secondary sources of data, especially if the methodology followed is not clear and the approach transparent - a particular concern with open source data. The transparency and trustworthiness of some sources e.g. developer funded data was also questioned.

Groups do procure primary data in support of their Plan and this is often due to a need for context specific information and data

which relate specifically to the designated neighbourhood plan area. Furthermore, the starting point for many groups is to conduct a Parish survey or questionnaire in order to gather community views. Discussion centred on the need to avoid leading questions, to collect data rather than opinion, how to judge the validity of the data, how to ensure widespread engagement and the balance between carrying out a comprehensive questionnaire and getting residents hopes us about what the NP can address. Equally using outsiders to conduct such work could run the risk of losing key nuances or other specifics relevant for a neighbourhood.

This links to the long running question of what to do with **non-land use actions** / ideas that are generated by the community. It was seen as important that community aspirations are retained in some format, for example, as an appendix to the Neighbourhood Plan or as a supporting document. As will be discussed in Chapter 6 on Implementation. The identification of community aspirations and projects can be used as a basis to lever in funding or to deliver on projects following the making of the Plan. Some participants cited a greater willingness on the part of others to work with a neighbourhood when a 'made' Plan was in place.

Questions were also raised over how this "neighbourhood" evidence (i.e. information gathered from the community) can marry with the more technical evidence that may be collected or required in support of the Plan. It is important to reiterate that policies must be supported by a robust evidence base and community views do not in themselves constitute evidence (see NPIERS, 2018). It is however important that the community sentiment is not lost - the Plan is after all a community-led plan and the views and

aspirations of the community can help to set the tone and sentiment of the Plan and explain the intentions behind the policies.

The broader planning context and policy environment was also discussed as the relative weight given to evidence can also depend on (local/neighbourhood) political change which can influence the direction of the Plan and its policies. Evidence relating to housing need and housing targets was considered to be a particular challenge in this regard.

Importantly, the linkage between evidence and desired outcome was recognised - the use and application of evidence? Consultants were seen by some as useful in assisting with interpreting evidence and using it as a basis for developing policies.

**Overall participants indicated some confusion over need; availability and validity of sources of information / data and evidence.**

## 6 Implementation of Neighbourhood Plans

*Implementation of the Neighbourhood Plan - how the Plan will be used and kept up to date.*

### 6.1 Implementation of NPs

An aspect of increasing concern has been the use of the neighbourhood plan after it has been 'made' and when a Plan may need to be amended, refreshed or a new Plan prepared. Some key points to bear in mind:

- The 'Light touch' approach to NP preparation has shifted over time - meaning that more care is needed over the evidence base its robustness to challenge;
- There is a shifting local and national planning policy context - it is unlikely that a Plan's policies will remain up-to-date and relevant for the whole Plan period;
- Many groups see having a "made" plan as the end game, however, policies need to be used as a basis for determination of planning applications and so ensuring its application in practice is important;
- The Plan and the associated work can help to form the basis for spin-off community projects or proposals thus yielding benefits beyond the Plan.

It may be useful to look at the CPRE/NALC 'How to shape' guide on the Implementation stage of NP: <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/publications/1633-how-to-shape-where-you-live/file> and the information on this aspect of NP on the University of Reading neighbourhood planning website.

The HIVE discussions centred around the following three questions in respect of NP implementation:

*Q1. How do you expect your Plan and policies to be upheld and applied? How will you monitor the made Plan? Issues?*

*Q2. How do you expect to keep your Plan up to date?*

*Given the changing policy environment. Issues?*

*Q3. What are your reflections on implementing the wider community agenda and ambition?*

### 6.2 HIVE findings

This topic area may be broken into two main elements: that of **implementation** of the Plan after it is 'made' and secondly the **need to review** and then act on change to make appropriate amendments or redo a Plan. This required forms of 'everyday management' of the Plan.

It was evident that many groups had not considered the implementation of their Plan fully and instead focussed in on the end-game of reaching a 'made' Plan. Many recognised the importance of implementation and considered that more information and guidance should be available. This would assist groups to recognise and consider the mechanisms for implementation early in the process. This is of particular importance as those developing the Plan (i.e. the Steering Group) may not be responsible for its implementation (this is the Qualifying Body). There is a **danger of loss of expertise/experience** gained through the process which may occur when a steering group disbands and 'hands over' the Plan to the Parish Council (or Forum in an urban / un-parished area). Participants considered that a strategy for implementation and review should be considered by the Steering Group and Qualifying Body and reference and guidelines for implementation may wish to be included with the Terms of Reference associated with the NP process.

The Qualifying Body (Parish Council or Forum in an urban / un-Parished area) should be consulted on any planning applications submitted for development within the Neighbourhood Area. This affords opportunity to influence the decision-making for the application. NP policies are unlikely to be only consideration that a local planning authority will need to consider. The participants saw that an increased emphasis on **engagement is critical** to getting support for implementation given that the NP may be monitored and utilised by those with little knowledge of the process. Furthermore, implementation of NP policies also led to a recognised disjuncture between aspiration and feasible policy - that policy needs to be persuasive in order to be effectively applied.

During the course of the discussions, there was some uncertainty and limited knowledge about how the planning application process works. It is important to remember that the NP is one element for consideration where planning applications are determined - planning law stipulates that planning applications will be determined in accordance with the development plan (which means the local plan AND the NDP) unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

Some saw the advantage of a 'made' plan as helping to organise community feedback on planning applications - in that citing specific policies would give shape and legitimacy to comments being made.

This distinction between the Steering Group and the Qualifying Body also relates to real uncertainty regarding the **monitoring of the Plan** and keeping it up to date. Questions raised include who has the power to decide if / when / how the Plan should be reviewed? This reflects broader issues of power and responsibility.

Many reflected on the considerable effort that would be required to monitor the Plan and to keep it up-to-date. LPA briefings and updates were considered necessary to ensure that NP groups know when they need to amend their Plan as the steering group are not linked to ongoing local plan production and may not be alert to changes in the broader planning context.

Many benefits beyond the Plan were discussed including the **use of CIL and s106** to deliver the community aspirations. It is important that groups recognise the local context and appraise themselves with the LPA's position and intentions regarding CIL. The need to link to CIL /s106 more effectively and to plan for CIL /s106 spend was identified by participants. It was felt that advice on how to draw up credible project and **spend priorities from CIL and also via s106 contribution** would be beneficial. Information about how to make best use of the Plan and associated energy and evidence to lever-in external support would also be beneficial.

As summarised above, discussions on implementation were diverse but a general lack of engagement with implementation and post-adoption (made) Plan activity and preparation was highlighted. There was a feeling that **better education about NP implementation** is needed and in particular advice on revisions to ensure the NP is used in practice. It was suggested that engagement is needed with NALC and other key third sector actors to make them aware of the potential challenges, and lack of awareness, of the implementation stage.

## 7 Support and resources in Neighbourhood Planning

*Support and resources - how citizen-planners are assisted, informed, and sustained through a taxing process.*

### 7.1 Support and Resources in NP

In terms of the support and advice that NP communities receive there have been some generalised and specific issues identified.

The HIVE discussion centred around the following questions:

- Q1. What has been your experience of this aspect of neighbourhood planning?  
What are the most important elements of support and advice?*
- Q2. What form should this take?  
Standardised / who from?*
- Q3. What lessons can be learnt about the current support?  
How can the offer be improved or supplemented? Ideas and alternatives?*

Concerns have been raised regarding the ability of 'laypersons' to write implementable planning policies, with many groups seeking professional input leading to concerns regarding re-scripting and loss of community ownership. There is a variation in the type of support consultants can offer and their ways of working differ. Support tends to focus on the technical aspects of plan development e.g. writing planning policies, Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Funding is available for groups to procure external support - and further technical support is available for eligible groups. See the Locality webpages. However it was stated that for some a 'catch-22' situation

can arise whereby some spend may be necessary before a funding award is made.

### 7.2 HIVE findings

#### *i. Third-party advice and guidance*

A theme that has been raised in prior research was again a feature of this exercise: standardisation of support versus bespoke support. All respondents had drawn on advice and guidance available - especially resources published by Locality including the Locality Roadmap. They have also been referring to other NPs, the NPPF, guidance from DCLG and the NPPG.

Participants also reported that resources and advice on particular issues is missing or in short supply - this includes simplified guidance, basic things such as maps of the Parish, information about how to start the initial stages of the process (how to 'get things moving'), step-by-step process notes and a one-stop shop for guidance. However, participants also discussed the potential for reliance on standardised approaches and general advice provided in these advice notes and that there remains a place, and need, for bespoke support.

Some considered that **templates** would be beneficial (for example, to assist with evidence gathering) whereas other reported that reliance on templates, and a standardised support package from consultants, had resulted in some NDPs running into trouble at examination / in the High Court. Thus care should be exercised with duplication.

There were also calls for more opportunities for **peer-to-peer learning** and workshops and support events (like HIVE). One positive idea was to create a NDP library that highlights the issues and strengths across different contexts.

Reflecting the increasing judicialised environment in which NP operates some groups have required **legal advice**.

Although Locality have provided legal advice to some groups this does not form part of the current support programme and it is therefore missing / in short supply.

## ii. Consultants

Prior research has identified that around 75% of all NP groups have used consultants, the HIVE sample was similar with c80% who have or will appoint consultants. A wide range of support was being offered by NP consultants, policy writing again was high on the list, as was a more general advice role including drafting the Plan. SEA work was reported as being particularly complicated and as a result many NP groups had appointed consultants to assist in this aspect of NP. In order of importance, external support was needed due to lack of internal expertise, funds available to do so, 'other' and on the advice of the LPA. Other reasons cited include protecting volunteers from providing testimony at an inquiry, on advice of a support organisation, expectation by the Parish Council, to ensure integrity and due to time constraints. The involvement of consultants can also help to ensure evidence has been analysed independently and competently and proofs, to some extent, against challenge by the LPA or residents (or indeed Developers).

The majority of respondents valued the consultant input - this is to be expected as the roles are often critical ones and groups may well become reliant on consultants. However, the feedback demonstrated a mixed bag of experiences - with some exhorting the value of having an independent person to provide advice, others were more sceptical "you only get what you pay for" and others commenting that "there is a lot of rubbish out there."

Overall the PQQ findings reveal a need to **better understand the type, quality and basis of support offered through consultants.**

Groups have found it challenging to identify what input they need and the value of support, the 'we don't know what we don't know' conundrum. This underpinned several of the key points raised:

- How to gauge how much external support is required?
- How to isolate and identify what the aspects of NP are that require professional input versus those that can be carried out by the community?
- How can limited NP funds available be used to the best effect?
- What is the relative merit of appointing external support as compared to up-skilling the community?
- What is the process for appointing consultants - on what terms and what should be expected?
- How to deal with issues arising if the consultant's advice is contested.

There was a strong recognition that individual relations and expertise was important and that this could be provided by many sources including consultants and the LPA. Some participants reported that as the support offer and knowledge from the LPA increased there was less of a requirement for consultancy input. The focus on consultants produced numerous points, including:

- Concerns regarding 'wasting money' on consultants;
- The importance of word of mouth recommendations and the benefits of asking other groups for advice on who they appointed;
- The independent nature of the consultant is beneficial during policy drafting - can summarise succinctly the evidence collated and take the emotion out of the writing;

- The importance of the local context - when appointing consultants it is important that they are aware of local context and situation especially the Local Plan;
- Caution regarding the use of standard templates by consultants;
- Questions regarding the relationship between quality of support and cost - are good quality consultants more expensive?
- Some NP groups reported that they were constrained on who they could appoint by cap on day-rates set by Locality - this was particular for very technical pieces of work.

### *iii. Peer support*

As highlighted in chapter 4, peer learning was seen as useful. 72% of respondents have liaised with other NP groups and have been seeking advice on funding, community consultation, planning process and to understand their experiences and pitfalls. Some groups are now passing on their knowledge, but 63% welcome more interaction and networking with a focus on sharing best practice, advice and pitfalls to avoid. A further 22% were 'unsure' at this stage - reflecting perhaps their early stage in Plan preparation.

As valued as other NDPs are in providing inspiration for NP groups and as a source of information, some participants expressed difficulties associated with determining what is valid and robust - caution that peer-to-peer learning has a danger of extending issues rather than resolving them?

### *iv. Other sources of support / advice needed*

As discussed in Chapter 4 (role and relationship with the LPA), the LPA also has a role in supporting and advising neighbourhood planning groups. This relates to not only practical advice and

support on the NP process but also openness, transparency and honesty about the Local Plan process. This includes providing a realistic timescale for delivery and notifying groups of potential changes in the planning pipeline. It was also felt that the process of Local Plan production, and how to feed into the process, needs to be made coherent and clear.

Some groups also voiced concerns over the use of 'burdens' funding that LPAs receive from Central Government. These monies are primarily used to pay for the costs of examination and referendum. It was felt that there is little transparency over how this money is actually spent leading to suspicions of LAs withholding and not using such NP funds effectively.

As previously discussed, greater LPA support and advice can help to reduce reliance and dependence on consultants and money being wasted on their appointment.

**Overall there is a fragmentation of support and advice and it is confusing for many groups to identify and draw in the best set of inputs for their situation.**

## 8 Conclusion and synopsis

Much of the findings of the HIVE appear to reinforce prior research conducted by the Reading team (see Parker et al, 2014, 2015; Parker and Wargent, 2017a, b). However there were some new iterations or continuing trends that stand out.

### 1. **Emphasis on the impact of (multiple) change:**

Substantively the multiple factors of change that act to undermine the Plan during and after its finalisation loomed large in the debates. Clearly much more work needs to be done to provide clarity, some certainty and also appropriate resources to sustain neighbourhood planning in the longer-term. Unless these issues gain more focused attention from government then neighbourhood planning is likely to founder.

### 2. **Role and understanding of Evidence:**

There were real concerns and associated sets of questions regarding the sources, quality, and status of evidence. Such issues are significant as unless they can be satisfactorily resolved they will undermine the stability of NP in the long term.

### 3. **Efficiency - in advice, resources and support:**

How NP practice is organised and facilitated is very mixed and acts to prolong uncertainty. From basic things like the presentation of support material on LPA websites, to a portal for possible relevant evidence, updates on local and other policy change - these issues act to affect the quality of Plans, possibly slow progress and create inefficiencies for all parties.

### 4. **Implementation and need to revise NPs:**

Issues of communications, of deploying NP policy effectively are apparent. The need to review / amend Plans needs to be communicated better - governance arrangements re: role of Steering Group versus the Qualifying Body (i.e. Forum/Parish) came out as did the need for post-Made Plan communications between LPAs and Qualifying Bodies.

The role for third party organisations e.g. NALC, to advise groups on implementation and to understand potential challenges re: monitoring, updating and using the Plan as a basis to comment on planning applications was highlighted as support to LPAs.

### 5. **Opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, workshops and shared learning:**

Groups find it helpful to learn from each other and receive training. This provides groups with confidence, knowledge, understanding and the skill sets to help them to produce the Plan (rather than necessarily having to appoint consultants or rely so heavily on third party support). Improvement on this aspect of NP may at least then aid towards “knowing what they don’t know”.

### 6. **Outstanding questions arising:**

The work brought together through HIVE indicates a number of questions which still to be addressed or discussed fully:

- The **offer from LPAs** and the difficulties of an undefined / loosely defined Duty to Support;
- **Longevity** of NP - and need for review/ amendment;
- **Stability** of the environment for NP groups (as volunteers);
- Overall **value of NPs** in different circumstances;
- Need for **high quality support** and peer learning.

## 9. References and materials

**Note:** For a fuller list of resources and materials, see:

[www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning](http://www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning)

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