Localism – A Planning Panacea?

It has been observed that there is a "global trend" towards devolution of power from national governments to regional and local authorities (Rodriguez-Pose & Gill 2003), and planning is one of the activities often devolved (Allmendinger & Haughton 2010). In England, the UK Government has since 2011 gone further and, it claims, devolved planning powers to the community level. The introduction of a new form of statutory planning – *Neighbourhood Planning* – was heralded by the UK Government as an embodiment of their commitment to "localism", representing a shift from top-down to bottom-up control in the English planning system (DCLG 2010). This Policy and Practice explores some of the tensions inherent in localism as exemplified through the practical implementation of Neighbourhood Planning.

Neighbourhood Planning – a view from the coalface

Introduction

Since the introduction of Neighbourhood Planning (NP) in England under the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, I have worked on 20 neighbourhood plans. This contribution draws this experience to offer reflections on a number of recurring themes and issues which arise at the 'coalface' of this neighbourhood planning practice, namely – support; process management; the problem solving scope of NP; the role of the planner; and, how NP fits into the wider evolving planning picture.

Getting the right support in place for Neighbourhood Planning

The £23m Government-funded support package to Neighbourhood Planning Groups for 2018-2022 is delivered by a Locality[i]-led consortium. The split is approximately £9m for grant funding, £2m for running the programme (allocating grant and support and providing guidance) and £11m for direct 'Technical Support'. Groups can normally get £9K and up to an extra £8K when allocating sites or including a Design code but unlike in previous programmes there is no extra help for Neighbourhood Forums which is notable given the acknowledged additional problems Forums face compared to established Parish Councils and the consequent relatively low take up of Neighbourhood Planning in urban areas. Importantly the grant allocation process is quite quick and flexible although it can sometimes be complex. 'Technical Support' is delivered largely remotely via e-mail, phone and video call and is based around discrete packages but in practice Neighbourhood Planning does not always break up neatly into discrete stages.

Policy guidance has to deal with the technicalities of this new, developing field which can be hard for planners let alone the groups. There is rightly a lot less guidance than before with much of the previous guidance being unfit for purpose. Currently (Jan 2019) the Design Guidance needs re-writing to clarify what is meant by a Design Code (earlier CABE guidance might help here). Some guidance is excellent such as the Road Map and Policy Writing guides. I find groups want advice on what to do when things go wrong such as disagreement with the Local Authority over area designation. There is currently no mechanism for users to give feedback to the writers of the plan, certainly there is no encouragement to do so in guidance notes.

Clear feedback about how Neighbourhood Planning groups are progressing would be useful. For example, how much groups spend on surveys, how commissioning someone to do consultation work compares with a DIY approach, what problems examiners keep seeing, how much evidence is actually needed, why some groups start then give up, which people and groups who might benefit from Neighbourhood Planning have never heard of it, which policies work and which don't, and what groups think of the guidance provided.

Managing the Process

While much of the guidance deals directly with planning issues, frequently groups struggle to manage the process effectively. Making best use of the support available can be a challenge. They can use consultants but what for and how do they brief them especially if they have little experience in doing this? It is the group's plan and grant so their prerogative as to how to use consultants. They can write the Plan themselves and just use a consultant when they get stuck or need someone to do a discrete piece of work as is common in the development industry and Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) where planners, architects and engineers are brought in at key stages by staff familiar with the process. But Neighbourhood Planning Groups are dealing with something new to them and often without properly qualified or trained staff and so often need a more proactive approach from consultants.

Often groups do some initial consultation before getting consultants involved but occasionally this unguided consultation is wasteful with large sums spent on long surveys (usually meaning fewer respondents) that are unfocussed and of dubious value to the Plan. People decide to do plans in response to certain issues but often fail to address them in consultation due to uncertainty about its role in the process and can end up hostages to consultation.

Support varies between and within LPAs due often to lack of resource but in some case hostility towards Neighbourhood Planning due apparently to fear it will undermine the Local Plan (unfounded due to the need for Neighbourhood Plans to be in general conformity with Local Plan Strategic Policies) and reservations about Neighbourhood Planning Groups' democratic legitimacy. Where LPAs do not offer the support expected in the Act there is little recourse for Groups. Some LPAs in more affluent boroughs have offered money and direct consultancy support. Less affluent LPAs often hit by cuts tend to be in unparished areas and are more likely to suffer from deprivation including low literacy levels and Forums in these areas are therefore facing much harder challenges hence the lower take up of Neighbourhood Planning in such areas.

Managing, without dampening, expectations is important as people's understanding of planning varies greatly. Neighbourhood Planning is a way for local people to have greater control over development in their area but this will vary greatly depending on the issues, opportunities and strategic Local Planning policies. Groups don't always understand the extent and limits of their or their Plan's powers, often underestimating their power to set the agenda and deferring to others, or conversely thinking Neighbourhood Plans can dictate Police numbers, or National Health Service expenditure.

Groups sometimes struggle to focus for a number of reasons and this is the main point of a Vision and Objectives - to define what the Plan is, and is not, about. Some groups copy objectives from plans already 'made' as they regard them as templates and then struggle to make their plan meet objectives that are not locally relevant.

Many people don't distinguish between Land Use Planning and other forms of public decision making such as provision of health care, education and policing with 'Planning' understood as what 'they' do to 'us'. This idea of 'them' and 'us' is arguably a citizenship issue that localism is intended to tackle but sometimes groups can struggle to relinquish a passive, or oppositional, role.

There can be conflict within groups for example when some members want to use the Neighbourhood Plan to fight against development of strategic sites already allocated in the Local Plan while others realise it cannot. Assessing housing need can soften attitudes towards LPAs allocating sites in the Green Belt as groups come to understand the issues they face. Brandon Lewis claimed that "plans for housebuilding are more than 10% higher in the first areas with a Neighbourhood Plan as opposed to only the council's Local Plan" (DCLG & Lewis 2015) but I am not aware of any evidence that this is due to Neighbourhood Plans.

Good governance matters to ensure plans are made in a responsible way and to ensure effective decision making where there is no consensus or certainty and choices still need to be made. This is something I see groups struggle with. I've seen problems where there has been a confusion of roles and responsibilities when Parish Councils and Forums have delegated work to sub-committees or consultants. Neighbourhood Planning takes place in an uncertain world with differences of opinion and groups are often guessing what the LPA, developers and the Examiner will think.

The scope of Neighbourhood Planning - are people trying to solve problems that are best solved in another way?

Groups often want to address non-planning issues such as highways. Supplementary documents can accompany Neighbourhood Plans and collect those ideas that are not Land Use Planning Policies. Perhaps funding could be made available to help these documents turn into Action Plans which share the Vision and Objectives of the Neighbourhood Plan. For some groups affordable housing is an important issue and one that often frustrates them as affordable rates are set strategically. For this reason providing housing directly has been considered by some groups but currently Parish Councils don't have this power.

Groups often complain that Local Planning Authorities don't apply existing planning policy, or make good quality decisions, and in those cases it is questionable what Neighbourhood Planning can do. Perhaps where an LPA policy requires development to protect or enhance character, a Character Assessment can help interpret that policy even if it is produced principally for the Neighbourhood Plan[1], or more clearly strongly worded policies can help in some cases.

What is the role of the planner - what skills do they need?
The emergence of Neighbourhood Planning also defines and requires new roles for the planner. Consultants may need to guide groups but get out of the way when appropriate to avoid taking over thereby disempowering the group, difficult when at meetings the Chair says 'Over to you'.

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[1] See an example of a neighbourhood character assessment here: https://thurstonparishcouncil.uk/thurston-neighbourhood-plan-npd/character-assessment/

Neighbourhoood Planning can encompass many aspects of planning work such as site assessment, heritage, flood risk, retail, housing need, policy development etc. and consultants need the flexibility and broad range of skills to cover these areas in a Neighbourhood Planning context which can be different to a Local Plan context (for example addressing housing need).

Consultants need the skills to get to know their groups who may not articulate what they want in ways familiar to planners. Groups may not be aware of all the potential pitfalls and opportunities so consultants can help by "watching the group's back", as well as helping them to brief other consultants including for technical support packages.

It is important to make sure the groups understand that Neighbourhood Plans are ultimately about land use planning policies. That is not always easy when people read that they can "control development" in their area which is sometimes interpreted as meaning that groups can decide what will or won't be developed.

I have found training can help groups at various stages of the planning process, including the need for evidence, what planning polices can actually do, the importance of being specific, areas like highways, and what to do with ideas that can't translate into planning policies. It seems that project management tools to help manage the process can also help give the groups clarity.

How Neighbourhood Planning fits into the wider planning picture
Neighbourhood Planning was introduced at a similar time as other changes in the Planning System and many Neighbourhood Plans have been produced at the same time as the Local Plan which adds complications but also opportunities to influence the Local Plan.

Courts are increasingly being brought into planning decisions including Neighbourhood Planning, so clear interpretations of related legal decisions are needed particularly where groups are trying to second guess examiners and Local Planning Authorities as it can be hard to be sure what they are going to think despite engagement (see Sturzaker & Gordon, 2017 for a discussion of some legal decisions).

Another issue is that it is not always clear as to what counts as a Strategic Policy where Local Plans don't label their policies as such or what counts as general conformity with them. Where LPAs do not agree with Neighbourhood Planners over this, who decides, the group, the LPA or the Examiner? As regards housing, how Neighbourhood Plans fit in with the Local Authority's Objectively Assessed Need is another tricky area. A housing needs assessment in a Neighbourhod Plan area can give you some numbers but what they mean, and how they relate to the wider housing market, can be a source of tension with LPAs.

Greater control of Community Infrastructure Levy[2] spending is a 'carrot' to encourage Neighbourhood Planning, but in many areas CIL is still only a future possibility where LPAs remain unconvinced that the gains outweigh the administration costs.

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[2] The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a tax on development set at the local authority level to fund infrastructure related to the development. If an area has a Neighbourhood Plan then some CIL receipts are allocated for spending in that Neihgbourhood.

City regions should not affect Neighbourhood Planning as long as the strategic policies with which Neighbourhood Plans need to be in general conformity remain in Local Plans even if there is an overarching City Region Strategic Plan.

Conclusions

Support is vital and is evolving and there have been some positive steps such as the welcome rationalisation of guidance, but the latter must continue to develop in response to feedback. There needs to be more about managing the process including managing support, effective decision making and dealing with the problems groups face. Better project management tools and a database of example and model policies with comments on their implementation and appropriateness would be useful.

Whether the availability of technical support for setting up Forums compensates for the loss of additional grant support for these groups remains to be seen. Close attention needs to be paid to how the split in funding between grant and technical support works out and how the largely remote delivery of discrete packages of technical support work serves the needs of NP groups.

Honest, open dialogue to discuss issues in Neighbourhood Planning is needed in particular on the following issues: skills for consultants and Local Authority planners, how Neighbourhood Planning is 'sold', why uptake varies from place to place, the role of engagement, and whether Planning is all that needs to be devolved to the Neighbourhood level or whether funding and housing powers could join it. There needs to be some means of redress for groups where LPAs are not cooperating and the deep cuts to LPAs budgets are also something that needs to be addressed if capacity to support NP is to be fostered.

Scales of decision in urbanism in France: local autonomy under control

Introduction

Considering local level spatial planning, the situation in France has witnessed important changes over the last 15 to 20 years. Indeed, from the beginning of the 2000s, the planning framework has developed in sophistication both in terms of tools and contents at different levels and scales. These changes were accompanied by a rise of methods of public participation in planning that date back to the mid-1980s. These changes show an evolution towards a more horizontally and vertically spatially integrated system of planning, mainly from local to the regional scale. This focus on infra-national scales can be explained by the French system of territorial governance based, at the lowest level, on numerous local authorities (*communes*)[3], and by the political decentralisation process. Planning tools are consequently aligned with the areas for which elections take place, and the new planning powers which have been decentralised to local authorities. At the same time, the need to have more powerful public authorities at local level has led to the development of formal inter-municipal cooperation and this scale has also gained new powers in terms of spatial planning. Even if these inter-municipal organisations can be considered as the competitors of the municipalities

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[3] France is a country with almost 36,000 local authority (*communes*) areas with an average number of inhabitants of 1,870 and average area of 15 km².

on spatial planning issues, the municipalities are still the scale at which elections take place and whose political legitimacy is supported by a high level of political participation[4].

Nevertheless, despite this situation where local authorities have an important role in terms of spatial planning, the role of the State is still important in legal, financial and wider public policy terms. In addition, the French system of spatial planning at local level tends to consider that all local spaces and elected local bodies have the same resources to deal with spatial planning issues under the assumption that they have been given the same formal tools needed to deal with these issues. Furthermore, as the participation of citizens between elections through mechanisms such as public enquiries at the local level is still mainly consultative in nature, the capacity to really take into account people's voices can be questioned.

The rise of local planning instruments

Before the year 2000, the main regulatory framework for urbanism in France was the *Plan d'occupation des sols*. This was a document drafted at municipal level to plan the long term allocation of the land for a municipality. In 2001, the *Plan local d'urbanisme* (PLU) was introduced which required an analysis of the issues facing a municipal territory and the elaboration of a programme of actions to be taken into account in the local plan. The PLU is used to deliver building permits[5]. At the same time, the *Schéma de cohérence territoriale* (ScoT) was introduced at intermunicipal level, which determines the spatial organisation of a wider local territory and the evolution of its urban areas for the medium and long term. Starting from a development project called a *Projet d'Aménagement et de Développement Durable* (PADD) which presents the major policy orientations in terms of spatial planning, the location and the distribution of the projects envisaged across space is established. At the inter-municipal scale, it is also possible to prepare a PLU, a *Plan local d'urbanisme intercommunal* (PLUI). In that case, it is the PLUI that determines the decisions made in relation to building permits. The SCoT appears then rather as a local strategic planning document. Nevertheless, the PLU/PLUI must be in accordance with strategic orientations of the SCoT. These documents might address issues like housing, economic development, public transport, commercial and small business infrastructures, landscape conservation, enhancement of access to towns, and risk prevention, and aim at insuring the right combination of local sectoral policies. Furthermore, their spatial scope and the obligation of coherence at municipal and inter-municipal levels implies a vertical coordination of plans and actions, even if this is still essentially at a local scale (i.e. even intermunicipal groupings are still local as opposed to regional in extent). Planning at inter-municipal level has been settled to counterbalance the weight of the *communes* in terms of spatial planning, as this level seems sometimes irrelevant to deal with a wise management of spatial issues at local scale. Inter-municipal organisations shall notably allow the management of urban spaces beyond communal frameworks (eg. urban transport) and the articulation between urban spaces and peripheral peri-urban or rural areas (eg. management of peri-urban areas).

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[4] In the last municipal elections in France held in 2014 the turnout across two rounds of voting averaged 63% (data.gouv.fr) ; whist abstention for other local/regional elections these last years has reached 50% (elections at *département* or region levels). In comparison the turnout for English local government elections held in 2017 was 35.1% (https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/234893/Voting-in-2017-Final.pdf).
[5] Not all local territories in France have a PLU or SCoT. Most low density local areas (6 370 *communes* in 2016) have a very simple spatial planning document the *Carte communale* or are regulated by national laws that strongly restrict the possibility to urbanize space (6 228 *communes* in 2017).

A recent reform of spatial planning derived from the 2015 *loi portant nouvelle organisation territoriale de la République* (law on the new organization of the territory of the Republic; often abbreviated to *Loi NOTRe*) implies that French regions have to adopt a planning regional scheme by August 2019 that the local authorities must take into account in their local spatial plans.

These changes show that the French planning system is evolving by integrating elements from the traditional models of countries further north in Europe (the "comprehensive integrated approach" identified by CEC, 1997) into its national framework, with a view to better multi-scalar coordination of planning actions at least between local and regional scales of planning (Santamaria, 2018).

Questioning local capacities, autonomy and democracy

But there is a contradiction in the French situation. On the one hand, national laws oblige local/regional authorities to aim at better spatial integration in terms of planning and, yet on the other the idea of spatial planning at national scale has disappeared since the last attempt made at this in the mid-1990s. This does not mean that the State does not intervene any longer in local spatial planning affairs.

Firstly, the general spatial planning rules and tools are enacted at national level even if each local authority is charged with adapting these to local contexts. Nevertheless, this situation raises the issue of the means (in terms of money, skills, resources, governance, etc.) by which local authorities can prepare their plans and put them into practice; bearing in mind that these means can be very different from one place to another. There is a kind of legal illusion in considering that because all local authorities have the same tools they have the same capacity to act with the same intensity.

Second, the financial means to put into practice spatial planning actions at regional and local level are partly still in the hands of the State via annual and multiannual national funding and grants – the *Contrat de plan État-Région* which are signed for a five year period. The local taxation regulations are also defined by the State, which is an issue when State funding to local authorities has been constantly diminishing for several years. More recently, a portion of local taxation on local businesses has been recentralized at State level and portion of *la taxe d'habitation* (local housing tax) will be soon abolished. All these decisions, have been taken without real dialogue with local authorities, but have an impact on their ability to invest, notably in planning and development.

Third, the State possesses particularly powerful legal tools in the area of spatial planning and interventions in terms of the provision of infrastructure and amenities across the national territory. For example, in certain spaces which are considered to be particularly strategic at the national scale, it can set up *Directives territoriales d'aménagement et de développement durable* in order to protect the environment or enable future developments. While these strategic planning documents prepared directly by the State do not override local planning documents, they open the way for *projets d'intérêt général* initiated by the State, which are then binding for local players. Another legal provision enables the State to intervene directly in spatial planning matters in local territories through the so-called *opération d'intérêt national* mechanism. This relates to the implementation of urbanisation operations under the auspices of the State justified with reference to the national interest. The role played by the State in spatial planning

in the Ile-de-France region should also be mentioned. As the region is considered strategic, the regional authorities share their planning powers with the State for the preparation and implementation of the policy orientations of the regional plan.

Alongside the the role of State in local spatial planning, an issue which can also be raised in terms of local democracy is that today most spatial planning initiatives at local level are led by inter-municipalities. This situation raises the question of the lack of political legitimacy of these organisations led by designated individuals elected in the *communes* and not at intermunicipal level (i.e. through indirect universal suffrage). Until now, the attempts to organise local elections at intermunicipal level have been a failure. For some, this is a important problem in terms of local democracy in so far as people in charge of taking important decisions on spatial planning issues are not directly elected by citizens at the level where decisions are really taken (Desage, Gueranguer, 2011).

A consultative approach to public participation in planning: the "general interest" at stake?

Over recent decades, the above changes have been accompanied by changes in terms of public participation in spatial planning issues, notably in the field of land use planning. Today, nearly all plans and projects must be submitted to public review.

The "public enquiry procedure" concerns spatial planning operations and land use planning documents like the PLU. It consists of collecting the opinions of the populations concerned at the local level by way of a procedure that is intended to guarantee the independence of the decisions taken concerning the plan or project being prepared.

Moreover, an independent national entity, the *Commission nationale du débat public* (CNDP - National Commission for Public Debate) is in charge, 'upstream' of public enquiries, of organising public debate with the populations potentially concerned by planning projects. This body has a consultative role drawing in different stakeholders from the contracting authorities (local, regional, national authorities), private firms and the citizens affected. The National Commission for Public Debate informs citizens and ensures that their point of view is taken into account. In particular, it ensures that the information provided by the project manager is accessible, complete and understandable. As such, it can fund alternative or complementary expertise requested by the public. At the end of the debates, the Commission draws up one or more concluding documents that show all the points of view expressed. It thus specifies the feasibility conditions of the project. The project manager has the legal obligation to respond in a proactive and public manner to the recommendations made by the Commission. To guarantee a certain independence, the Commission is composed of 25 members from different backgrounds: national and local elected representatives, members of the national courts, civil society groups, employers, unions, and experts. This commission has certain similarities with the public hearings used in the USA, and with the *Bureau des audiences publiques sur l'environnement* (BAPE) created in 1978 in Quebec, and these experiences partly influenced the French public debate system (Subra, 2014). In light of this it is interesting to note that the CNDP has itself been suggested as a model for a Commission for Public Engagement (CPE) in infrastructure decision making in the UK (Slade and Davies, 2017).

More widely, the notion of participation has become a leitmotiv among politicians and in legislative provisions for planning operations as a means of working towards a consensus on

what is of a general interest. However, whilst the notion of public participation is often cited, it is never legally defined and its implementation is still, in most cases, based on a consultative approach towards public participation.

More fundamentally, there is a questioning of the notion of the general interest itself. Historically this has been defined in France as an interest that transcends that of individuals, and therefore overrides individual interests. This has been used to justify the implementation of planning operations even if they sometimes contradict the views and preferences of local people. This very conception of a general interest is disputed today as it is seen by some as an ideological device arising from the hegemony of certain groups seeking to impose their decisions on places and on society. This criticism leads to a variable geometry definition of the "general interest" that depends on the convictions, the culture, the values, the representations and the interests of individuals and groups. This can trigger conflicts on spatial planning issues and projects such as those seen in 2014 which saw several protests by opponents of development projects on national or local scale. Some led to violent clashes between police and demonstrators, for instance in the conflict about the construction of a new international airport near Nantes. Consequently, despite the fact that since the 1990s tools for consultation and public enquiry have been developed by the national public authorities, France has seen an increase in such conflict in recent years (Subra, 2014).

Neighbourhood Planning – Panacea, Pragmatic Possibility or Placebo?

In this concluding part of this Policy & Practice, I reflect upon a number of themes which have been raised by both Eddy Taylor and Frederic Santamaria in relation to other research which has been published on Neighbourhood Planning, and report on some empirical findings in the North West of England.

Neighbourhood Capacity

There is a steadily growing corpus of literature on Neighbourhood Planning in England, much of it focussing on the *process* of Neighbourhood Planning, in large part due to the fact that as yet many more communities have begun preparing a plan (in excess of 2,000) than have completed it (around 500). Some of this, particularly early, research challenged some of the assumptions around localism that are noted in the contributions above, such as the desire of communities to take responsibility for producing their own plans (Gallent et al. 2010); and the feasibility of them doing so, with Inch (2014) noting how demanding participation in planning could be for "ordinary" citizens. Due to this, a reliance on professional planners, whether as consultants or because they live in the neighbourhood and have been able to participate as a local resident, has been observed as very common (Sturzaker & Shaw 2015; Vigar, Gunn & Brooks 2017).

Neighbourhood Autonomy

There is a statutory requirement on local authorities to support Neighbourhood Planning groups, but this is very vaguely defined. A number of Neighbourhood Planning groups have reported finding the relationship with their local authority hard to navigate (Parker, Lynn & Wargent 2017), and in at least one case there has been active opposition from the local authority to the production of a Neighbourhood Plan (Sturzaker & Shaw 2015). To explore the level of support provided by local authorities, recent research at the University of Liverpool has

explored the level of support for Neighbourhood Planning offered by local authorities. 45% of the Neighbourhood Plans in the North West are to be found within just two local authorities, Cheshire East (42 Neighbourhood Plans) and Cheshire West & Chester (29 Neighbourhood Plans). Whilst these are the 3rd and 7th least deprived local authorities in the North West, they also offer a great deal of support to communities to undertake Neighbourhood Plans. This support includes a contract with Cheshire Community Action to provide support (in Cheshire West & Chester), a weekly drop-in session for interested communities (in Cheshire East), and a now defunct system of direct grants to communities from Cheshire East. Other local authorities are unable or unwilling to offer this level of support. In part this is due to the variable impact of "austerity", which has been shown to have greater effects on more deprived local authorities (Lowndes & Gardner 2016), but anecdotal evidence suggests some local authorities are resistant to the idea of Neighbourhood Planning.

The Public Interest

How "the public interest" is, or should be, reflected in Neighbourhood Planning is an open question – as of course it is in Planning more broadly (Campbell & Marshall 2002). From the outset, researchers were concerned that Neighbourhood Planning might be a vehicle for better resourced individuals and groups to gain more influence in and over the planning system (Hastings & Matthews 2015), rather than the empowering force it was portrayed as upon its introduction. Research into the practices of Neighbourhood Plan production has found groups limiting consultation due to concerns over where it might lead (Vigar, Gunn & Brooks 2017), a perhaps troubling replication of the "decide-announce-defend" approach to decision-making which planning in England has been accused of in the past (Bell, Gray & Haggett 2005). The role played by the "independent actors" within the system, the independent examiners and the courts, has also come under scrutiny. Parker, Lynn and Wargent (2017) noted that nearly all Neighbourhood Plans were being amended by their examiners, in many cases quite substantially, casting doubt on the extent to power can really be claimed to have "shifted" to communities (DCLG 2012). In contrast, the courts appear to be applying a degree of flexibility in their judgements in relation to Neighbourhood Plans, apparently seeking to give community groups some leeway (Sturzaker & Gordon 2017).

Outcomes of Localism

Beyond these questions about the process of plan-making, we must of course interrogate the outcomes of Neighbourhood Planning, specifically whether a Neighbourhood Plan can empower communities to deliver something different to that of the longer-established model of local planning. The picture is mixed – as noted in an earlier contribution, the Government has claimed that Neighbourhood Plans increase housebuilding by more than 10% (DCLG; & Lewis 2015), but this claim has recently been found "illogical and unreasonable" by the High Court (Planning magazine 2017) due to the lack of evidence supplied. Some communities have reported that they have effectively no more power than they did before, due to the ongoing level of financial and regulatory power held by local authorities and developers (Lord et al. 2017), but other communities have taken the opportunity to put forward their own preferences for housing which can lead to community-led housing initiatives (Bradley & Sparling 2016; Field & Layard 2017) and the consequent redistribution of power.

To achieve this, communities need more support to navigate their way through the complex Neighbourhood Planning process (Field & Layard 2017). Parker, Lynn and Wargent (2017)

interviewed many of those involved in the first Neighbourhood Plans to be "made", and they found only a minority would be willing to get involved in Neighbourhood Planning again, reinforcing the challenges communities have found in putting the system into practice. Notwithstanding these challenges, there is evidence that Neighbourhood Planning could be a powerful and progressive tool to enable communities to come together and challenge the prevailing neoliberal and developer-driven model of planning in England (Williams, Goodwin & Cloke 2014; Bradley & Brownill 2017). For this to be the case, more work is needed to understand more fully why communities, particularly those who are relatively more deprived, have been unable to follow through on their initial interest in Neighbourhood Planning; and indeed on the motivations and experiences of those deprived communities who are persevering.

Conclusion

In this *Policy and Practice* we have compared the English experience of localism with that of France, identifying in the implementation of Neighbourhood Planning in England a number of practical issues which remain unresolved. More broadly, this piece of work serves the purpose of much comparative analysis in Planning – it forces us to look upwards and outwards, reflecting on the assumptions which might implicitly underpin approaches to Planning in different contexts.

One such assumption is the tendency to conflate the concepts of neighbourhood and community, as does the UK Government's guidance on Neighbourhood Planning (MHCLG, 2018). It takes only a moment's reflection to begin thinking through the difference between these terms, with neighbourhood typically referring to a small spatial unit and community to some association of individuals, not necessarily spatial in nature (Barton et al., 2010). The distinction is important for other reasons, not least that the French constitution 'does not recognise the idea of "community", considered to potentially associate an ethnic or religious minority to a geographical space' (Gardesse & Zetlaoui-Leger, 2017, p. 201). Instead the "general interest" is used as a guiding principle, as noted above. Another key difference is that, apparently, the French planning system still rarefies the role of the Planner as expert (Gardesse & Zetlaoui-Leger, 2017), in contrast to England, where some have expressed concern at the deprofessionalisation of Planning amid the rise of citizen-led Neighbourhood Planning (Lord et al. 2017).

These sorts of difference highlight the need, with any analysis/es of particular forms of planning practice, to reflect upon fundamental principles – who holds the power to plan, and who are they planning *for* – another way to consider the classic power over/power to distinction (Clegg et al., 2006). These in turn are fundamental questions to ask about localism in any instantiation, including those of the English and French planning systems. The answers to these questions continue to evolve, and will continue to be subjects of interests to theorists, practitioners and policy-makers.

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[i] Locality is the national membership network for community organisations. See: https://locality.org.uk/ and on Neighbourhood Planning https://locality.org.uk/services-tools/neighbourhood-planning/