



Campaign to Protect  
Rural England

## **COLLABORATIVE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING**

**Workshop organised by CPRE and Civic Voice**

**11 November 2010**

**Aim:** To see if we can develop a coherent set of principles on which collaborative neighbourhood planning should be based to influence the Localism Bill

### **Presentations**

Neil Sinden (CPRE) provided a context for the discussion drawing attention to the Conservative's Open Source Planning Green Paper, the Coalition Government's Programme and the recently published Local Growth White Paper.

There was evidence of changing aspirations for the role of neighbourhood planning in recent discussions, and that its role may be more constrained than originally thought. This makes it all the more important for advocates of neighbourhood planning to show how it can work.

#### Toby Blume, Urban Forum

The experience of local groups currently suggests that involvement in the planning system is often reactive or negative, so people get involved because they are responding to something they don't want. They describe the system as overwhelmingly bureaucratic but they still engage as they want to have their say and care passionately about their area.

Definition of community planning:

- Owned and led by local people working closely with public bodies on both design and implementation
- Holistic approach
- Incorporates land use planning with social and environment factors, but different from spatial planning

There are different approaches but all are inclusive and participative, and hopefully fun.

Urban Forum is currently undertaking research on how we can use the experience of community planning in rural area in an urban context. Emerging thinking includes:

- Areas must be self-selecting
- Negotiations with all partners must happen up front
- High degree of flexibility is needed
- Big money creates tensions, so actually makes it harder
- Seems urban communities rely on the State more than rural communities, the latter are more used to community led planning
- Parish councils are not seen as inclusive
- Spatial planning is a small part of a village visioning process

There is a need for two way accountability between neighbourhoods and local authorities.

The reforms pose lots of opportunities but there are also currently lots of unanswered questions.

### Deborah Mattinson, Britain Thinks

Engaging ordinary people in processes brings something different, and often better, to the outcome. So we should try to empower the empowered and also reach beyond them.

Key is to elevate the debate from being 'me' centred to considering the needs of the wider community.

It is important to keep in mind that different people will have different levels of expertise, but also different levels of confidence.

A range of techniques exist from qualitative, in-depth, discussions with a limited number of representative people to large-scale engagement. Given the choice in depth approaches with a carefully selected cross section of people are likely to prove the most productive.

If the engagement is due to a controversial existing proposal you have to try and get people to step back and identify criteria that people can agree on. Then consideration can be given to more detailed issues.

See [http://www.pwc.co.uk/eng/issues/a\\_citizens\\_view.html](http://www.pwc.co.uk/eng/issues/a_citizens_view.html) for example of a citizens jury.

### **Discussion**

Trust is an important issue. People need to be able to believe that if they engage in the development of a neighbourhood plan the local authority will consider it. If local authorities support proposals that go against the plan, for example if they are seduced by big business, communities currently only have the option of judicial review which is very expensive and legalistic. Further consideration should be given to the introduction of a limited, third party right of appeal to help rebalance the appeals system and provide a totemic example of safeguarding community interests. There is also a need to address the impact of costs awards on planning decisions.

Engaging more people in the process of developing proposals could also ensure there is more pressure on decision-makers to make the right decision.

Empowering local communities and the new bottom-up system will be more challenging due to the financial cuts local authorities are facing. However, we must also try to put the scale of the cuts in perspective – there is money out there.

A focus of early discussion is often to understand the tools that are required to facilitate discussions. Neighbourhoods need more than volunteer campaigners. Experience from the Netherlands suggests that evidence and facilitation is best provided by an independent, neutral source. This requires resources from central Government.

Timing of engagement important – it should be when things are still up for discussion rather than rubber stamping decisions.

There is currently confusion about how different elements will be defined and how they will fit together. The Government has not yet provided any evidence on the workability of the new system or the funding it will require. For example, how will disagreements between different tiers be resolved? Will a duty to co-operate be enough? Will there be a strategic overview and if so where will it sit and how will it work with the different tiers? What is a neighbourhood? How do we avoid planning by appeal, especially given the proposed presumption in favour of sustainable development?

It was noted that good examples of collaborative planning, such as citizen juries, seem to suggest that they work best where consideration is being given to a specific site or issue. So there are questions about how well processes can be adapted for the development of a whole neighbourhood plan.

If the Government wants to see a fundamental shift in the way plans are developed they need to acknowledge that the required cultural shift will take time and need as much attention as the process. It will take time for communities to acclimatise to the new system and there are risks in introducing immediate changes such as the presumption in favour of sustainable development in advance of the necessary investment in the community. Equally, it is important not to view the new approach through the prism of the existing planning system and to understand the nature of the change Ministers are keen to introduce – based on localism, a permissive approach, principle and not evidence based policy making, communities stepping forward, and a variety of approaches being taken in different areas.

It was noted that the reason people get engaged in the planning system is often to try and stop things. One of the biggest opportunities is how to create a sense of excitement and focus in a proactive, rather than reactive, way so people engage in positive processes. And, how to do that on limited funds.

In having discussions with communities it is important to appreciate the context. For example, it is difficult to engage people in sensible discussions about the future of their area if they are worried about the impact of the new Government on their housing arrangements, or if they will still have a job in the future.

It was suggested that there might be scope for local authorities to sub-contract the development of their Statement of Community Involvement, or whatever replaces it, to community groups and representatives. This would help communities feel engaged and ownership as they will be helping to shape future processes.

Concerns were raised about the availability of the scale of volunteer capacity that might be needed to make 'localism' work. It is important the system isn't dependent on the capacity and skills of the volunteers which happen to be available in a particular neighbourhood. The approach will depend on the availability of community voices able to put forward alternatives and council's willing to devolve power.

The work of South Hams District Council was given as a positive example of engagement on housing numbers. The area includes AONB and National Park and development pressure from growth in and around Plymouth. Initial discussions found strong resistance to additional housing development. The Council then went round to individual villages talking to residents about housing need and whether housing could be accommodated in the village. By taking this approach they were able to include the same level of housing in their LDF but without the opposition they believe they would have faced from a more top down approach. Such a collaborative approach is, however, demanding for the local authority and slower.

A number of potential examples were suggested to engage ordinary people in community planning. These included New Deal for Communities, work undertaken by Yorkshire Forward on renaissance towns, the work of many RSLs (Barnsley ALMO was given as a specific example), the work of development trusts and Architecture and Built Environment Centres such as The Glass-House.

It was noted that in most cases examples of good practice highlight the need for someone to take the lead and enthuse people, and that person was generally paid to do that role. In the future this may have to be the role of charities, rather than through initiatives promoted and

paid for by central Government. Neighbourhood planning may also help provide a focus for the “community organisers” being promoted by the Government

It is understood that Government wants to devolve power to as low a level as possible – this will often be to a level below local authority but they may have an important role as convener. In some areas it will be challenge to ensure local authorities really do devolve power to communities and beyond the “glass floor” that often exists. There can be problems as a result of the Cabinet or Mayoral system in local government which concentrates power in a few hands.

Getting individuals and groups, whether at community or national level, to say what they do want, rather than what they don’t want is often a major challenge. In the new system thought will have to be given to how to help communities to undertake their new role. Can simple toolkits be developed to help initiative conversations and discussions for example? The new planning system presents opportunities for communities. While not every area will be equipped to grasp those opportunities immediately, or may not want to, we need to try and think about solutions to the challenges rather than simply focus on the challenges.

### **Summary of areas of discussion**

The following points were raised in summarising the discussion:

- It is important to consider how the new proposals mesh with the existing system – what needs to change and what can be built on?
- There is concern over the practicality of the new process and a need for more evidence that it will work in the manner expected
- The success of the new approach will depend on harnessing the passion of communities for the place where they live and presenting positive choices about the future
- The new system needs to work universally and not just favour rural areas or sites with significant development proposals
- The new system shouldn’t rely on the skills and resources that happen to be available in local communities and local councils – it needs reliably to develop their capability, strengthening existing arrangements and providing independent support, advice and facilitation
- There is a real risk of an implementation gap – with a mismatch between the timing of the new approach and the capability and culture of communities and councils necessary to deliver it
- It is important to recognise the limitations of the permissive approach to neighbourhood planning in terms of:
  - Handling strategic and cross boundary issues
  - The presumption in favour of sustainable development
  - The incentives being proposed to encourage new development
  - The “glass floor” problem where local councils do not devolve power to communities

- New safeguards will be needed to empower and encourage communities to participate in the new process, including additional rights of appeal for communities and stronger enforcement
- The new approach provides real opportunities for communities to play a much stronger role and they will need to raise their game and be clearer about their vision for an area and how it should change for the better

### **Attendance**

Tony Burton (chair) – Civic Voice  
Neil Sinden - CPRE  
Fiona Howie - CPRE  
Toby Blume – Urban Forum  
Deborah Mattinson – Britain Thinks  
Dick Bate – Green Balance  
Lucy Musgrave - Publica  
David Brooke – CPRE Gloucestershire  
David Bailey - CLG  
Charlie Watson – CPRE Policy Committee  
Wendy Le Las – Le-Las Associates  
Michael Bach – London Forum of Civic and Amenity Societies  
Adrian Harvey - CABE  
Athena Lamnisos - Forster  
John Houghton – Shared Intelligence  
John Hobson QC – CPRE Honorary Standing Counsel