Planning and participation in a time of pandemic

Sue Brownill

I am really pleased to have been asked to write a regular column on participation for Town & Country Planning. Participation has been central to my experience of planning from first learning about it as a community worker in London Docklands in the 1980s, to becoming an academic and teaching future planners, and in remaining actively involved in housing and planning issues where I live. In discussion with the TCPA, we decided to call the column 'Snakes and Ladders', with a nod to Sherry Arnstein's famous ladder of participation – but also in recognition of the differing weight given to participation in planning over time and space and the ups and downs experienced by those engaged in it.

The column will address key participation issues, and will appear up to three times a year. To make sure it is relevant to members we would be keen to receive ideas or examples for future columns. Please contact the Editor with your suggestions.

When I was asked to write this column, we were living in a different world. Pre-lockdown and pre-COVID, the issues facing participation in planning seemed to centre around the upcoming White Paper in England and the momentum from last year's 50th anniversary of the Skeffington Report, which first crystallised the arguments and procedures for participation in planning. And that was what I was preparing to comment on. Now, with people dying, planning decisions and participation moving online, elections cancelled and one of the biggest disruptions to public life in living memory, I questioned whether this was still relevant. But hopefully the immediate crisis will recede at some point, and then the wheels of planning reform will start inexorably turning once more.

However, the experiences of this time are having a profound effect, not just on us personally, but on the profession of planning, the responses of communities, and the practices of participation. So I went back to my original thoughts, but this time wondering about how the ways that planning and participation have responded to the COVID-19 epidemic will influence these debates. Will they contribute to a step up Sherry Arnstein's famous ladder of participation (also 50 last year), or could they put in place one of the snakes that send us sliding down into a less democratic planning system? And, more importantly, what can we as planners and community members do to influence the trajectory of planning, post-COVID?

The rest of this article addresses these questions, but also argues that, while participation should be central to these debates, we should draw another leaf from Arnstein's ladder of participation article[1] and call for participation not just for the sake of it, but as an important tool for a fairer and more equitable planning system.

The Planning White Paper
While the timetable for the White Paper must now be uncertain, its potential implications are not. A taster was published on 12 March, just before the Budget and before lockdown, with the intention that the White Paper would follow later in the spring. This short policy paper, entitled Planning for the Future,[2] built on the report released earlier in the year by the right-wing think-tank Policy Exchange, entitled Rethinking the Planning System for the 21st Century.[3] One of the authors of the latter paper (Jack Airey) is now a SPAD (Special Adviser) in Downing Street. Its emphasis on shaping the planning system to deliver more housing, 'exploring' the use of zoning, extending permitted development rights and the focus on 'building beautiful' have drawn extensive comment elsewhere.[4]

What I want to do here is focus on the implications for participation. Strangely, for a planning reform document Planning for the Future resists the usual reference to promoting 'real' or 'true' participation. In fact, the word participation does not appear. Instead, there is a statement of intent to 'modernise the system, accelerate planning decisions and make it easier for communities to engage and play a role in decisions which affect them'. The fact that speeding up the system and making it easier for people to engage have usually proved to be mutually exclusive (for example in the New Labour 2004 reforms) rather undermines their inclusion in the same sentence.

A digitised planning system appears to be seen as the way forward in squaring this circle: 'It will make it easier for communities to understand the planning system and play a role in decisions that affect them.' And faith is placed in design codes 'for promoting the design and style of homes and neighbourhoods local people want to see'. This and a reference to support for neighbourhood forums in providing sites for home ownership represents the only clues to what may come in the White Paper.

While increasing participation through improved online provision and the significance of good design are important issues, they alone cannot support a reformed system or a comprehensive platform for participation. In thinking of what else the White Paper might address, it is interesting to go back to the Planning Exchange document. Again, references are sparse, but participation is referenced in the main body of the text in the section on deficiencies. This does not, however, refer to deficiencies in participation, but to the fact that participation, as the Policy Exchange sees it, has evolved into one of the deficiencies of planning: 'attempts in the late 1960s to

increase public participation in planning, has had the effect of putting control in the hands of objectors rather than 'the people''.

The Planning Exchange paper also sees increased participation as part of the 'accumulation of regulation' that has led to complexities and delays in the planning system. And in an appendix on the evolution of the planning system it notes that post-Skeffington 'the rise of public participation was soon linked to the issue of 'NIMBYism''. In short, participation is part of the 'red tape' that interferes with the market (and particularly the provision of housing).

Nothing is included directly relating to participation in the recommendations, although the idea that local politicians should be involved only in decisions at the plan-making stage in a zoned system indicates a certain line of thought. The idea of restricting participation to a discussion of design codes fits into this trajectory, with perhaps some opportunity to participate digitally at the plan-making stage, but with definitely no possibility for 'NIMBYs' to comment on planning applications. Although Neighbourhood Development Plans are not mentioned in either document, their evolution to support housing provision, including the significance of design, would also fit with this.

This erosion and reshaping of participation stands in stark contrast to the vision that emerged from the Raynsford Review[5] and the recent RTPI report on future planning reform,[6] which both see participation as central. And of course, if we go back to Arnstein and the question of what participation is for, is it to speed up the building of houses and make them look 'beautiful', or is it to ensure a planning system that can address the full range of social and community needs?

Planning in a time of COVID
How does the experience of planning during the COVID-19 epidemic impact on these debates? There are two important sets of issues here. Chief among them is the impact on planning democracy, including the enforced switch to digital planning and virtual decision-making as planning committees become virtual, inquiries are suspended or carried out remotely, and consultation becomes online-only.

Done properly this can enhance involvement, particularly when combined with real-time engagement, as shown by the experience of Decidim.barcelona.[7] However, the speed with which planning authorities are having to adapt means that the complexities of ensuring that the public remain involved cannot be fully addressed.

Civic Voice is monitoring this, and a combined letter from organisations including Just Space, CPRE London and the TCPA[8] raises concerns that some local authorities are moving some decision making to behind closed doors, rather than making them virtually open and increasing officer delegation. The joint letter sets out conditions to ensure that participation is not eroded as planning moves online, including insistence on no increase in the use of delegated or executive decision-making and ensuring that speaking rights are maintained in virtual planning meetings. We also must be mindful of the digital divide and the potential for widening the gap in participation between groups of the population.

The second point relates to what the COVID-19 experience is telling us about what is important to people in terms of their environments, and the role of planning in enabling delivery of these features. Spending more time at home highlights the importance of decent space standards, energy efficiency and comfort – all of which depend on 'regulation', as anyone living in an office-to-residential conversion will tell you. As most of us are aware, the origins of planning lie in public health provision; and the significance of supporting wellbeing through land use, alongside the need to protect open space in towns and cities, has been highlighted during lockdown. Adapting to social distancing may lead to spatial reconfigurations which again will show the need for planning. Having experienced reduced traffic and better air quality, many may want this to continue.

We are also seeing unprecedented levels of 'big government' and public spending and the revaluing of state action and key workers; we can only speculate on what action could be brought to bear if climate change and air pollution were declared pandemic style emergencies.

And finally, governance is being revitalised, with the recognition of the importance of local government as a vital support for communities and a myriad of community networks emerging to support neighbourhoods, much of which is online and could form new channels for participation. And this is what we need participation for: to enable an approach to planning which prioritises wellbeing for all sections of the population and to ensure that the democratic structures are there to deliver it.

Moving forward
So, there is much that we can take from the experience of planning under COVID-19 into the debates about reform that will restart once we start to move out of the current crisis. It is inevitable that within these debates there are going to be conflicts between those calling for fewer restrictions on the market to ensure a revival in land and property markets and those recognising the need for more regulation to enable the places in which we are all spending more time to be inclusive, sustainable and healthy. The outcomes of these debates could have profound impacts on participation.

One scenario, let's call it the 'snake', is that participation is, if not swept away (as no government would like to be seen to be doing that), then digitally reconfigured to smooth and prettify the market, with opportunities for involvement to directly shape it restricted. To avoid this, we need to be arguing for the 'ladder'; recognising the centrality of democratic involvement in planning, not just as a right but as a way to ensure that planning addresses social and environmental concerns as well as a way to draw in a wider range of citizens. To feed into these debates there have been some recent calls for a 'new Skeffington', given that there has not been a follow up in 50 years.

While there is much value in getting central government to take participation seriously, not only do we not have time for this but, more to the point, there have been many recent reviews (such as the Raynsford Review and the recent RTPI's Priorities for Planning Reform report) and much dedicated grassroots work to draw on – such as Planning Democracy in Scotland, Just Space in London, and at the Neighbourhood Plan level. This work stresses the need to ensure that there is a robust legal framework for participation, with civil rights being extended and enshrined in clear policies in planning legislation that enable local planning authorities and developments to be monitored.

Equally, consultation must be properly resourced, including resources for building a wider public awareness of the value of planning and for building community capacity.

And we need to remember Arnstein's point about what consultation is for. The Raynsford Review calls for outcomes for citizens to be enshrined in planning, such as the right to a decent home. The awareness of the significance of our immediate environments to wellbeing during the COVID-19 epidemic could provide an impetus here for people seeing a value in getting involved.

Finally, who is consultation for? It is unlikely that planning will go back to pre-COVID days in how it is implemented, and digital engagement is likely to become part of the 'new normal'. This could mean that those with access to fast broadband, public libraries and smart phones participate more. Therefore, ensuring that a digital divide does not exclude sections of the population that are already less engaged in planning is a priority, particularly given that Arnstein was writing at the height of the Civil Rights movement for black and ethnic minority groups. Building on the new forms of local organising that have sprung up during the COVID-19 crisis offers a vital opportunity here.

All this means that we need to be making the 'new planning normal' within our response to COVID-19 as well as in our responses to the debates in each of the nations of the UK about the future of planning, tracking how the differing nations of the UK emerge from lockdown and sharing lessons and good practice. And we must make sure that participation remains central to these debates, both as a right and in terms of its outcomes; i.e. ensuring that planning addresses issues of equality and sustainability and that the potential of digital democracy to include all sections of society is realised. Taking the understanding of crisis as both opportunity and danger, let's ensure that the next round of planning reform is a ladder for participation, and not a snake.

Sue Brownill is with the School of the Built Environment at Oxford Brookes University. The views expressed are personal.

Notes
1 SR Arnstein: 'A ladder of citizen participation'. Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 1969, Vol. 35 (4), 216-24. Available at www.participatorymethods.org/ sites/participatorymethods.org/files/Arnstein %20ladder%201969.pdf
2 Planning for the Future. Policy Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Mar. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/publications/planning-for-thefuture
3 J Airey and C Doughty: Rethinking the Planning System for the 21 Century. Policy Exchange, Jan. 2020. https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ Rethinking-the-Planning-System-for-the-21st- Century.pdf
4 See, for example, D Lock: 'Radical reform at last?'. Town & Country Planning, 2020, Vol. 89, Feb./Mar., 52-54
5 Planning 2020 – Final Report of the Raynsford Review of Planning in England. TCPA, Nov. 2018; and Planning 2020 'One Year On' – 21st Century Slums? TCPA, Jan. 2020. www.tcpa.org.uk/raynsford-review
6 Priorities for Planning Reform in England. Policy Paper. RTPI, Apr. 2020. www.rtpi.org.uk/press-releases/2020/ april/rtpi-sets-out-priorities-for-planning-reform-inengland- post-covid-19/
7 See, for example, the EUROCITIES 'Decidim.barcelona' webpage, at www.eurocities.eu/eurocities/documents/ Decidim-barcelona-WSPO-AZ9ATM
8 See the Just Space website, at https://justspace.org.uk