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RTPI Planning Convention
Tuesday 14 June 2011**

Planning, localism and communities

I think we know what an opera is. A dramatic work in one or more acts set to music for singers and instrumentalists.

I think we know what a soap opera is. An ongoing episodic work of dramatic fiction presented in a serial format on TV or radio. But I have chosen Coronation Street though it could be the Archers or Eastenders carefully. They are communities. Different sorts of communities, but communities none the less.

The action takes place in neighbourhoods – small walkable areas in the case of Eastenders and Coronation Street, rural ones in the case of the Archers. All human life is there – not to mention some that you've never heard of.

However the question of what is a neighbourhood is not answered as easily as that. It has been a standard question for planners, architects, community workers and local authorities forever. There is no reason to think that this is going to change.

Some neighbourhoods will be close to town or city centres where the prevailing dynamic may be the economic needs of the town/city.

Some maybe suburban areas, fallen on hard times and in need of a facelift and an improvement of both local amenities and the environment.

Some may be rural areas where there is a close community, where maybe local opposition will stop new housing despite the needs of those living in the area, or the fact that a bigger population might have benefits for local services.

There will be areas that look like communities but where long-standing religious (say) differences lie just under the surface.

Some will be big, some will be small.

One size will not fit all

Notice how we are looking at neighbourhoods defined by the people who live there – the community. But if I asked someone where they lived and they said

Islington, would I regard everyone who lived in Islington as one community? Clearly not. Islington has many different kinds of community, from the very rich to the quite poor. They often live in different neighbourhoods. Sometimes cheek by jowl.

For some Islington may not be their home but just a passing place to lay their head and their real community may be their workplace. There are a series of overlapping Venn diagrams in the concept of community, based on class, demographics, geography as well as interests like choral singing or conservation.

Are their aspirations the same? Some maybe, but others are very different indeed. I think it is quite possible that we will see an even greater difference between these different sorts of communities over the next few years.

We must also recognise that the notion of community with which sociologists have concerned themselves for many years as well has a sentimental side. It grew up in an age when women were at home, minding their own children as well as others, when different work patterns e.g. mining created particular types of communities of interest.

Nevertheless communities and neighbourliness develop under all sorts of circumstances. For example everyone thought living in tower blocks was alienating but those who had always lived there were fond of it and proud of it and knew their neighbours.

There is much work done now which shows that many people who live in streets on the ground do not know their neighbours on either side, and conversely that a 'big issue' like a planned road way which will disrupt the neighbourhood creates a common cause for people to get together. The history of the civic movement bears testimony to the fact that it is often the stimulus of external threat that sparks the formation of a civic society.

Civic Voice is volunteer led and community based and works to make the places where everyone lives more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive. I actually asked our Director for a slide of some of our members standing in front of a ruined castle which could have been headlined 'one of our failures' but he chose the more conventional route. Civic society volunteers are the most numerous participants in the planning system which is why our practical experience and outlook may be helpful. They are also used to working with other groups (including local business) to make common cause which will be a key element of neighbourhood planning.

The move towards localism is being done against a background of cuts to community organisations which combined with difficult economic circumstances for everyone. This may accelerate and some people fear this could lead to social unrest. Those who work in the community look to see how people can get by better, how their resilience can be shored up during this time.

Meanwhile the rather damaged Big Society brand is set to transform the way things are done with communities running services, community rights to buy and to build, neighbourhood planning and so on.

Basically this model involves long term structural and cultural change which is the only way for localism to be successful. The intellectual thought leadership on this one has been led by what has been described as Blue Labour Red Tory think tanks but the one thing missing here is an understanding of how long it might take to make these changes. It will not, cannot, happen overnight.

Meanwhile many people will go on doing their best in their areas. There is a whole set of literature on why residents become citizens. Those of you who are volunteers know that active volunteering is a thankless task, and the need to reinforce people's energy is important and why neighbourhood planning could be an extremely useful tool.

During my years working in regeneration I have noticed that the places where people live have a huge influence on their willingness and sometimes need to get involved with activities beyond their immediate concerns. It is hard, for example, to feel involved in the bigger issues of crime and health when you are living in sub-standard accommodation, or when your immediate environment is a threatening urban wasteland. Even more difficult when you are living in inappropriate accommodation or even homeless.

So against this cheerful background, how do we think communities will cope with neighbourhood planning? The government has recognised that there will need to be many more community organisers and have recently let a £15m contract to Locality to train 5,000 over the next 4 years. There is no doubt that communities of all sorts will need help to undertake a neighbourhood plan. Even the middle classes who might think they understand everything will also need help. Because this is participation, not consultation. There is a difference.

In my view any neighbourhood plan needs to live up to the Ministerial promise of a true "power shift" to communities. We need to start with where people are – the reality of their neighbourhood and their aspiration. What do people value? What do they dislike? What are their aspirations?

It will be really important to have a friend at court (community worker or user-friendly professional) to help the community to understand the proposals and to articulate their own input. The community needs to be the client but they will really value the kind of professional support which helps them to be better clients. This is not patronising. Don't forget this is a new world for planners too. The language of planning is difficult. Money spent on this is never wasted if the chosen person has the right skills and the confidence of the community. Remember some communities will never have been asked for their opinion in their lives. Some people may not be able to read. Some may not be able to read plans. But aspirations and plans need to be articulated and developed.

Many will need an outline plan working with planners or architects to 'bell the cat' only after having taken the views of residents and others comprising the community. What is the rationale for this plan? Does it stand up? Does it cover social and economic as well as architectural and planning issues? Can it really work? Many practices are well-used to this now. And nothing will work without the right brief.

Discussions may well not all be plain sailing – disagreements cannot be allowed to get out of hand and alienate other interested parties. Everyone needs to be grown up. We need to be sure that there is some legitimacy to those who claim leadership of their community, that they really do and aren't just representing themselves. Have they some prior common interest or activities? This applies to the professionals, middle classes and businesses as well. Some will have been used to making common cause with others, some will be new to it.

Small things are important – though some may be paid for their involvement, others may be at work or volunteering combined with roles of child care or caring for an elderly relative, and the time meetings are held needs thought.

There are other barriers for poorer communities:

- ☛ Resources
- ☛ Not enough support
- ☛ Keeping motivated it is hard work and some may drop out
- ☛ Getting others motivated i.e., finding volunteers
- ☛ Lack of personal knowledge and therefore confidence
- ☛ Committee skills

The ability to deliver of various groups may be different - some may be resource –rich, some not. I do not think that businesses should take the lead in this – it seems to undermine the whole notion of neighbourhood planning, though this is not to say that good economic validity of any plan should not be a key component of its deliverability or that business does not have a vital role to play. (One of the members of the Board of Civic Voice tells me that his local Duke has indicated a strong interest in becoming the leader of his neighbourhood plan...not quite I think what David Cameron had in mind, but maybe we can just regard it as the Big Society at work). And what will be the role of elected members? Does one sort of local democracy usurp another?

It is also easy to dent the confidence and motivation of a community group. People need to know neighbourhood planning will be worth the investment of their own time and effort and we worthwhile. This is why Civic Voice has been so voluble about the need for stronger safeguards against development which cuts across the neighbourhood plan. It is also why we fear the effect of making some neighbourhood plans business-led will turn communities away from getting involved more widely.

And what should the output of a neighbourhood plan be? In a nutshell:

- ☛ Responding to local needs and aspirations
- ☛ Creating inspiring places where people want to live, work and play
- ☛ Well designed
- ☛ Creating new opportunities for neighbourliness and enterprise
- ☛ Places that are easily managed and maintained
- ☛ Socially, economically and environmentally sustainable

Can it be done for the £20k on offer from Government (and even this is to local authorities and not the communities who are meant to be in the driving seat)? Only with the best will in the world. Only if communities are inspired to give of their time and knowledge. Only if people can trust the motives of planning and be confident it is working for the public and not the business interest. And there is no doubt a danger that the plans will not be sufficiently resourced to be robust enough to survive scrutiny

Two key points – it must be deliverable.

And it must be delivered.

There is nothing more likely to put any community off than hours of unpaid work which results in either nothing happening or things that weren't meant to happen happening anyway. All the excitement and interest that keeps people going is easily lost, and not easily regained. This may seem obvious but it is worth saying. It is better not to begin than to end up a garden path with only the wild wood at the end (unless, obviously, the wild wood was part of the plan....)

So – can neighbourhood planning deliver? There is still much to sort out. The Bill provides some of the hardware necessary to deliver a power shift to communities. Yet in many ways it is the software of support, guidance and resources (both intellectual and financial) that will be made available that is the most important. There is too little effort and resources going into this aspect.

In particular, it is concerning that there is a strong business bias being brought into neighbourhood planning. Business and economic soundness is important but it is not appropriate, we at Civic Voice think, for promoting business to be a sole purpose of neighbourhood planning as permitted by the Bill as it currently stands. It skews the purpose of planning. We should recognise the social, economic and environmental well being of those 'working' in an area as well as those 'living' there but not allow plans to become business-led.

Much of the earlier part of this presentation was slightly doom-laden. But I like to think it could end on a happier note.

Soap opera or grand opera? One thing's for sure. It won't be over till the fat lady sings.