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# ***London governance and the politics of neighbourhood planning: a case for investigation***

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Localism Act 2011 has successfully devolved planning powers to over 2500 English communities, involving 14 million people, with over 750 'made' neighbourhood plans legitimised by referendum. In London however there are less than one tenth of the made plans than in the rest of England. Institutional resistance and policy choices may be implicated. Two comprehensive studies of neighbourhood planning in England are reviewed, which both highlight the disadvantages citizen-planners suffer in cities, compared to county areas with parish councils. The extent of support (a statutory obligation) of the local planning authority is found to be a crucial factor in determining progress, and evidence is found of some London boroughs covertly impeding local groups. Theorisation is considered by reference to a range of academic studies of localism and neighbourhood planning in addition to the two key reports. Issues about social deprivation and unequal access are recurrent with political implications which may help explain opposition to neighbourhood planning. Theoretical distinctions made between 'representative' and 'community' forms of localism, and objections to 'anti-political' effects are noted. There has been remarkably little research into London borough governance generally, and into neighbourhood planning in particular. Based upon evidence of widely varying and arguably perverse governance practice, a study of localism in the capital is called for.

**KEYWORDS:** neighbourhood planning, localism, London, governance, devolution

## **INTRODUCTION**

'Double devolution' is a term coined by David Milliband, which neatly denoted a reform of the tiers of governance to empower local communities; 'I call it "double devolution" - not just devolution that takes power from central government and gives it to local government, but power that goes from local government down to local people, providing a critical role for individuals and neighbourhoods' (Milliband 2006). This ideal was widely welcomed at the time, but despite the 2011 Localism Act, evidence suggests that the second stage, of power to the people, is faltering and that local government may be the impediment in some places. The Localism Act 2011 (with all-party support) provides for a raft of public rights, with neighbourhood planning as the leading edge provision of devolution to local communities. There are two well-resourced, empirical reviews of how the 2011 localism legislation has been implemented in England. The first, called the 'User Experience' report, by Parker et al (2014), investigated actively engaged communities. In reviewing neighbourhood

planning in practice, it was intended to draw lessons so as to guide government policy and inform further legislation, which the 'User Experience' report successfully did. The second report, 'People Power', produced by an expert commission, chaired by Lord Kerslake, also focussed on the practice of neighbourhood planning in England (Locality 2018). This was on a smaller scale and was undoubtedly predisposed towards communities taking up this third tier of devolved planning powers. A third-sector body called 'Locality' funded both reports. Locality is sponsored by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and is charged with supporting local groups taking up rights under the Localism Act. The reports found, in common, positive experiences but uneven take-up of planning powers, with issues about the inclusivity and legitimacy of local groups. Both reports emphasised that the local council is a crucial determining factor in the successful achievement of neighbourhood planning by; in rural areas a parish council or in urban areas a 'designated' neighbourhood forum. There may be a direct relationship between the degree of local government support and the extent of take-up of neighbourhood planning, with both reports detecting obstruction by some councils and the existence of stalled groups.

Neither report focussed on London nor identified it as atypical, but the capital city is however patently anomalous. From the evidence, there appears to be a substantial devolution deficit, with a lower volume of neighbourhood planning activity. The number of 'made' plans is ten times higher in England as a whole, than in London. This is based upon data indicating 11 made neighbourhood plans in London (Neighbourhood Planners, London 2018), and national data indicating over 700 made plans in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2018) and calculated from Office for National Statistics regional population figures for 2016 (Office for National Statistics 2018). There is an obvious question about the role of London's governance in this retarded performance. It is questionable whether the 2011 model of devolved local planning is actually sustainable in the capital, with nil activity in some boroughs. In what follows, a theoretical context is supplied, and explanation is sought, from a review of research into neighbourhood planning, mainly conducted by academic urban planners and geographers. Such evidence as is available in London is reviewed with a primary focus on governance and the conduct of the borough councils. Non-governance explanations of the London anomaly include the socio-economic and demographic demand side and whether Londoners actually have an appetite for do-it-yourself town planning. "Yes we do", does appear to be the answer, but the state of the art in London localism is poorly researched. By reviewing the two major reports and some of the theorisation, a contextual national synopsis emerges. There are frequently occurring objections to neighbourhood planning, made on pragmatic and on ideological grounds. Such objections may be informing the London policy community and also the professional and political disposition of London local government as an institution. Enquiry is called for into the inhibition of community-based planning apparently extant in London's governance.

## NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING IN ENGLAND: THE USER EXPERIENCE REPORT (2014) AND FOLLOW-UP (2017)

Research for the comprehensive User Experience report was conducted three years prior to the Locality Commission study and remains the largest source of primary data (Parker et al 2014). The neighbourhood planning provisions, by far the most important and politically significant part of the 2011 Act, are the focus of this definitive progress check and analysis. A follow-up review was carried out in 2016 (Parker and Wargent 2017). The User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning in England study was sponsored by Locality on behalf of the government and employed a telephone survey of 120 local planning groups together with six focus groups. Out of 737 active planning groups, 120 were sampled for the survey. At the time, London was the second biggest region by population (an estimated 8.8 million) but encompassed fewer planning groups than the other nine regions except the North East (with a population of only 2.6 million) (Westminster 2017). London had less than one fifth of the groups, in proportion to population, as the South East (with the highest absolute number of groups). The data was 'informally gathered' (Parker et al 2014 p.10) and neither participation rates by population nor the distinct lack of progress in London are definitively quantified. This London anomaly, of low take-up, or 'devolution deficit', was not acknowledged. The User Experience study employed 100 items in the telephone survey which supplied a rich source of data including comparison of local authority support with progress made in planning. Six focus groups were also convened by the 2014 User survey. One of these, called the 'stalled area' group, comprised community groups which were initially interested, but did not embark upon, or progress, the planning process. This is particularly interesting, and these few groups were identified from their enquiries made for professional advice from Planning Aid or Locality. There may be a national cohort of hidden stalled groups, in which the London component is likely to be disproportionately numerous. A key issue is that in much of rural England there are pre-existing parish councils, whereas in London and other cities communities have initially to define themselves, with an agreed boundary, and gain designation from the borough council as suitable bodies. When designated they are titled as 'neighbourhood forums'. Sturzaker et al (2019) discern this rural / urban difference and note the significant role of the local authority. The government anticipated that neighbourhood forums would encounter more difficulties than parish councils, and this was ameliorated by the supply of a higher level of grant assistance. While London is lagging way behind in any case, the typical difference in progress between parish councils and neighbourhood forums nationally has not been quantified. Research access to non-starter or stalled groups in London would be needed to investigate the full reasons, but to date an unknown number of community groups in the capital are stalled and effectively remain voiceless.

The 120 groups surveyed by telephone in the User Experience study were definitively successful groups. They were asked: how the process had gone, stage

by stage; what advice had been used; the effect on community relations; and so on. As an example of what was found, 86% of parishes and 71% of forums reported that formal consultation had gone 'well' (Parker et al 2014 p.40). The focus group responses were summarised so as to supply a qualitative assessment from each type of area; 'urban disadvantaged', 'growth' and so on. Common themes emerged. Peoples' aspiration for a neighbourhood plan, was attributed to its statutory status, and its scope for control over the; 'type, design and location of development in their neighbourhood'. A frequent desire was expressed for better local authority attitudes and behaviours, with, 'a more organised and clear set of obligations around the duty to support' (Parker et al 2014 p.64). The urban areas focus group (which presumably included some London groups) found consensus that, 'Local Authority support, both in tangible forms but also in terms of attitude was critical' (Parker et al 2014 p.92). There were only three groups in the 'stalled groups' focus group, but it is perhaps surprising that there were any at all. Generally, local authorities were seen as, 'not ready to actively support neighbourhood planning' (Parker et al 2014 p.107). These three may represent the tip of an iceberg. The report notes that overall the evidence suggests; 'Neighbourhood planning can be undertaken by most communities if effectively supported, and in particular if the relevant local authority is supportive' (Parker et al 2014 p.75). Additionally, although the community initiates neighbourhood planning, 'in practice successful neighbourhood planning is co-produced' (Parker et al 2014 p.76). The follow-up study conducted in 2016 carried out 36 telephone interviews with groups which had advanced through the process. Half of these now had a 'made' (passed the local referendum) plan with statutory force (Parker and Wargent 2017). Although 92% of the groups indicated that the process was more burdensome than expected, 82% would recommend other communities to develop a local plan. Suggestions are advanced in the report for changes at each stage of the planning process, for example more use of consultants and templates for actual plan writing. On the critical issue of local authority support, 78% of groups reported that the authority had been somewhat or very supportive, but 11% indicated they had received no support and another 11% (four groups) felt their authority had been obstructive. These negative experiences were ascribed to, 'slow decision making, failure to provide detailed guidance, or lack of dedicated resources'. The report acknowledged that this 'may be influencing take-up elsewhere and should be explored further' (Parker and Wargent 2017 p.5). The original finding, that the local authorities' statutory 'duty to support' should be clarified, was endorsed by 89% of the groups. In conclusion, the report suggests that this council support 'continues to be the overriding variable in the speed and success of neighbourhood plans' (Parker and Wargent 2017 p.6). Later follow-up analysis of the User Experience survey and other research has noted the absence of explicit criteria for success. An agenda for improving policy and practice for neighbourhood planning, 're-imagined' has been produced, which suggests better 'co-production' by the community with the local council (Wargent and Parker 2018).

## AN APPRAISAL OF NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING AND A CALL FOR ACTION: THE LOCALITY COMMISSION (2018)

Six years after the passage of the 2011 Localism Act, a comprehensive review was thought timely by Locality into the practicalities and take-up of the statutory community rights on offer. Surprisingly, no direct reference is made in the commission report to the earlier User Experience study. The commission of enquiry into the Future of Localism was conducted in 2017 and reported in February 2018 (Locality 2018). The Localism Act confers planning and land use rights on local communities, which were intended to deliver ‘a fundamental shift of power.... towards local people’ (HM Government 2010 p.11). Concern about limited impact and uneven public engagement soon became commonplace however, expressed in academic literature and also voiced by community activists, politicians and commentators alike; see for example the Mayor of Hackney objecting that the Act, ‘does not challenge the deep-rooted centralisation in the UK’ (Pipe 2013). The then Department for Communities and Local Government later reinforced the 2011 Act with the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 (informed by the User Experience study), but these provisions were more by way of a tidying up; by tightening deadlines for councils, giving more weight to neighbourhood plans, together with some reinforcement of housing requirements. The key question posed by the Locality Commission was how far and with what result had the would-be empowered communities in England taken advantage of the 2011 rights. Importantly these rights are collective, conferred on communities (parish councils or neighbourhood forums), not individuals. The commission, led by Lord Bob Kerslake, former Head of the Civil Service, was independent, although it is reasonable to describe the eight commissioners as enthusiasts, already fully convinced of the benefits of localism. Their inclinations were underpinned by evidence of popular support for greater devolution (Locality 2018a):

Table: Locality Commission on the Future of Localism. YouGov poll of 1,628 adults

	<u>CURRENTLY HAS MOST SAY IN LOCAL AREA</u>	<u>SHOULD HAVE MOST SAY IN THE LOCAL AREA</u>
<u>National Government</u>	<u>25%</u>	<u>3%</u>
<u>Local Government</u>	<u>49%</u>	<u>26%</u>
<u>Local People</u>	<u>3%</u>	<u>57%</u>

So, by way of endorsement of the Act, they state their desire for, ‘power to be pushed down to the local level, unleashing the creativity and expertise of communities’ (Locality 2018 p.5). The legislation was designed to drive a genuinely community-led democratic revival. Insofar as progress in this intended shift of power

is limited, could the Act be deemed a partial failure? The commission finds that the promise of the legislation 'has not been achieved' (Locality 2018 p.4), evaluating that the framework of rights 'stops short of enabling the fundamental shift in power that is needed' (Locality 2018 p.21). Evidence was taken from 22 organisations together with online survey responses. It was found that the most important and best known right, to produce a neighbourhood plan, has seen some success. This is continuing with currently over 2500 communities in England (representing nearly 14 million people) developing their own statutory local plan, with over 700 passed by local referendum (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2018). Neighbourhood planning has nevertheless been inhibited in various ways and there has been little take-up of the other community rights. The Right to Bid, where the community can register an 'Asset of Community Value' (mainly pubs threatened with closure) and raise funds to purchase the building, has seen limited success. The Right to Challenge, and take over a local service, has resulted in 'little or no impact' (Locality 2018 p.31). A variety of obstacles were identified. The issue of community capacity is central. Capacity encompasses technical and professional skills, resources, volunteer time and networks. Neighbourhood planning in particular is dependent upon this social capital. The limited and untargeted national support programme for communities (supplied through the government appointed body, Locality), is noted, in the context of continuing local government austerity (Locality 2018 p.31). Research has frequently highlighted the community capacity issue, identifying inequalities between areas and uneven participation within areas. This has been quantified by Parker and Salter (2017 p.484) who found that 7.5% of planning groups were in the lowest quartile of multiple deprivation (IMD 5) but 25.8% in the top quartile (IMD1). A second issue identified by the commission is the bundle of problems posed by unsympathetic local authorities, 'in too many areas public bodies remain top down and risk averse' (Locality 2018 p.12). Poor access to information and lack of accountability are complained of. The attitude and culture of the local council was found to be crucial and widely varying, from strong official support, to actual obstruction. The commission is insistent on the need to; 'change local government behaviour and practice to enable local initiatives to thrive' (Locality 2018 p.3). The study is underpinned by apposite evidence, supplied by active and committed participants; both citizen volunteers and professional practitioners. Well-founded recommendations arise across the range of localism policies and activities. Findings are supplemented by reference to relevant academic research and authoritative sources. The report is essentially interpretive in its appraisal of the efficacy of the range of community rights. This evidence-based diagnosis leads to four defined domains for strengthening or 'reimagining' localism. These are; an integrated structure of good local governance; suitable resources and powers available to communities; stronger devolved relationships; and the development of community capacity.

Taken overall, the commission supplies a community activists' perspective on localism, which identifies a culpable local government, inhibiting empowerment.

Instrumental outcomes in terms of land use planning are not reviewed. There is no attempt at theorisation, about the governance implications of community-based initiatives, nor about the impact upon the communities which engage. In particular, analysis of agency and social capital are not attempted, although the desirability of building participative democracy is advanced. The main contribution is in resolving complex implementation and policy issues into an evidenced and clear depiction of the state of the art in localism, together with some detailed and pragmatic policy prescriptions. There is criticism of the design of the Act as well as of the government's inconsistent commitment to devolution. In particular it is noted that the 2011 Act, and the Big Society agenda which framed the legislation, were not accompanied by, 'a programme of significant investment for capacity building commensurate with the scale of the challenge' (Locality 2018 p.31). Targeted regeneration initiatives, focussing on areas of multiple deprivations ended in 2010, to be replaced by a universal but permissive provision which leads to greater inequality of participation. The problem was compounded by simultaneous and cumulative reductions in local government funding (Lowndes and Gardner 2016). Even so, the majority of the report's recommendations concern the conduct of local government. Principles for neighbourhood governance are set out to meet the current challenges. Such challenges include, 'lack of new leadership; partisan interests overriding commitment to place; lack of participation; and inability to effectively engage the community' (Locality 2018 p.19). There is a warning that in the absence of genuine collaboration there is a risk of reinforcing disengagement. Recommendations, for strengthening the legislative framework, are set out, such as; a requirement for councils actually to publicise statutory localism rights; making it easier to establish parish councils; and extending the powers of designated neighbourhood forums in cities. The culture of local government however is seen to be crucial. Devolution of council budgets and local procurement are suggested as a means of reinforcing localism. Partnership with community organisations is advocated by, 'co-production' in design and delivery of local services and the creation of, 'non-hierarchical spaces for community debate and decision making' (Locality 2018 p.23). Idealistically, as a counter to excessively partisan politics, it is argued that, 'deliberative, participatory and place-based local democracy can unlock creativity, unity and community energy and harness the skills and tools for citizens to lead change in their local area' (Locality 2018 p.37).

Some weaknesses in the commission's report can be identified. The particular circumstances in London are not referred to even though it is commonly understood that take-up of localism is much slower here than elsewhere. In fact one of three focus group events was held in London. However with a form of recruitment by open invitation, failed or slow groups (arguably characteristic of the London experience) are unlikely to be represented. There is a natural bias in both reports towards participation by the successful groups, often professionally represented. An issue arises here about 'voice' and authenticity, when consultants often speak for the supposedly empowered citizen volunteers. Struggling volunteers, perhaps



numerous in London, are unlikely to have the time or the inclination to attend 'show and tell' events. The commission's emphasis is upon experience in the English counties, and on parish councils, rather than neighbourhood forum experiences in London. Even the parish councils, it is argued, require better support from their higher-tier authorities and some are seen to be ineffective. Without a parish council, an urban community group, wishing to embark on a neighbourhood plan, must self-determine and agree a boundary and then demonstrate it is a fit and proper body. Only thus can it obtain 'designation' from the council as a 'neighbourhood forum', to start the planning process. Parish councils on the other hand are already endowed with: a boundary; professional administration (their clerks); public funding with a bank account and authority to spend (the council tax precept); together with formal status and legitimacy (they are statutory bodies which are normally elected). Any urban group of public-spirited citizens has merely an informal shadow of this resource and authority. They are ill-equipped on their own to devise neighbourhood plan policies, achieve popular support and pass technical examination. Although up to £15,000 in government grant and plenty of advice is available to a neighbourhood forum, full political and bureaucratic support from the local council for such volunteers has been found to be essential. The commission devoted only two short paragraphs specifically to the urban-based neighbourhood forums despite their manifest disadvantages. It is suggested that there is, 'scope for increasing powers which designated forums could take-on around spending and service delivery' (Locality 2018 p.38). But in swathes of London and indeed in whole boroughs, designated neighbourhood forums do not yet exist at all. The report explores concerns about the deficiencies of local government voiced by successful groups, both parish councils and forums. The urban groups face a different order of problem from rural groups and are especially dependent upon their local authority. The report does contain plenty of best practice guidance and good advice about how local authorities might better support localism. This is based upon the experience and evidence from successful planning groups, which have the wherewithal to contribute to the research. The commission is remiss in not seeking out the hidden stories; of the poorly organised, the under-resourced, the frustrated and the otherwise unrepresented. Evidence is emerging to suggest that some London councils have exercised their power and discretion wilfully to obstruct local groups. There is barely a hint of this in the Locality report. It is ironic that the report warns about neighbourhood planning being dominated by, 'those with the loudest voices and those that have the confidence, skills, wealth and time to participate' (Locality 2018 p.16), given that it mainly attended to the successful and vocal groups. Nevertheless, the commissioners and contributors have produced an eloquent defence of localism and a persuasive call to re-invigorate the initiative.

## A CRITIQUE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Theoretical contributions will be reviewed here, initially from the local government perspective, then taking in the useful notions of community and representative forms of localism, and finally considering views of localism from the more to less sceptical. Progress in neighbourhood planning in London is retarded and anomalous, and council policy may be implicated. This may be reflective of the local government perception of localism with neighbourhood planning as the leading edge. Planning was a shrewd choice for radical localism, since the resourcing issues and accountabilities associated with service delivery are avoided. But 'localism' as a term has been employed somewhat generically and often appropriated as a prerogative of local government, rather than as an empowered space available to the community. For example, the Local Government Information Unit, in 'Reviving localism: Three challenges' restricts the notion entirely to powers and funding made available to local government from Whitehall (Walker et al 2013). This could be termed single devolution. As another example, in a paper entitled 'Who is accountable for localism?' five different models of localism, proposed as a heuristic or diagnostic tool, were institutionally-based in local government. The view was advanced that citizen-led collaboration is a possibility, but only included in one model of the five. This latter model is defined as 'polycentric governance'. Otherwise representative local government is dominant throughout the typology (Richardson and Durose 2013). Such definitions of institutionally-led localism are inconsistent with the 2011 Localism Act, ostensibly empowering citizens to exercise rights for themselves. From the local government viewpoint, it is common to find the assumption that agency for localism is confined within institutional boundaries. There is a political tension and a discontinuity between the two ideas; that the initiative for localism is retained by the formal institution of representative government; or that the initiative can be directly seized by a citizenry, entitled by legislation. This blind spot from the local government perspective is well illustrated by a recent study of devolution and local government, which describes localism as a 'myth', and reviews the minor provisions of the 2011 Act without any mention of neighbourhood planning at all (Leach et al 2018). In any case large urban authorities do appear to be disinclined to exploit the double devolution potential of neighbourhood planning. Salter classifies a range of local government responses to neighbourhood planning in the South East, which recognise the reality of double devolution. A minority, employing a 'deflective response', are; 'actively discouraging groups from taking up neighbourhood planning' (Salter 2018 p.346). This response may be more prevalent in urban areas without parish councils. There is now a great deal of research with which to inform local government policy-makers and professionals, ranging from the more generic localism literature to more recent research specifically into neighbourhood planning. Differences in research perspective exist in the localism literature about the contribution and value of neighbourhood planning. There is an obvious distinction between the two empirical and synoptic survey-based reports from Locality and Parker et al, reviewed earlier, and academic research which is theoretically grounded, reviewed below. Some research, more normatively situated, is explicitly sceptical about neighbourhood

planning, most is nuanced, and some literature might be taken as endorsement. Parker's et al User Experience study, already reviewed, is strictly empirical with a pragmatic range of recommendations for improvement in policy and practice. But Parker and his co-authors have also produced a canon of dedicated research and reports, which has incorporated the gamut of critical thinking on localism and neighbourhood planning. Even so, there remains a dearth of *applied* research and grounded theorisation about neighbourhood level planning in UK cities in the context of local governance.

Both the commission and user reports supply a similar and descriptive synthesis, identifying major problems with local government delivery of its 'duty to support'. There is limited explanation. The all-important and problematic relationship is unexplored between the citizen-planner groups and the institution of local government. Theory on governance might suggest that 'designated' neighbourhood forums should be regarded very much as a part of a 'governance network' with shared responsibility and collective action. However, the asymmetry of power and authority, and the dysfunctional relationships sometimes actually found, would support a doubtful view of networked governance. Laffin (2014) endorses this scepticism, noting that hierarchy and centralism remain pervasive. Some helpful conceptual clarification is supplied by Hildreth (2011) in a framework devised to enable exploration of the localism concept. Hildreth offers both a simple typology of localism, together with a set of indicators with which to characterise each type. This framework has potential as a tool for an analysis of post-2011 neighbourhood planning practice. Hildreth's model was slightly updated and modified by Evens et al (2013) so that there are three suggested types of localism. A *managerial localism*, 'decided at the centre, but policy settings and delivery functions are devolved to the locality, under a strict regulatory framework' (Evens et al p.402). A *representative localism* is where single devolution occurs so that powers and responsibility are devolved to elected local government, which plays a community leadership role. Thirdly a *community localism* model is proposed where rights and support enable citizens collectively to engage directly in decisions and action in a form of participatory democracy. Evens et al associate the managerial model with the 1997 to 2010 Labour governments, and the community model with the 2010 to 2015 Coalition government. We now have the User Survey and Locality Commission providing an evidence base for further exploration of an explicitly community localism model. There are some obvious questions. For example, does neighbourhood planning enhance or challenge representative government? That is to say, does localism more or less engage the public in local representative governance? Is the development (typically in excess of two years) of a Neighbourhood Plan by the community a form of deliberative democracy? The model, supplied by Evens et al, does offer a further means of conceptual clarification. They suggest two alternative purposes. Either community localism is intended to strengthen democratic engagement, or the rationale is conceived as a pragmatic means more effectively to deal with local economic and social problems (such as town planning). This latter

intention necessitates, 'a fusion between representative and community localism' (Evens et al p.404). There is a glaring omission here in the bulk of empirical and theoretical studies. The ward councillor is potentially the link between community engagement and social purpose, and an agent for synergy between the formal institution and the citizen-planner groups. Involved councillors might also supply an element of elective legitimacy. There is only anecdotal evidence of some active (and correspondingly popular) ward councillors and some who shun engagement. The 2011 Act proclaims its *raison d'être* as encompassing both democratic and social purposes. This split between democratic engagement and / or problem-solving is a simplification, but political scientists, planners and geographers alike contribute perspectives which reflect this duality.

In reviewing the academic literature some essentially constructivist objections to the 2011 'community' version of localism, emerge. This represents a profoundly sceptical school of thought. The efficacy of the 2011 Act's neighbourhood planning provisions is questioned, but also the motivations of the Acts sponsors. Rejection of the potential for, or practice of, improved democratic engagement can be found, and also social justice concerns about the possibilities for the betterment of economic or social conditions. Such a critique is available from Williams et al (2014) who argue that the Localism Act is driven by neoliberalism, so as to promote individualism and market-based technologies, which are inimical to local democracy and equity. Even so, allowing that active community and protest groups can acquire the agenda, Williams et al note a subversive value in such transfers of power to the neighbourhood; 'the changing architecture of governance brought about through the drive towards localism has opened up opportunities for the direct appropriation of governmental structures by local groups seeking progressive outcomes' (Williams et al p.2809). Clarke and Cochrane (2013) in an analysis of the 2011 localism rationale and its antecedents describe localism as 'spatial liberalism' and object that this is anti-political, 'because elites, often unelected, set the procedures and agendas' (Clarke and Cochran 2013 p.15). Further; 'this localism seeks to replace New Labour's technocratic government, but it appears to be doing so with just another form of anti-politics: naïve, populist liberalism' (Clarke and Cochran 2013 p.17). It has been argued that the Localism Act is simply a covert means of promoting the private sector (Ludwig and Ludwig 2014). Davoudi and Madanipour (2015), adopting Foucault's notion of 'governmentality', that is to say the art and technology of government, warn of the dangers of the well organised and the well-off capturing decentralised planning. They question the legitimacy of neighbourhood forums, contrasted with the elected legitimacy of councillors, highlighting the tension between representative and community versions of localism. They acknowledge the populist appeal of, 'romantic images of small groups bound together through cultural and geographical ties which collaborate reciprocally and locally to find local solutions for local problems' (Davoudi and Madanipour p.78). Such neoliberalism is seen as a replacement of welfare liberalism, resulting in a retreat from concerns about social justice. Even so they conclude that localism can be progressive or regressive;

'localism is a situated process that unfolds in specific contexts' (Davoudi and Madanipour p.275). In a rare London-based case study, Apostolides (2018) argues that neighbourhood forums confound localism's democratic purposes since they are neither representative of the area, nor socially inclusive. A neoliberal agenda has partly withdrawn the state, promoting self-interest over community interest. Self-appointed elites, 'reap the benefits exclusive to their group, solidifying their advantageous socio-economic position' (Apostolides p.230). In the London context, such propositions might be informing or reinforcing putative institutional reluctance or political obstruction to localism. Some of these contributions imply normative judgements about localism, imputing an ideological motivation to those who enacted the policy and inferring self-interested intentions of the citizens participating.

Perhaps the definitive and nuanced theoretical evaluation, in the light of the extensive evidence from the User Experience study, is available from Parker, Lynn and Wargent (2015) who, between them, have contributed so extensively to research on neighbourhood planning. Parker et al give a cautious welcome to neighbourhood planning, although they acknowledge the constraints of a neoliberal paradigm. The reality falls well short of the 'dialogic' or collaborative planning desired, but based upon evidence from the research, neighbourhood planning, 'may provide a platform for agenda setting and voice for communally-held views' and further, 'holds *potential* for a more pluralistic planning' (Parker et al p.522). This is caveated with concerns; about resources, the ambiguous 'duty to support', non-participating neighbourhoods; and the need to explore the conduct of local authorities. Based directly upon what interviewees have said. Neighbourhood plans *may act as a catalyst for further democratic engagement*' (Parker et al p.526). Although concerned with a dichotomy between civic interest and self-interest, Bradley (2017) notes that place and identity are crucial. Participative democracy can prevail so that a; 'complex struggle between alternative visions of the common good emerges' (Bradley p.43). Sturzaker and Shaw (2015) using a longitudinal case study have examined the possibilities but identify problems of capacity, participation and legitimacy. Resolution; 'rests to a not inconsiderable extent on commitment from the local authority' (Sturzaker and Shaw p.604). The means of making evaluations of efficacy are available. Painter et al (2011) in a comprehensive review of localism were sceptical about claims for community 'empowerment' and devised four required conditions for the genuine article. These are; statutory support, sufficient devolution, encouragement of 'active civil society' and localism as a policy priority. Bailey and Pill (2015) review government attempts over a twenty year period to 'empower' local communities. Two models of neighbourhood 'localism' are identified, which correspond to Hildreth's 'management' and 'community' typology. An earlier 'state-led' model comprised central government targeting areas of deprivation, with performance indicators for service delivery. This fits with Hildreth's social and economic purposes. The more recent 2011 'state enabling / self-help' model is heavily dependent on local voluntarism. Thus: 'top-down, state-led policy initiatives tend to result in the least empowerment, whereas the more bottom-up, self-help,

state-enabled projects at least provide an opportunity to create the spaces where there is some potential for varying degrees of transformation' (Bailey and Pill p.300). Stoker, in his defence of representative democracy, rejects accusations of anti-politics, endorsing localism, which 'enables the dimensions of trust, empathy and social capital to be fostered' (Stoker 2006 p.176). However, he is concerned about the danger of narrow parochialism. Stoker advocates greater and various participation so as to promote the civic arena and he welcomes local tensions, 'Conflict between interests and their resolution remains at the heart of politics, wherever it is conducted' (Stoker 2006 p.177). Stoker also raises the social justice issue, about the need to address inequalities and to recognise, 'both diversity in communities and a concern with equity issues' (Stoker 2006 p.177). Wills (2012) in a major study examining devolution in London, emphasised the importance of existing community infrastructures, such as churches. Noting London's high population turnover ('limiting opportunities for place-based trust'), increasing diversity, and the social pressures, Wills nevertheless notes an increase in social capital and engagement in political life (Wills 2012 p.117). Localism was found to aid community cohesion and create a sense of place-based common identity. Wills argues this promotes a restored form of place-based urban governance at the neighbourhood level, affirming the community localism model. Overall, most researchers do not find a neoliberal context necessarily inimical of community localism and, although the mediating role of local government is sometimes recognised, any systematic impediment by local government is not acknowledged. There is a common currency, found in theory and in practice, of inherent issues with neighbourhood planning, centred on legitimacy, engagement, inclusion, and inequality. Benchmarking of community localism against representative localism, in how the council deals with these issues is unavailable. In other words, it is not known if the primary elected councils are more effective in overcoming deprivation, achieving inclusion and promoting citizen engagement than parish councils or neighbourhood forums.

## LONDON APART: NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING AND BOROUGH GOVERNANCE

The lower and slower take-up of neighbourhood planning in London is demonstrated both in the disproportionately low numbers of active groups revealed by Parker et al (2016), but also in the recent data demonstrating that there are ten times more 'made' neighbourhood plans in England outside London than in London itself (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2018)). Population per made plan is a crude metric, but for comparison, the city of Leeds, with parish councils and strongly supportive of neighbourhood planning, has about the same proportion as England as a whole, while at the extreme, Arun District in Sussex (also parished) has about eight times more made plans than England as a whole. Manchester and Liverpool have no made plans. The neighbourhood forum vehicle for citizen-led planning seems to be the basic problem. In the absence of a parish council the self-starter groups are critically dependent on, and vulnerable to, their

local council. Reluctance to support neighbourhood planning, or even obstruction, by local government was reported in both the User Experience and Locality Commission reports, although neither of these explored London's anomalous circumstances. Community localism is intrinsically problematic in urban areas lacking the advantages of pre-existing parish councils, (which arguably constitute a form of representative localism). The difficulties for self-determined groups are well known: in defining and agreeing boundaries, mobilising a critical mass of citizens, getting funding, employing expertise and so on. Obtaining council 'designation', has proved hard going in all but two of London's boroughs; the pioneering Westminster (Conservative) and Camden (Labour) boroughs, with respectively 15 designated and 12 designated groups in being. The problems inherent in the neighbourhood forum model are not insuperable. However, alleged council obstruction and reluctance to devolve power in London, is evidenced for example in a list of eight blocking tactics (Burton 2015). The volunteer network of groups known as Neighbourhood Planners, London (2018) has monitored and reported online the progress of designations and referendums across London. A survey was conducted of borough council support, so as to assess basic compliance with national planning guidance. Only six Local Plans in London fully recognised neighbourhood planning and provided guidance. This included, as might be expected, the Local Plans published by the two supportive boroughs, Westminster and Camden. Fifteen Local Plans supplied partial recognition, while nine Local Plans gave little or no recognition to neighbourhood planning (Neighbourhood Planners London 2017). These latter boroughs promote their own community involvement strategies. There is some correspondence between these three groups of boroughs (pro, indifferent and anti) and the actual levels of neighbourhood planning activity in each borough. There are examples of displacement tactics, as with Lambeth Council, which spent £140,000 producing a 'refreshed masterplan' rather than supporting the community's neighbourhood planning group. The relevant report mentions neighbourhood planning as one of five 'risk factors' (London Borough of Lambeth 2016 p.7). Boroughs like Lambeth appear to have a strict adherence to the 'representative localism' model, preferring an own-brand version of community engagement, even if this might conflict with the statutory duty to support neighbourhood planning. Another specific example of an alleged displacement tactic is available from Lambeth, where the South Bank and Waterloo Neighbours group has publically objected to the council's separate 'Cooperative Local Investment Plan' ('CLIP') citing: 'locals who are concerned that the CLIP is an attempt to undermine a community-led exercise in favour of a council-led one' (South Bank & Waterloo Neighbours 2018).

Although the Localism Act had all-party support in parliament, there has been some differentiation in party policy, for example, the report on 'One Nation Localism' where the Labour party endorses a representative model of localism (Studdert 2013). The Labour Mayor's recently published draft London Plan takes a similar position to the unsupportive boroughs on neighbourhood planning. A discussion document by Neighbourhood Planners, London (2018a) points out that

neighbourhood planning is largely excluded from the London planning framework, which describes London's 'two-tier', rather than the actual three-tier, planning system. Various Mayoral policies, for town centres and regeneration, exclude the possible contribution of neighbourhood planning, despite the stated imperative for collaboration with local communities (Neighbourhood Planners, London 2018a p.8). A revealing example of the possible antipathy towards neighbourhood planning by London's policy community, can be found in a report called 'Making the Case for Place' published in November 2017, following a year-long programme of professional meetings and field work. The programme was devised and run by Future of London, a policy network for planning and regeneration professionals, from London government and private sector contractors. The report is replete with guiding principles emphasising community engagement and partnership. Local authorities and developers should fully employ the 'planning levers' while communities should; 'Take opportunities to engage early in the planning process' (Future of London 2017 p.28). However nowhere in the report's advice and case studies is neighbourhood planning enlisted, endorsed or referenced in any way. There is no debate. This is a remarkable omission of the most devolved part of the National Planning framework, and might be described as a professional boycott, led by local government which pays the piper and calls the tune. London borough governance has received very little research attention since it was reformed under the 2000 Local Government Act. A wilful failure to co-operate with local communities exercising their 2011 rights and failure to meet the statutory duty to support would constitute a serious democratic deficit. However, a recent democratic audit, assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, found that London (borough) government is 'stable and effective' and that 'this is one of the better functioning parts of UK government' (Travers 2018 p.346). Even so, average electoral turnout in the 2018 council election was only 38.8% (easily exceeded by many neighbourhood planning referenda) and in three boroughs there are no opposition councillors. The Communities and Local Government Select Committee looked at the effectiveness of overview and scrutiny committees and found that there is a serious accountability problem in local government. Noting reports of high profile failures of scrutiny, such as the Grenfell fire in Kensington and Chelsea and vote rigging in Tower Hamlets, the committee found widespread weaknesses; 'in many authorities there is no parity of esteem between the executive and scrutiny functions' (Parliament, House of Commons (2017 p.3). Based upon written evidence and witnesses, the report was highly critical of cabinet governance and of local party politics. Organisational culture was highlighted as the most significant issue. The coverage of the London boroughs in this parliamentary evaluation is unclear, but the report is a further prompt to a review of London borough governance. Both of the national research projects, referred to earlier, emphasised the problematic responses of local authorities, and London borough governance would be an obvious place to start a diagnosis of London's lack of progress in neighbourhood planning.



## CONCLUSION

The two empirical investigations, in 2014 and 2017, into neighbourhood planning under the 2011 Act, have identified numerous hindrances and problems with this third tier of planning. There is a close alignment of findings and recommendations in the two reports, which are unequivocal in concluding that local governance is the key determining factor in success, noting evidence of council reluctance, lack of support and even outright obstruction of neighbourhood planning. The 2017 Localism Commission report, taking a somewhat evangelical stance to localism, identifies alleged local government 'blocks to community power' including top-down decision-making, lack of accountability, lack of trust and poor access to data and information (Locality 2018 p.16). The User Survey carried out in 2014, highlighted bureaucratic delays and lack of clarity in the 2011 Act, which led to technical recommendations incorporated into the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017. Policy weaknesses remain, such as the absence of objective criteria for success. Progress in London, with only a tenth of the number of 'made' neighbourhood plans is markedly slower than in England as a whole. The research methods employed by the two projects were likely to neglect unsuccessful groups, so there may be a hidden cohort of frustrated volunteers without voice, especially in London. There was no investigation into the dynamics of communities which have considered and rejected neighbourhood planning, or commenced the proffered place-shaping, but given up. London's localism tardiness is unexplored, unexplained and worthy of investigation. Research signposts are available in the comparable findings of the national reports and from extensive theory. There is evidence at a London-wide level of reluctance by the political and professional policy community to support neighbourhood planning and, at borough level, of conservative policies and practices which are withholding support and hindering community take-up. Arguably a devolution deficit. The institutional climate of the borough councils would be central in a study of neighbourhood planning in London. A policy analysis of the 32 boroughs is needed to identify the very different cultures and varied localism strategies in place. Opposition to neighbourhood planning is tacit however, abetted by an absence of debate. A council is unlikely overtly to defy an act of parliament, and explicitly refuse its statutory 'duty to support'. This is an interesting research challenge; to surface such stealth opposition. A tentative typology emerges of boroughs which are supportive (localist), those which are passive (tokenist) and those which employ displacement and other blocking tactics (contra-localist).

Research perspectives on localism are suitably sceptical, but findings of a neoliberal project, anti-political in its effects, are not well supported by the two empirical studies, which find successful public engagement and tentative evidence of enhanced social capital. The useful theoretical distinction made between a representative model and a community model of localism may assist in understanding the politics of localism in London, where evidence suggests that many in the policy community adhere to the representative model. Senior officers and

members may be more comfortable retaining positional power, targeting limited community support by need. Curiously, the potential role and agency of the ward councillor is unexplored. Whether localism as a policy in London is 'anti-political' has not been tested. Are communities which are working on their neighbourhood plan more or less engaged with politics, more or less trustful of politicians? Demonstrably, some councils' are disinclined to support such groups, but why so? Such official conduct may itself constitute a form of institutionally-situated 'anti-politics'. There remains however ample empirical evidence of unequal participation and a lack of inclusivity in communities, which may undermine the long-term sustainability of third tier planning. Pragmatic and ideological objections in the literature to such social exclusion may reflect, and also inform, borough council policy, but this has hardly been investigated. Survey and interview templates and policy proposals from the national studies are available to frame an investigation in London, which would enable comparative study. Interpretive approaches, designed to include the otherwise voiceless and stalled groups, might be appropriate, particularly to explore extant questions about inclusivity, anti-politics, social capital and so on. The two national studies suggest neighbourhood planning-based localism policy is a qualified success in its engagement purposes, but problematic, especially in London. This paper argues that London is exceptionally deficient and apart in its achievement of the third tier of planning, largely because communities rely upon a flawed (practically and theoretically) neighbourhood forum model. In turn, these forums are excessively dependent upon council support, which, by political choice, may be unforthcoming. In effect, devolution denied. A study of neighbourhood planning in London is needed with a focus upon the policy and practice of local governance.

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