

# NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING RESEARCH 2014-2018: SYNOPSIS AND OUTSTANDING ISSUES

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## **Preface**

This short report acts to synthesise three practice oriented research efforts conducted between 2014-2018 with a view to identifying key themes and issues that have emerged over and across those studies. The audience is predominantly policy makers and those involved in supporting Neighbourhood Planning (NP) activity.

# Neighbourhood Planning Research 2014-2018: synopsis and outstanding issues

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## 1. Introduction

This report sets out the themes and issues of concern identified in three separate research studies carried out in 2014, 2016 and 2018 through the University of Reading (UoR). All were looking at the experience of Neighbourhood Planning (NP) users in England. The final section acts to synthesise this and highlight key points as well as areas for further attention.

The research projects were:

- **2014 - Neighbourhood Planning User Experience report** (research team: Parker, Lynn and Wargent. Report - October, 2014)
- **2016 - Neighbourhood Planning Users Revisited** (research team: Parker and Wargent. Report - January, 2017)
- **2018 - Neighbourhood Planning HIVE** (research team: Parker, Salter and Dobson. Report - June, 2018)

The first study was based on a large sample of participants (n=120) while the follow-up studies drew on a smaller samples - all respondents were active in Neighbourhood Planning. The second study included local authorities as part of the research. The 2018 work honed in on several key themes after a more general review of participant experience.

Further information on these projects and wider outputs and associated NP resources can be found on:

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

We firstly set out a brief precis of the key findings and points unearthed in the three studies before looking at issues and areas of commonality and difference across the studies. This is with a view to informing government and others about dimensions of Neighbourhood Planning that could be looked at again to ensure its resilience and utility. A key concern for us is that NP should be improved sufficiently that it delivers positive outcomes and is sustainable; given that it relies substantially on voluntary effort.

Unfortunately there is lack of formal criteria against which to assess NP. A recent paper by two of the UoR team<sup>1</sup> set out criteria for success in Neighbourhood Planning given that indicators have not been present. In brief these broad criteria are:

- Improved *quality* of neighbourhood plans (and ensuring ‘value added’);

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<sup>1</sup> See: Wargent, M. and Parker, G. (2018) ‘Reimagining neighbourhood governance. The future of neighbourhood Planning in England’, *Town Planning Review*, Vol. 89(4): 379-402.

- More *equitable plan-making* - inclusivity, awareness and accessibility of NP;
- Deeper *co-production* - ensuring that the necessary partners would work together effectively;
- Greater *social inclusion* - reflecting different abilities and magnitude of issues in different areas;
- **Reconciliation of hyper-local and strategic concerns** - ensuring that Plans (all statutory plans) meet the needs of very local and wider populations;
- Enhanced community control and Neighbourhood Plan '**authority**'.

Such markers act to provide guides for policy design and assessment of feedback. For us these types of normative themes can then be used to shape research and policy iteration. More generally it is useful to think about the experience of NP from the perspective of all those involved and affected i.e. Local Authorities, developers, consultants and NP areas who have either not taken it up, or have abandoned NP.

We also provide a commentary towards the end of the report, on how NP has performed and the types of iteration that could be considered or used as points for further discussion and research.

## 2. Main themes of the User Experience research (2014)

### i. Introduction

This research was the first national study on NP looking at the way the policy had been used. The work involved 120 NP communities in a telephone survey and a series of themed focus groups<sup>2</sup>. The work looked at all stages of the NP process but given the timing, less emphasis was possible on the latter stages of Neighbourhood Plan production and little or no coverage of implementation was possible.

### ii. Main points

Participants overall viewed Neighbourhood Planning as an initiative with merit and further potential, although not without challenges and difficulties. The majority of respondents perceived the process as **burdensome**, but many also saw it as necessarily hard given the Plan was to have statutory status. This did also mean that ultimately the process would need to prove worthwhile - otherwise drop out would most likely be high and as such the long term sustainability of the policy would be in jeopardy.

The research suggested that, in principle, Neighbourhood Planning can be undertaken by most communities **if effectively supported**, and in particular if the relevant **local authority is supportive**. These are important caveats however.

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

- a greater understanding of the effort required, and the scope of neighbourhood planning, at the beginning of the process would be useful - so this could be prepared for and resources assembled;
- local authorities could be more proactive in encouraging neighbourhood planning in their area;
- the production of toolkits and appropriate guidance would be helpful.

**In terms of general Improvements** a better explanation of the process was viewed as helpful, with more face-to-face advice assisting in this respect. Overall the feeling was that the benefits were emphasised but the burdens were not clear.

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<sup>2</sup> See also the academic paper which derives from this work: Parker, G., Lynn, T. and Wargent, M. (2015) 'Sticking to the Script? The co-production of neighbourhood planning in England' *Town Planning Review*, Vol. 86(5): 519-36. Note: The research was funded by DCLG (now MHCLG) through the *Supporting Communities* funding programme administered by Locality.

When exploring the **time taken** to progress a Plan<sup>3</sup> the debate hinged on a need to proceed with due diligence in what could be both complicated and reliant on volunteers. There were some ideas concerning delays that related to LPA responses and the time taken to organise examinations and referenda.

The research explored issues and experience at each stage. Suggestions for changes at the **key stages** of Neighbourhood Planning can be summarised as follows:

- *Area designation* - delay from the local authority was seen as holding up the process for a minority of the sample. There was also a plea made to clarify guidance on how to implement area designation more smoothly.
- *Evidence gathering* - for some, delays or problems with assembling evidence for the Neighbourhood Plan was seen as relating to a general lack of resources, time and volunteers. Several interviewees indicated that some evidence was not available. Toolkits and templates were cited as ideas to help with this stage.
- *Plan-writing* - respondents asked for improved guidance on writing plans and there was a widely held view that there should be proformas or templates available. Additionally, there was a wish to have more clarity on what supporting documents were required. Other suggestions included having a proforma for a neighbourhood development plan available at the beginning of the process and having access to standard policies.
- *Community engagement, consultation and publicity* - this was seen as unproblematic for most groups but it was noted that little advice or guidance on community engagement was available. Further advice and guidance on this dimension of neighbourhood planning was recognised as being useful. A wider point relates to questions of evidence and inclusiveness - an issue of respondents not necessarily knowing if they had been flawed or partial in their engagement efforts.
- *Examination stage* - clarification of timescales and the obligations of the local authority to respond, alongside the production of simplified guidance on the examination stage. Suggestions included introducing the opportunity for the examiner to discuss their thinking directly with neighbourhood planning groups.
- *Neighbourhood Referendum* - the main issue identified for this stage was highlighted by some focus group participants and this related to clarification on publicity and campaigning in support of a neighbourhood plan in the run up to the referendum. This aspect of NP is picked later in reflecting on the 2016 and 2018 work.

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<sup>3</sup> Subsequent work by two of the UoR research team has shown that the average time to reach referendum (for those completing) was 27 months but this clearly underplays the time taken for some. See: Parker, G. and Salter, K. (2017) 'Taking Stock of Neighbourhood Planning in England 2011-2016', *Planning Practice & Research*, Vol. 32(4): 478-490.

**Capacity and skills of those producing Neighbourhood Plans** - the large majority of the respondents claimed they had been able to access the skills and knowledge needed for Neighbourhood Planning. There appeared to be a wide range of skills and knowledge that could be drawn upon from within the community, but importantly partners are also seen as having a key role given the range of skills needed to produce a Neighbourhood Plan. It would appear that lack of skills introduced delay rather than totally impeding the progress of Plans. It is notable that subsequent work has called into question the optimism of the early adopters in terms of the required levels of planning skills and knowledge and associated research skills.

It was stated, in both the interviews and the focus groups, that **local planning authority** input and attitude made a significant difference to neighbourhood planning progress. Overall perceptions of support by the local authority to communities participating in Neighbourhood Planning were positive, with most respondents stating that their authority had been 'very' or at least 'somewhat' supportive. Numerous examples were cited where local authorities had enabled good progress but in other cases, whether deliberately or not, they had slowed down or frustrated Neighbourhood Plan progress.

Respondents indicated that **more focused advice and support from local authorities** would be welcomed. There was also a perception that training for officers and councillors about Neighbourhood Planning could be enhanced. It was perceived that support and understanding amongst local authorities varied, and a mix of reasons were offered by participants for this. Further work to explore attitudes, capacity and behaviours amongst local authorities may be a useful supplement to this research.

The development of more structured partnerships and agreed demarcation of roles and actions should be considered. Establishing a **memorandum of understanding**, or protocols, to outline the commitment, responsibility, and mutual roles between the local authority and the neighbourhood planning group (the Qualifying Body) would also help to clarify expectations. In addition, the appointment of dedicated liaison staff appears to be one option that could assist with this dimension of neighbourhood planning. Some argued that there should be clearer guidance and more clarity and specification about what to expect from local authorities under the duty to support. This aspect was picked up by DCLG and support organisations in 2014 although more work on this could focus on the details - as exemplified by the generic approach now required under the Neighbourhood Planning Act where Statement of Community Involvement's need to specify support to some degree. Also, groups in 2018 argued that, while MoUs were a good idea, standard MoUs were unlikely to be enough to ensure appropriate context specific support arrangements and manage mutual expectations.



The role of **specialist input and consultants** was identified as important. Particular importance was placed on face-to-face support. This was preferred by most neighbourhood planning areas, 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. Later work has shown a mixed picture of the quality and effectiveness of such inputs.

Many interviewees, and focus group participants, stated that guidance on neighbourhood planning needs improvement through improved **guidance, tools and templates** - both by consolidation of existing material and in making it more specific. Feedback from the focus groups in particular, suggested that some existing guidance was confusing or that it was often difficult for qualifying bodies to apply the existing guidance to their specific circumstances. There was considerable support for more templates, and comprehensive toolkits were seen as a means to overcome uncertainty across all stages. It was felt that these should provide a greater level of clarity and certainty for Qualifying Bodies to help them progress.

The lack of face to face support and tailored support remain an issue for some - as discussed later in sections 4 and 5. The clear message from those involved in the research, however, was that more attention to topics such as community engagement were desired, as well as technical aspects, such as writing planning policies and Strategic Environmental Assessment. Specific ideas included improved *project planning* to assist groups to organise, reflect on needs and create a realistic schedule. This could be conditional on the release of support funding. The production of *indicative templates* for neighbourhood planning tasks and stages should be considered; including model policies, but that such templates or proformas should not constrain neighbourhood planning groups (in common with the sentiment expressed about guidance not being overly prescriptive).

Since 2014 a lot of work has gone into to enhancing this aspect of NP through Planning Aid and Locality and subsequent contractors working for DCLG (now MHCLG). A review of how these tools have helped could be useful. A focussed set of activities with NP completers to look closely at these may be of benefit.

There appeared to be little advice and knowledge exchange on issues arising post-referendum stage. This included information about other resources, approaches and vehicles to assist neighbourhoods to realise their ambitions as expressed in their neighbourhood plan. The further development of thinking on the **implementation** of a neighbourhood plan, and the next steps for neighbourhoods, was needed.

### C. Reflection

We have added some points of extra commentary and update above. It was apparent that the overall message from the majority of groups in 2014 was that, from their experiences, Neighbourhood Planning was proceeding well. The use of key local

individuals and teams, as well as funding to support the activity appeared, on the whole, to act to enable urban, rural and more or less deprived neighbourhoods to embark on Neighbourhood Planning. However the 2014 work focussed on those who *had* progressed and not enough is yet known about the inertias, barriers or reasons for abandoning or rejecting NP as an option. Given significant numbers reach the final stages or complete the Plan to 'Made' status a fuller appreciation of how communities 'encounter' NP would be useful. This in part prompted both the 2016 '*NP users revisited*' and the 2018 '*NP HIVE*' work - as summarised below where latter stages and Plan implementation featured in the deliberations.

As we explain in the final section there are still significant knowledge gaps which need to be addressed in order to aid successful policy iteration or reform.

### 3. Main Themes of the NP Users Revisited study (2016)

#### A. Introduction

This research went back to a subset of the original 2014 respondents to revisit and update their experience, as well as interviewing local authorities active in support of NP. Many similar themes came out and were consolidated - including the heavy use of consultants and the critical role of the LPAs. Here a summary and reflection against the 2014 research is presented before a summary of the 2018 work is set out in section 4.

#### B. Key findings

Numerous issues and ongoing burdens were apparent. Respondents provided several suggestions on how perceived burdens could be eased including 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;
- support on plan writing and technical documents was important (i.e. Sustainability Appraisals and Strategic Environmental Assessments);
- participants desired a strong message of support from DCLG over the longevity of neighbourhood plans - specifically clarity was sought over NPs' status 'post-adoption' including 5-year housing land supply (or similar).

More generally, and as in 2014, respondents indicated that more focused **advice and support** from LPAs would be welcomed. There was also a perception that training for officers and councillors about Neighbourhood Planning could be enhanced - including the introduction (or extension) of dedicated support. As in 2014, respondents noted the wide range of **skills and knowledge** present in their communities. The most commonly cited inhibitors to the process were:

- **lack of support;**
- **lack of financial resources;**
- **lack of capacity.**

As we emphasise in section 4 new issues have also come to the fore. Many respondents in the 2014 work stated that Neighbourhood Planning guidance required improving through consolidation and more specificity. At that time, some existing guidance (i.e. advice on websites, or through other sources) 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, a majority of respondents indicated that **checklists, toolkits and templates** introduced after the 2014 report had helped. 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. A realisation of the need for contextual interpretation and bespoke fashioning for each NP area was however recognised in 2018.

In the 2014 study, the **role of consultants** was identified as important in many cases. In 2016, 75% of respondents had used consultant support (strikingly similar to the 2014 levels). A significant majority of those that used planning consultant indicated that they could not have completed the process without such outside help. Of particular importance to communities was the face-to-face support provided, particularly during Plan writing stages and beyond.

The **Local Planning Authority Role** was seen as critical (as in 2014) Neighbourhood Planning could be undertaken by most communities if effectively supported, and in particular if the relevant LPA were supportive. 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 supportive, with a significant number indicating that they could not have completed their Plan without their support. A significant minority (almost a quarter) felt they received 'no support' or the LPA had been 'obstructive' - this was felt to be very damaging by participants who cited slow decision making, failure to provide detailed guidance, and lack of dedicated resources as core issues.

It is possible that **lack of support** from LPAs may be influencing take-up elsewhere and this should be explored further. The 'Duty to Support' brought mixed responses from interviewees. There was general agreement 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 Duty to Support 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. As we mention below, there are now other reasons to strengthen this Duty.

A significant minority of community participants 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. Indeed the research team at Reading followed-up on this by looking in some detail at NP examinations<sup>4</sup>.

The 2018 work in this area did highlight how the uneven support of LPAs could be attributed in some instances to a wish to delay NP activity until new Local Plans had been completed. Work on how and whether to orchestrate and possibly synchronise NP activity with local plans becomes a useful area for reflection.

### C. Suggestions

Suggestions for changes at the **key stages** of neighbourhood planning found in 2016 (picking up from 2014) can be summarised as follows:

- i. **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. Issues arose where local identities did not match existing Parish or ward boundaries although both community and LPA respondents largely felt these were local issues rather than regulatory ones.
- ii. **Evidence gathering** - assembling evidence was seen as largely unproblematic for participants, although some respondents noted the need for specialist inputs concerning Sustainability Appraisals and the levels of evidence required more generally. As such 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 stage. As discussed in section 4 issues of quality of evidence has emerged as have questions of plan quality in the face or challenge (notably Judicial Review) and at the examination stage<sup>5</sup>.
- iii. In 2014 respondents asked for improved guidance on **writing policies** 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, advice on reviewing Made NPs and consultant input were all seen as useful in the process. However, as the 2018 work identified there are ongoing issues here and associated dangers of boiler plate approaches or selective borrowing of policy from other Plans.

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<sup>4</sup> See Parker, G., Salter, K. and Hickman, H. (2016) 'Caution: examinations in progress' *Town and Country Planning*, Vol. 85(12): 516-522 and Parker, G., Salter, K and Hickman, H. (2017) Briefing Note: Neighbourhood Planning Examinations.

<sup>5</sup> The large majority of Plans have been modified at examination, see; Parker, G. and Salter, K. (2017) 'Taking Stock of Neighbourhood Planning in England 2011-2016', *Planning Practice & Research*, Vol. 32(4): 478-490.

- iv. **Community engagement:** As in 2014, community engagement was regarded as largely unproblematic for participants in 2016. A number of participants saw community engagement as a major source of strength for their Plan, whilst ‘piggybacking’ on previous and ongoing engagement work remained 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.
- v. In 2014, clarification of timescales and obligations of the LPA to respond (and tweaked under the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017), 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 policy ‘rescripting’. The recruiting of examiners was viewed as quite straightforward.
- vi. The main issue identified during the **referendum stage** in the 2014 work 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.

#### D. Reflection

The overall conclusions of the 2014 research were largely confirmed in 2016 through the revisit work - with Neighbourhood Planning continuing to be successfully undertaken by a range of communities. Subsequent research has shown, however, that some areas have experienced much weaker or slower take-up. Groups still viewed the process as complex and burdensome, involving technical planning knowledge that many communities have to acquire externally. Support from Local Planning Authorities (and to a lesser extent private planning consultants) continues to be the overriding variable affecting the speed and success of NPs. Some moves to address this have been made 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. Indeed new or now more apparent sources of delay and frustration have been identified in the 2018 research.

As before, communities seek assurances over the future of Neighbourhood Plans whilst clear and definitive guidance remains a priority. The impact of change has come through in the 2018 work and the way that some LPAs have been advising NP groups to wait for local plans to be in place has become more recognised.

## 4. Main themes of the 2018 NP HIVE research

### A. Introduction

This work (the HIVE research) stems from the 2014 and 2016 studies and a user questionnaire survey conducted in late Spring 2018. The work also draws on a novel user event held in June 2018; where key themes were explored with participants after the wider questionnaire. This activity together provided both general coverage which overlapped with earlier work but also delivered the equivalent of 20 focus groups in qualitative data about the experience of Neighbourhood Planning (NP) across the topics of:

- Advice and Support for NP;
- Role of LPAs in NP;
- Evidence in NP; and
- Implementation of the Plans.

### B. Main points

Overall much of the findings of the HIVE appear to reinforce prior research conducted by the Reading team(s). However there were some new iterations or continuing trends that stand out and appear worthy of highlighting. In particular **uneven support** from local authorities, the impacts of **external change** and an apparent lack of understanding of actions at **implementation stages** or when and how to review or refresh a NDP. Given that more Plans have reached latter stages of NP, or have got to 'Made' status, it appeared that a more reflective and self-critical perspective was emerging - and recognition of a need to be more robust and to support the NP with clear defensible **evidence** was recognised.

The key points of the HIVE research can be distilled into five themes:

#### i. 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. The types of changes related to both national policy, legal decisions (e.g. JR outcomes), local plans and to LPA staffing.

#### ii. Role and understanding of evidence

There were real concerns and associated sets of questions regarding the sources, quality, and status of evidence. This is a key area of challenge at neighbourhood plan

examinations and in some instances Judicial Review. Such issues are significant as unless they can be satisfactorily resolved they will undermine the stability of NP in the long term.

### **iii. Efficiency - in advice, resources and support**

An ongoing issue has been the sources, quality, accessibility and authoritativeness of advice and support. The advent of the NPPG should have assisted in terms of formal guidance and the 'rules', but the practicalities and regulatory requirements have needed careful attention and help with interpretation and application to individual cases. Many NP steering groups actually need more bespoke input and this is why so many turn to consultants. Something like 80% of NP groups have used consultants - a figure that has stayed pretty stable throughout (75% in 2016).

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.

### **iv. Implementation and need to revise NPs**

Issues of communications and of deploying NP policy effectively are apparent. The need to review / amend Plans, and the process to be followed, needs to be communicated better. This may also have a direct impact on governance arrangements (i.e. the role of Steering Group versus the Qualifying Body) and there is a need for post-Made Plan communications between LPAs and Qualifying Bodies.

Some NP groups were concerned that the Plan may not be used by the LPA and that the community would not champion effectively on a month by month basis. There was considered to be a 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.

### **v. 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 aid towards them "knowing what they don't know" - or at least raising awareness of such matters.

## **C. Reflection**

The 2018 work saw an emphasis on concerns about 'what happens next' (i.e. after the Plan is 'Made') and the way the development industry has undermined some Plans. There was a lack of confidence about the robustness of Plans and the basis (i.e. evidence and scope) and need to refresh or renew a NP for numerous reasons (i.e. presence of a new local plan, undermined NP policy, passage of time and events).



This throws open a number of related issues. Some of which were present in the prior research or have been discussed in the academic literature. The key themes were quality and timeliness of support from LPAs (and consultants), policy writing, evidence base and impact of new policy locally and nationally. There were also ongoing issues with variable knowledge, capacity and support from LPAs and as such this latter aspect appears to need some quite substantial reflection including the relationship to local plans and their use in practice of NPs.

We reflect on this further in section five.

## 5. Key points arising

The 2014, 2016 and HIVE research highlights a number of questions which still need to be addressed or discussed fully. First we consider the findings over the three studies against the criteria set out in section 1. We then set out some possible actions - these are intended for discussion purposes.

### A. Assessing Neighbourhood Planning as progressive policy

We can usefully reflect on the criteria explained in the introduction to assess the state of play and how such criteria could be refined into clearer measurables for policymakers and funders:

- Improved *quality* of neighbourhood plans (and ensuring ‘value added’);
  - Need for the Plan (or relative need across England),
  - Added value of NP policies,
  - Impact on outcomes i.e. better, more appropriate development to context, innovation.
- More *equitable plan-making* - inclusivity, awareness and accessibility of NP;
  - Participation levels,
  - Openness and transparency
  - Representation of neighbourhood.
- Deeper *co-production* - ensuring that the necessary partners work together effectively;
  - Role of the LPA and issues relating to support and communications,
  - Role and value of the consultants - including questions over quality of knowledge and specificity of advice,
  - Tools to broker co-production (e.g. MoUs).
- Greater *social inclusion* - reflecting different abilities and magnitude of issues in different areas;
  - The recognition of particular needs,
  - Prioritisation of actions and policies,
  - Further tailoring of resourcing and support arrangements.
- *Reconciliation of hyper-local and strategic concerns* - ensuring that Plans (all statutory plans) meet the needs of very local and wider populations;
  - Relationship to higher level policy and evidence,
  - Opportunities to scale-up issues, ideas and policies from NPs into local plans,

- Use of the NP by LPAs in decision making and iterations of policy locally ('loop learning' effects).
- Enhanced community control and neighbourhood plan '**authority**'
  - Fixing of NP policy as material in a context of multiple changes,
  - Improve the clarity / threshold for quality so that communities gain more control by dint of 'earned autonomy',
  - The use and impact of NP in practice is one means of assessing this.

## B. Possible actions

There are several matters of increasing importance as well as topics that reflect continuities in NP. Clearly it is *possible* to complete an NP but there are questions over **burdens** (to all parties) and **support** arrangements, **value-added** of NPs, and **implementation** of Plans. While there was strong take-up of NP in early years the levels of take-up have slowed and the number of Plans that have been completed has been lower than might have been expected. Take-up levels, the **types of areas** taking up NP and a focus on areas where NP might add value could be explored further - especially now that the pattern of take-up is discernible and it highlights reticence or inertia that may actually correspond to where most benefit might be derived from NP (i.e. Urban and deprived neighbourhoods, areas where development pressure is high or where more focussed economic development is needed). The establishment of better criteria for need and indicatively tasking NP may assist here.

A number of reforms have been made to the planning system since the introduction of Neighbourhood Planning many of which have threatened to unsettle NP or to cause confusion - despite intentions to clarify or improve. **Changes** to national policy, national or local methodologies for evidence and needs assessment, and legal judgements may have acted to slow down or deter some NP groups, or have rendered their efforts out of date or undermined. Furthermore, at a local level many NPs are being prepared in an evolving planning policy context as LPAs seek to ensure they have an up-to-date local plan and housing land supply. Much of this has been conceivably unavoidable but equally it may have been better anticipated, communicated and prepared for.

Despite claims to the contrary in the 2014 work it has become clearer that careful attention must be paid to community engagement and a robust evidence base. These form the basis of the NP and also link to new issues in relation to the **Implementation** stages and possible challenges in **reviewing and updating the NP**. We think the position of NP as a *research activity* needs clearer recognition and there is a need to improve understandings of evidence (type, quality, methods, robustness) and as such some attention to **research training** may be worth consideration.

Advice on implementation, active engagement with Development Management and the relationship to local plans generally appears uneven and preparation for how to

ensure the NP is used when planning applications are determined and local plans are reviewed is important.

In terms of key topic areas we can summarise a number of issues and actions:

1. **Stability** of the environment for NP groups (as volunteers it is apparent that the unstable policy and legal environment is acting to slow, discourage and undermine Neighbourhood Plans) and, thus;
2. **Changes** - numerous forms of change are impacting on NP. There are issues here about how to insulate against, proof or anticipate such change. Some of these could be managed or at least communicated more clearly for the benefit of communities, these changes include;
  - a. National Policy and regulation,
  - b. Local Plans,
  - c. Legal precedents,
  - d. Staffing in LPAs.
3. **Longevity** of NP - and need for review / amendment (by volunteer effort);
  - a. When to do this,
  - b. What degree of effort is required
  - c. Appetite and support to review NPs (both within groups and the LPA)
4. **Local Authority role** and the **offer from LPAs** and the difficulties of an undefined / loosely defined Duty to Support;
  - a. Duty to Support (and MoUs) - certainty and clarity over what and when,
  - b. Need for **high quality support** and peer learning,
  - c. Face to Face support.
5. Overall **value of NPs** in different circumstances and their use in practice i.e. post referendum/ 'Made' status. This speaks to a clearer messaging of NP as part of a planning system that requires ongoing maintenance - i.e. monitoring, review, amendment and periodic renewal of Plans and attendant policies.

### C. Research priorities

This points to several strands of research that need attention:

1. Overall to look at **support** requirements again - although a well-worn issue there are still questions about levels of understanding and quality of support;
  - a. Responses and issues in Local Authority support,
  - b. Responses and issues in consultancy support,
  - c. Development of a deeper understanding of the most effective roles, relations and divisions of labour between the main actors involved (e.g. Neighbourhood Planning steering groups, local authorities, central

- government, consultants and others) and to discern how such divisions were shaped,
- d. Newer or more specific issues relate to methods and research skills for NP communities - that appear pre-requisite for good planning.
2. The **take-up** of Neighbourhood Planning:
- a. What alternative tools are being used to engage communities and to plan locally where NDPs are not being taken up? And to what effect?
  - b. A focus on those who *have not* progressed with Neighbourhood Planning to understand the inertias, barriers or reasons for abandoning or rejecting NP as an option;
  - c. Better understanding of appetite and ongoing commitment to NP by volunteers.
3. **Implementation** phase work to look at:
- a. Use and monitoring in Development Management decisions - what impact or added value is achieved;
  - b. Ability, and appetite, to refresh or review the Plan;
  - c. The 'added value' / net additionality of Neighbourhood Planning i.e. beyond the local plan - this could include a review of the content of Neighbourhood Plans to reflect on the ambition / scope of the Plans and to explore the rationale for inclusion or exclusion of topics or policies;
  - d. Relationship of NDPs to local plans - and questions of how an LPA and NP group may slow down or otherwise respond to structuring factors such as an absent / emerging local plan. This could include a focus on the challenges of integrating plans vertically and horizontally and the two-way exchange of knowledge between scales and places.
4. Consideration of whether new iterations of activity in NP could be more formally **linked to local planning / local plan production**- either as part of the process or springing from a local plan to add value post local plan adoption.

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## 6. Annex - selected UoR NP research outputs

Note: A new book written by three of the research team involved here, is due out shortly (Winter, 2018). This aims to intermediate between neighbourhoods undertaking or considering Neighbourhood Planning and others involved in NP. The book is written to provide a critically supportive stance and highlights issues and things that communities can do to ease the NP process:

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

- Parker, G. (2012) 'Neighbourhood Planning: precursors, lessons and prospects'. *Journal of Planning & Environment Law*, 40: OP#139: pp.21
- Parker, G. (2014) 'Engaging neighbourhoods: experiences of transactive planning with communities in England', in Gallent, N. and Ciaffi, D. (eds.) *Community action and planning: contexts, drivers and outcomes*. Policy Press, Bristol.
- Parker, G. (2017) 'The uneven geographies of neighbourhood planning in England', in Brownill, S. and Bradley, Q. (eds.) *Localism and Neighbourhood Planning: power to the people?* Policy Press, Bristol.
- Parker, G., Lynn, T. and Wargent, M. (2017) 'Contestation and conservatism in neighbourhood planning in England. Reconciling agonism and collaboration?', *Planning Theory and Practice*, 18(3): 446-465.
- Parker, G., Lynn, T. and Wargent, M. (2015) 'Sticking to the script? The co-production of Neighbourhood Planning in England', *Town Planning Review*, 86(5): 519-536.
- Parker, G. and Murray, C. (2012) 'Beyond tokenism? Community-led planning and rational choices: findings from participants in local agenda-setting at the neighbourhood scale in England', *Town Planning Review*, 83(1): 1-28.
- Parker, G. and Salter, K. (2017) 'Taking stock of neighbourhood planning in England 2011-2016'. *Planning Practice and Research*. Vol. 32(4): 478-490.
- Parker, G. and Salter, K. (2016) 'Five years of neighbourhood planning - a review of take-up and distribution', *Town & Country Planning*, 85(5): 181-188.
- Parker, G., Salter, K. and Dobson, M. (2018) *NP HIVE report*. June 2018 Available online at [www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning](http://www.reading.ac.uk/neighbourhoodplanning)
- Parker, G., Salter, K. and Hickman, H. (2017) *UoR Briefing Note: Neighbourhood Planning Examinations*. Available online: at <http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/NP-Examination-briefing-note-UoR-18-April-2017.pdf>
- Parker, G., Salter, K. and Hickman, H. (2016) 'Caution: examinations in progress - the operation of neighbourhood plan examinations in England', *Town and Country Planning*, 85(12): 516-522.

*Parker et al - NP research*

- Parker, G. and Street, E. (2015) 'Planning at the neighbourhood scale: localism, dialogic politics and the modulation of community action', *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 33(4): 794-810.
- Parker, G., Lynn, T. and Wargent, M. (2014) *User experience of neighbourhood planning in England*. Report. Locality, London.
- Wargent, M. and Parker, G. (2018) 'Re-imagining Neighbourhood Governance: the future of neighbourhood planning England', *Town Planning Review*, 89: 379-402.

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