Sticking to the script? The co-production of Neighbourhood Planning in England

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Abstract:	Efforts to engage with communities in spatial planning have been criticised as being tokenistic, vehicles for co-option or designed to promote neo-liberal agendas. The introduction of neighbourhood planning in England under the Localism Act (2011) is claimed by proponents to be a step change in the way that local communities are involved in planning their own areas. However, little empirical evidence has yet emerged to substantiate such claims, or provide details about the practices and experiences of NP. The paper highlights that there are numerous parties involved in the co-production of Neighbourhood Development Plans and there are numerous instances where, ideas, policies and priorities that emerge from within neighbourhoods are being 'rescripted' to ensure conformity to a bounded form of collaboration.

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Introduction

This paper sets out findings drawn from a study of 120 neighbourhoods[1] from across England who, at the time of the research discussed here, had completed or were preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) under the auspices of the Localism Act (2011) and associated regulations covering neighbourhood planning (NP) in England[2]. The focus is placed on the experience that the groups have accumulated in developing an NDP. This is particularly important given that there is a great deal of interest in this policy initiative and some early work examining the dynamics of neighbourhood planning case studies has been emerging (see, for example; Defra, 2013; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013; and this journal), but little empirical work with users has been published. This paper therefore contributes needed empirical evidence and also adds to the ongoing debate over how localism is being translated into practice in a post-collaborative neo-liberal era.

It is axiomatic that the views and experiences of participants, alongside claims made on behalf of neighbourhood planning, should be factored in for careful assessment, reflection, and further analysis. For reasons of space and focus this paper necessarily concentrates on the reported views of volunteers in neighbourhood planning, we also acknowledge that there is an ongoing need for theoretically informed critique (see also Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013; Parker and Street, 2015) and further research as indicated towards the end of this paper.

Neighbourhood planning (NP) suggests itself as a collaborative planning form (e.g. Healey 2003) and given thoroughgoing criticisms of the collaborative planning paradigm elucidated by, for example; Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones (1998); Huxley (2000); Hillier (2003); Mouffe (2005); Sager (2009); Swyngedouw (2010) and

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[1] Much of the source data drawn upon here is derived from a research study conducted by the authors (see Parker *et al,* 2014).

[2] The Neighbourhood Planning regulations: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2012/637/contents/made and the Neighbourhood Planning Referendum regulations. See: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2012/2031/made (last accessed August 6th 2014).

Allmendinger and Haughton (2012), neighbourhood planning has been introduced to a somewhat cautious welcome by planning theorists. It has been variously pointed out that a lack of substantive principles undermine the legitimacy of such forms of planning (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 1998) and that this lack may actually serve to jeopardise effective contestation of planning alternatives. There is a concern that dialogic spaces such as NP (Mouffe, 2005) may bundle-up plurality and alterity into some position justified on broad 'public interest' grounds (Campbell and Marshall, 2002). This positionality may or may not include future generations and other absent, or marginalized group interests who may not be able to engage directly (Eversole, 2010). Huxley (2000) in this vein, has contended that the collaborative planning paradigm carries two other important weaknesses i.e. it may be susceptible to co-option by powerful interests, and that proponents have downplayed asymmetries of power and knowledge between participants in dialogic spaces and collaborative forms of planning.

Yet such critique cannot be allowed to close-down this important debate if concerned parties are to challenge and reformulate spatial planning in England as a genuinely co-produced and pluralist activity. One of the challenges then becomes how to design and implement engagement that is somehow proofed against the problems of instrumentalism, co-option and colonization by more dominant actors and interests. It is also accepted however that participation cannot be open-ended and that consensus in a diverse social environment is unlikely (Hillier, 2003; Sager, 2009). Thus we are interested in developing awareness of the technologies of governance employed and that commonly circulate and shape engagement processes and outcomes (Parker and Street, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2005) and how neighbourhood planning groups are navigating through a challenging operating milieu and with a circumscribed mechanism such as neighbourhood planning. This leads us to a consideration of the value of the process and the outcomes of neighbourhood planning, as well as a focus here on how community views are 'rescripted' as a result of the co-production processes anticipated by Gallent (2013) and which highlights issues found in many neighbourhoods of capacity, skills and poor connection to existing planning networks.

Despite difficulties in terms of practice and philosophical critique, successive UK governments have experimented with weak forms of collaborative planning and simultaneously with innovation in public service provision at the local level as part of a wider governance 'shift'. Some of the changes wrought and associated tools have involved elements and forms of partnership and co-production (Ostrom, 1996; Eversole, 2010; Albrechts, 2013; Watson, 2014), which typically claim to involve actors making 'better' use of each other's assets and resources (e.g. knowledge, skills, time, money, facilities) to achieve improved outcomes and efficiencies. This reflects a connecting point between dialogic forms of planning and the exigencies of post-welfare times, including what may be regarded as a creeping neo-liberalisation of the practices of local planning and of the public sector generally (Raco, 2009). These incremental changes and associated mechanisms draw on justifications regarding both questions of cost and of control over pre-established policy aims or dominant tropes (e.g. 'growth', 'investment', 'sustainability'). Such policy shifts and institutional iterations are represented by proponents as innovations and 'gains' for a more participatory governance. The UK Coalition government, when introducing the Localism Bill in 2011, stated this quite clearly; that they were giving local authorities: 'more freedom to work with others in new ways to *drive down costs*. It will give them [LAs] increased confidence to do creative, innovative things to meet local people's needs' (DCLG, 2011: p5, *our emphasis*).

Neighbourhood Planning and the New Localism in Neo-Liberal Times

Efforts to decentralise and bring government closer to citizens or to 'govern through communities' (Rose, 1999) has been mainstream in UK government policies since at least the Major administration (1990-97) and requires compliance of the 'good citizen' to engage on the terms afforded. Rose, drawing from Foucault, stresses that populations are 'governed by freedom'; that the opacity of scope and understanding of what is legitimate or not can precipitate conformity rather than challenge. Bourdieu (1977) explains this by stressing that individual practices usually fall back on learned behaviours and what we have internalized as successful or acceptable socialities. Thus the combination of instruction from authority and loose boundary setting found in the Localism Act (2011) and associated neighbourhood planning regulations, may encourage compartmentalized or isolated thinking (Zizek, 1999), and this combination may, as a result, actually serve to *limit* the imagineering of alternatives.

Such conditions are further emphasised by an approach to town and country planning by the Coalition government and applied to England, that emphasizes a 'control shift' that claims, via the use of a discourse of localism, to empower, but which may act to reinforce centralised control precisely *because* of the opacity and the degrees of self-regulation highlighted by Rose (1999). Into this milieu we need to include the variance and limitations of resources held by neighbourhoods and other actors which also constrain behaviours in conditions of an 'overloaded state' (Rose, R., 1980) where the enabling capacity and attitudes towards participation may be limited and 'necessarily' instrumentalised.

The orientation of neighbourhood planning as explained below, reflects a twin configuration of a guiding State and the need for the good citizen with, in many situations, the involvement of the private sector or business interests to 'improve' matters (Jessop, 2002). This modality typically cites a need to address dissatisfaction with outcomes in local policymaking, secondarily a problematisation of the costs and benefits of public service delivery and a third justification around deficits of representativeness and inclusivity is also heard. All are framed using discourses of accountability and the criticisms are made and displayed as justificatory ramparts for change and selective formulations of 'new' localism aligned with neo-liberal versions of New Public Management thinking (cf. Diefenbach, 2009). This can be discerned in the foreword to the National Planning Policy Framework (2012), applicable in England:

> *'planning has tended to exclude, rather than to include, people and communities. In part, this has been a result of targets being imposed, and decisions taken, by bodies remote from them. Dismantling the unaccountable regional apparatus and introducing neighbourhood planning addresses this'* (DCLG, 2012: pi).

Despite widespread scepticism, New Localist initiatives such as neighbourhood planning may provide a platform for agenda setting and voice for communally held views. The approach also holds *potential* for a more pluralist planning. Yet the critique outlined briefly above highlights the potential subjugation of difference and dissensus when and if instrumental pragmatism, whereby 'getting things done', becomes a dominant rationale in neighbourhood planning. In such circumstances the main concern *can appear* to be getting the task 'over and done with' and seeking to organise engagement and co-production activity in an instrumental fashion and in

such a way that suits the organiser, rather than serving a wider (or even a narrower), 'public interest' (e.g. Honig, 1993; Rydin, 2003). There is a view derived from the above, and bearing in mind the rules imposed around neighbourhood planning, that this could become little more than an instrumentalist tool to effect centralism locally; aimed largely therefore at those willing to engage on the limited terms offered. We reflect on this later based on the findings presented, after first setting out a brief description of neighbourhood planning in England.

The Practice of Neighbourhood Planning under the Localism Act (2011)

The Localism Act (2011) placed neighbourhood planning on a statutory footing, but it is non-mandatory, with the decision to produce a Neighbourhood Development Plan (or Neighbourhood Development Order) resting with the 'neighbourhood'. If the option to do this is taken up the completed neighbourhood plan will become part of the statutory 'plan-led' planning system in England (see Gallent and Robinson, 2012; Parker, 2012). The extent to which control over the content has been ceded to neighbourhoods is important. While 'rules of the game' for NP exist and are imposed, they have been presented by Government in such a way that *appears* to allow for significant influence:

> *'Instead of local people being told what to do, the Government thinks that local communities should have genuine opportunities to influence the future of the places where they live. The Act introduces a new right for communities to draw up a neighbourhood plan'* (DCLG, 2011: p12).

Such was the enthusiasm for neighbourhood planning in government that 'Vanguard', (then renamed 'Frontrunner') groups had been encouraged to begin to prepare neighbourhood plans in advance of the enactment of the Localism Bill. Indeed the virtues of neighbourhood planning were extolled as part of the Conservative Party's agenda even before the election of May 2010 and a policy paper *Open Source Planning* set out a vision for a re-orientated planning system where:

> *'Local people in each neighbourhood… will be able to specify what kind of development and use of land they want to see in their area… this will lead to a fundamental and long overdue rebalancing of power, away from the centre and back into the hands of local people'* (Conservative Party, 2010: p2).

This apparent desire to enable neighbourhoods to specify the kind of development in their area through a neighbourhood plan was to be enabled by a series of

'community rights' enabled through a 'powerful set of tools for local people to ensure that they get the *right types* of development for their community' (DCLG, 2012: p44, our emphasis). Despite reservations from some commentators and local authorities, these tools, in particular the option of producing a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) has gained significant momentum after featuring in the Localism Act. By Autumn 2014 well over 1200 groups were using neighbourhood planning tools according to the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The Localism Act also introduced a 'duty to support' neighbourhood planning on local authorities in their area. This places local authorities as important partners who hold knowledge, resources and power to shape the progress and content of NDPs. In order to co-produce the Plans. many of the participating neighbourhoods have been drawing on government funded support which often manifests itself in planning consultancy input which supplements local authority support.

While a detailed overview of the neighbourhood planning process is not possible here (see for example Locality, 2012), the regulations that structure NP does require clear, if brief, explanation. The NDP process involves producing a plan for the whole neighbourhood area with the focus and marshalling of discussions, evidence and views all convened and directed at the neighbourhood scale.   Local actors work together to produce the Plan, with the neighbourhood level 'Qualifying Body'; either the existing town or parish council or the specially formed Neighbourhood Forum overseeing the plan preparation – usually through a steering group.

The groups work to a scheme set out in the NP regulations and the NDP, if deemed to be acceptable, becomes a statutory document with associated weight in decision-making, but in order to be finalised or 'made' NDPs need to conform to policy from the national level (i.e. the NPPF) and the strategic policies of the Local Plan (i.e. show 'general conformity'), as well as comply to various European level directives. Together an NDP must fulfil these 'basic conditions' (see Locality, 2012: p38). There are prescribed stages set out in the neighbourhood planning regulations (UK Government, 2012a,b). Each stage - and the consideration of what is to be done and how it should be done - is therefore shaped by a number of factors, including: the stipulations of the NP regulations; the emerging accepted view of allowable practices advised by DCLG; advice of support organizations such as Planning Aid and Locality;

and the dynamics of the NP steering group, community members and independent examiners. Taken together this situation indicates a much more heavily prescriptive environment than government pronouncements might otherwise suggest.

Methodology

A sample of 120 neighbourhood planning groups who had been involved in NP activity for at least six months were interviewed using a structured interview, involving a mix of open and closed questions to generate both qualitative and quantitative data. A series of six focus groups were convened with various types of neighbourhood planning groups operating in differing contexts to discuss key points emerging. The NP groups were spread across England and comprised 70 Parished areas (mostly classed as rural) and 50 Neighbourhood Forum areas (predominately urban). This data collection focussed on gathering evidence about what issues and means were most relevant to the groups in terms of enabling and constraining successful plan-making and across the stages of plan-making. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and the qualitative data was coded and analysed thematically (see Parker et al, 2014: p8-16 for more detail).

User Experiences of Neighbourhood Development Planning

We wanted to understand who instigated neighbourhood planning in each area and, as expected, there was substantial variation regarding who prompted this activity: the largest group who acted to initiate neighbourhood planning was the Parish and Town Councils (in 60 of the parished areas). In the Forum areas, 66% of NDPs were instigated by an individual or existing community group. In 35% of the cases overall it was indicated that the Local Authority had acted to initiate neighbourhood planning - reflecting their lead in the piloting of neighbourhood planning with selected and willing Frontrunner neighbourhoods in 2011 and 2012 (see Defra, 2013; London Assembly, 2012; Parker, 2012).

Several main reasons for embarking on neighbourhood planning were revealed, with key motivations for starting a neighbourhood plan stated to be reinvigorating the local area and protecting the desirable characteristics of the neighbourhood. Perhaps unsurprisingly, more than two-thirds of the interviewees stressed that they wanted to

have more influence; with a greater say in planning and development in their own areas and in shaping a future vision for the neighbourhood:

'We wanted to stop situations where we weren't being listened to, and give the community a voice.' [Int. 3]

'The bottom line was to get the community to be involved in thinking about planning policies for the future' [Int. 18].

'…to have genuine involvement of local people in planning decisions, it's just the sheer process of involvement' [Int. 36]

'In theory we should have more power now under the Localism Act - if you're not part of it you don't get a say, so that's why we started. Hopefully Neighbourhood Planning will give us some say, people comment that we [the Parish Council] don't have any more power than an individual, so we want to have our voice listened to' [Int. 68]

The responses collected about *motives* for embarking on neighbourhood plans were ranged on a continuum from simply wishing to be 'involved' to actively challenging the Local Authority on its approach to their neighbourhood. The overriding message was that the neighbourhoods wanted more control and the ability to influence, as well as to plan for the future. The theme of shaping a local vision was raised throughout the responses and was more prominent than shaping specific projects or land use policies. The issue of gaining a degree of community control was often portrayed as desirable, in contrast to prior experience of decision making by the Local Authority that was often perceived negatively.

Previous research (e.g. Gallent, 2013; Parker and Murray, 2012) has indicated that such neighbourhood activities are typically led by a small team of people who act to steer a community-led planning process (i.e. not necessarily the full set of people constituting the Qualifying Body or a large body of community members) and this was confirmed by this research. In most places it was a small group of people who were the main force behind progress. These key people in the community drove things forward; often with key skills or professional backgrounds. Many respondents indicated the presence of pertinent skills and knowledge within the neighbourhood and general town planning knowledge was present in more than half of the groups interviewed. Many groups claimed to be without one or more useful skills however and it was recognized that planning skills were crucial to Plan progress. Where these

were not available internally they had been brought in (very often consultant support) and such planning knowledge was deemed particularly useful in the plan writing stages. Overall it appeared that any lack of skills experienced introduced delay rather than being fatal to the progress of the Plan, but as discussed later; this did affect the form and content of the Plan and the role of private consultants.

Reaching milestones or key stages in the neighbourhood planning process e.g. successfully achieving Designated Area status, or producing a draft Plan, was highlighted by some as providing motivation and encouragement to continue with the Plan and some interviewees stressed how the process had been good for drawing people together. This suggests that neighbourhood plans may act as a catalyst for further democratic engagement, and could act as a focal point for further participation. Motivations and aims for the NP groups involved a mixture of frustration regarding past planning outcomes and processes, as well as hope that the neighbourhood plan could effect more control and assist in projecting a future better attuned to the needs and preferences of the existing population. Some groups were clear that they had a feeling of disenchantment with past practices and relations between the local authorities and the community. It was also stated in the focus groups that the establishment of a Forum was a significant achievement for non-parished areas as it was hoped that the Forum could provide a platform to engage with the Local Authority and give some enhanced 'standing' to community voices. So while the focus group participants recognized potential this also resonates with identified strategies for incorporating and managing engagement rather than enabling a more pen discursive local politics (see, for example; Honig 1993; Raco et al, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2005).

The interviewees were asked about specific delays or problems with writing the neighbourhood plan and the main factors cited included issues that related *to* the *plan writing* elements. This reflects somewhat of a disjuncture between early stages of NP and the types of skills and understandings needed as firstly; facilitators of community engagement and latterly as 'policy integrators' and para-legal writers. This was blamed partly on a lack of planning knowledge (emphasising '*what* to do' issues) but a deeper set of substantive challenges were revealed i.e. questions of '*what'* and '*why'* plan? which manifested in a need for repeated drafts, with multiple

amendments and the rescripting of 'community aspirations' into what was typically termed *'planning language'.* One respondent argued that 'if the residents are to understand it, it needs to be a local writing it' (Int. 20). Thus the time/effort/financial resources required to develop this skillset placed a significant burden on the small core group of people to progress the Plan; some cited the work as constituting a 'full time job'. Interactions with the Local Authority and other advisors which acted to steer their progress did in some cases leave a feeling that the neighbourhood volunteers had lost a degree of 'ownership' of the Plan.

Interviewees did feel however that their neighbourhood planning was navigating the NP system reasonably well. The interviewees were asked to reflect on whether neighbourhood planning had proved to be what they *expected* with over half (55%) who thought that it was broadly as they imagined. When asked to explain whether neighbourhood planning had proved to be more *burdensome* than expected almost half of the sample asserted that it involved more work and they had encountered more bureaucracy than anticipated it was also argued that NP was an elaborate process. Although others claimed that, whilst it has been hard, they entered into the process with an understanding that would involve some 'learning by doing'. Some felt that neighbourhood planning had not delivered as much power or control as they expected and there was some scepticism about the likely outcomes; for them it was not clear whether the NDP will *actually* give more say in planning and development; partly because of perceived limited room for manoeuvre and partly due to a loss of ownership of the 'planning script'.

There is an established point found in the community engagement literature about preparation and knowledge of participatory processes and their limits (Flinders and Dommett, 2013). Equally investment in early phases of planning that features discussion and awareness raising amongst the community is seen as important (Parker and Murray, 2012). These studies showed that outcomes were significantly 'better' where expectations were managed and good preparation was made. Our findings appear to reinforce such points and preparatory work in developing awareness and understanding of issues and building local capacity was seen as important amongst the sample. Some respondents indicated that previous work in community-led planning had aided their capacity and tempered their expectations of

neighbourhood planning. However concerns regarding the nature of the content and the orientation of the final Plan remained and in our view these issues require further exploration still.

The focus group sessions revealed some concern over the quality and extent of the engagement undertaken and, given the work reported here, which did not examine the detail of the process, there is a need to more fully understand the methods and quality of consultation and engagement undertaken in NP. Moreover how the views and preferences of all community members and interests are discussed, retained, blended or discarded during the process of neighbourhood planning (and particularly when reaching the final stages) is clearly important, as reflected upon below.

Developing and writing the neighbourhood plan with others

As intimated above most groups had overcome difficulties in progressing the Plan either themselves, or with assistance from planning consultants and the Local Authority. It is notable that a large number of neighbourhoods had relied on consultant input for at least some tasks or stages of neighbourhood planning (69%) and it was at the plan-writing stage that the perceived reliance on planning consultants was identified as critical:

> *'the whole process is designed for professionals; outside our scope'* [Int. 57]

> *'Communities need significant assistance translating ideas and theory to the Plan and planning language'* [Int. 1]

> '*Guidance implies we can put a broader range of things in the Plan than in reality you can…support would have speeded it up immensely*' [Int. 72]

> *'The community just haven't got the expertise*' [Int. 5]

There was a recognition of the need for local authority support and the neighbourhood planning experience so far showed a mixed picture of local authority support. The work showed that the steering groups lacked confidence and that their Local Authority involvement was critical to progress throughout all of the stages. The inputs had be established more clearly however given there were some reported difficulties with the timeframes in which some local authorities operated and consequent delays, as well as variable levels and quality of support:

'[I] urge all parishes, towns, forums starting up to try to do the process in partnership with the Local Planning Authority.' [Int. 6]

'Someone at the end of line all the time would be good, not just independent consultants…to help with stipulations, anything, procedural, how deep do certain tasks [need to be] - just to discuss and add reassurance and maybe tell communities where to look for the answer.' [Int. 8]

'The Local Authority could be more proactive in communications, should keep people better informed of other local planning and policies going on. Should be more proactive on approaching groups and keeping on board'. [Int. 11]

'In our experience, more and more timely help from the Local Planning Authority [would help] … pulling people together and getting an overview of what's happening has been excellent, that's the best way to ease the burden' [Int. 27]

'We need a guru at the next level to co-ordinate.' [Int. 53]

These types of experiences underpinned a common refrain about a need for more clarity and more detailed guidance on the process and the scope of action in NP and which was urged by most groups participating in the research.

Further evidence of local authority intervention in NP included the imposition or changes to existing neighbourhood boundaries. The existing administrative Ward, or in some cases parish boundaries, were not deemed appropriate in some places by neighbourhood groups themselves and this was expanded upon in the focus groups. Some thought the 'default' boundaries were too large for the resources available and would be too varied in terms of neighbourhood make-up or character. In some local authorities were apparently wishing to impose alternative boundaries for some places, and for their own reasons:

'Local Authority changed the area…controversial issue was surrounding areas – some didn't want council estates in the area. It was redrawn only to include nice areas. Community have a slightly broader boundary definition' (Int. 76)

> *'We have a recognised town boundary but the Local Authority misunderstood this process and essentially said 'no' to our boundary'* (Int. 79)

> *'Local council refusing to put a large [brownfield] site into the Neighbourhood Development Plan... site has other parishes adjoining it… invited together as group of communities to influence [the site owner]. Debated having a big neighbourhood area but [Local Authority] kicked that into touch' (*Int. 113)

> *'…smaller areas – hard to dictate – confusion is that some areas are doing Neighbourhood Planning for three streets and some doing a large rural environment. It's not the area but the mixture of issues.* We feel the area might be wrong, because we're corresponding with Local Neighbourhood Partnerships' (Int. 48)

There was concern expressed by some interviewees that the 'duty to support' NP which the Localism Act introduced needs to be operationalised in a more accountable fashion, given that the nature and extent of such support is not specified. There were clear frustrations experienced by some Qualifying Bodies in respect of local authorities, while others were pleased with the approach and relations fostered through neighbourhood planning. This also highlights that there is clearly a gap in knowledge about the capacity, attitudes and behaviours towards NP amongst local authorities and which requires further attention.

As recalled above, it has been suggested that where public expectation is adequately managed, the outcomes of participatory initiatives can be improved significantly. However there is a danger that such outcomes have effectively been choreographed; and there is a well-established understanding of the dangers of forcing community participants into a frame that suits the agents or promoters of the process (Eversole, 2010; Parker and Street, 2015). This corresponds to work on co-production in planning which brings into question the dangers of assuming that co-production processes can or do avoid the co-option of participants into pre-conceived schema (Watson, 2014).

While the early stages of NDP production were seen as being more about community development and were more open and discursive, it was in the latter stages that respondents saw that the nature and types of skills and knowledge shifted over to more technical 'planning' and at this point the professional planners exerted influence

over the style and content. In the latter stages of NDP production it emerged that in numerous cases some distance was created between the final draft plan and the ideas and form that the neighbourhood had wanted to put forward initially. Interviewees saw pertinent issues involving questions of drafting and redrafting; where a danger of loss of control and ownership was recognized and set against concerns over passing the imposed tests at independent examination and referendum. Some groups were ready to be pragmatic about the Plan and its form and content, while others were less willing to become so instrumental. The specific content affected varied and included a range of deemed 'non-land use planning' matters, attempts to impose restrictions on development and more general wording deemed by consultants to be unsuitable for decision-makers or for robust defence of NDPs under legal challenge.

This process of translating inputs from the community and other sources of evidence and creating a draft plan is a critical stage that cuts across several of the formal neighbourhood planning process stages. A key tension of neighbourhood planning undoubtedly lies in the relationship between amateur/volunteer and professional/expert voices and their competencies, as Gallent (2013: p380) also highlights. The draft NDP often went through a series of amendments, ostensibly to ensure that it conformed to the NP regulations and the other basic conditions. Interviewees continually highlighted the fact that community aspirations had to be translated and rescripted into planning language, often to the detriment of community desires and affecting legibility. This was performed jointly between the Local Authority, consultants and the NP steering group itself and may be read as part of an instrumentalist co-production. Such a phenomenon was seen as a possible outcome in neighbourhood planning by Gallent (2013) and was observed and highlighted by both Watson (2014) and Honig (1993) and in planning and local governance more generally.

Some of the comments made about the 'professionalisation' of the NP process, as opposed to neighbourhood planning being truly a community-led process, highlight the views and experiences of input from the consultants and the local authorities, and indicate that many participants had accepted that their ideas 'needed' to be 'rescripted' (cf. Haughton et al, 2010: Gallent, 2013: p393). This pragmatic

disposition was seemingly sustained by the instrumental desire to 'succeed' in getting a Plan completed. It is notable that many of the consultants and local authority officers involved were also 'learning on the job', and appeared to default to a default 'safety first' mode when interpreting both their role and the NP regulations. There is also an associated issue here, in that professional planners may actually be sidelined into performing a task of ensuring procedural compliance, rather than focussing on substantive matters as professionals trained to oversee appropriate scope and inclusivity and quality of research and evidence and to help realise aspirations. This brings into view the roles that actors are directed into by the requirements of the regulatory frame, limitations of knowledge and moreover the restrictions of available resources. Such conditions clearly shape the product as well as the process.

As such the co-production relations that are evident thus far are not necessarily benign. Neighbourhood plans are necessarily co-produced and the study foregrounds the need to more closely examine and understand how such relations are developed, maintained and on what basis. Some NP groups are continuing their Plans without consultants and with little or no local authority support. The experiences of such groups also needs to be investigated further and act in part as a counterbalance or control to be juxtaposed to the evidence presented here, as well as to enable comparison of NDP content in different operating contexts (e.g. urban/rural; affluent/deprived; local plan/ no local plan; growth pressure/weak property market - and see Parker et al, 2014).

There is clearly room for local authorities to both increase and refine support for neighbourhood planning groups. The question marks still remain however regarding the modality and management of NP. In particular how and why bottom-up aspirations or priorities are actually dealt with and reflected upon in substantive terms and in the light of needs and priorities (pre)established nationally or locally. At present it is difficult to see how an NDP reflects the neighbourhood interest or is even a negotiated hybrid of 'national' and neighbourhood interest. Instead the danger is that the Plan and its content simply results in performing national agendas, or conversely reflecting the predilections of a small group of people residing in the neighbourhood, or indeed achieving both.

Conclusion

The neighbourhood planning project initiated by the Coalition over the past four years has clearly been experimental and learning has been generated for all parties. However what exactly are we left with? The conditions of operation as discussed may be constricting neighbourhood plans and the groups involved to such an extent that this first phase of NP activity (i.e. 2011-2014) needs to be reflected upon critically by policymakers, let alone academics. It was apparent that the combination of factors discussed above are creating pressure on NP groups and their advisors to behave conservatively and begs a question for at least some groups and commentators about why they should 'bother' (Brownill and Parker, 2010); what added value is being achieved? Perhaps even more pertinently are NDPs acting to exclude possibilities rather than create spaces for dialogic, transactive planning to emerge?

While the findings demonstrated that the sample of neigbourhood planning areas were progressing well in broad terms, when measured against neighbourhood planning stages. Skills were being used within communities and otherwise largely being brought in where required. Moreover the understanding of NDPs and wider planning issues is apparently being developed in many places. There are numerous areas that could be looked at to 'improve' the process and to mitigate against some of the issues raised here. These include; ensuring that further clarity over the *duty to support* on local authorities is established and as part of this a protocol or *memoranda of understanding* between the local authority and the Qualifying Body could be a useful requirement. This could at least ensure that the level, type, timing and nature of the respective inputs required are recognized (see also Parker *et al*, 2014).

The current design and application of NP may be characterized as being instrumentally driven, given the emphasis on current government priorities and the need for such plans to be in conformity with higher level planning policy. Thus a wider conceptual point is to be made about the respective roles of different actors involved in neighbourhood planning and the overall relationship maintained and directed at the aim of producing robust neighbourhood plans. This research indicates that Plans are being shaped and altered for instrumental reasons by *all* parties

involved. There is also a suspicion that the NDPs that are progressing reflect the resources assembled in each neighbourhood, rather than actually highlighting the issues and scope of content that a plan could (or should) otherwise embrace. One reading of this situation is that many of the groups who have taken up neighbourhood planning are willing to behave instrumentally, on the premise that the outcome will be of *some* benefit i.e. in the hope that they may have a degree of influence on the future of the neighbourhood.

There is clearly a danger that the concerns and options that are generated by early neighbourhood planning process stages are rescripted; written out of the draft Plan – removed from the field of social design - or otherwise downplayed. This may be presented by some as necessary to ensure conformity, or to help manage intra-community relations and maintain agreement from the Local Authority. Such concerns have encouraged the practice of rescripting of early draft plans in order to ensure what might be termed, after Callon (1986), 'obligatory passage'. This leaves a series of questions to ponder; including substantive points about the difference that NP will actually make and the circumstances in which NDP activity is worthwhile, leaving aside any process benefits This corresponds to classic rational choice questions intimated above, including 'what's in it for me?' / why bother?' (cf. Parker, 2012; Rydin and Pennington, 2010; Brownill and Parker, 2010) which need to be answered if NP is to be self-sustaining.

Smith (2011) queries when such activity becomes merely co-option and, given the NP environment and observed co-production practices, we think there is a need to acknowledge who, how and on what basis the different parties will and should contribute to neighbourhood planning in the future. A genuine reflection on *how* to plan as well as *what* to plan for needs to be communicated effectively to all parties. Neighbourhoods need know to what they are committing and what the processes and aims, including the implications of any necessary 'airframing', really are. In our view the lead in this does need to be taken by the state; acting as a genuine broker of inclusive, transactive planning (Friedmann, 1973). As part of this Watson (2014) argues that the state does need to keep 'reserve powers' in order to ensure that co-production processes are resilient enough to prevent colonization by self-serving interests. This role cannot be left without oversight however and others do need to be

involved in co-creating the boundaries. There is a complementary point then about how to maintain the integrity of (re)forms of neighbourhood planning, which in turn is clearly relevant as part of wider discussions about *who* is doing the planning and the need for education about public policy aims and the purposes of planning; implying a (continuing) role for disinterested intermediaries, as others have indicated (e.g. Gallent, 2013).

For Albrechts (2013) emancipatory, or at least fair, co-production needs a fundamental shift in power, which of course parallels similar assessments of collaborative planning practice. This highlights how a careful balance is required in relation to co-production and planning and the types of considerations that are recognized and which influence behaviour. The orthodox claim that co-production involves not only partnership, but actors making better use of each other's assets and resources to achieve better outcomes and improved efficiency. Such reflections may also assist government and local government to figure out how to make most effective use of scarce resources for community engagement in planning activity, or for community-led planning. Moreover appropriate resources and spaces need to be *sustained* to enable knowledges and understandings to develop amongst co-producers of such plans and policies. Notwithstanding this type of call for investment and stability there are a range of aspects or areas of NP practice that still need to be better understood. The findings of this study tend to reinforce concerns about past efforts to devise forms of collaborative planning elsewhere and highlights a need to maintain a critical perspective toward co-production. Equally however NP is a significant shift – a statutory process that opens a space of possibility that local planning authorities cannot ignore and central government are unlikely to abandon. This important iteration in the way that planning is being operationalised in England needs critical and supportive attention if it is to be sustained in practice and in theory, and enable any potential NP holds in opening-up planning as a pluralist, civic enterprise.

Addendum: towards an agenda for neighbourhood planning research

Although not nearly comprehensive, we outline an agenda for further research below. There are a significant number of avenues for investigation across key aspects of neighbourhood planning which appear to us to merit attention:

i. To explore more fully the factors and rationales which affect decisions to engage with neighbourhood planning in *non-participating* neighbourhoods;

ii. Development of a deeper understanding of the most effective *roles, relations and divisions of labour* between the main actors involved (e.g. neighbourhood planning steering groups, local authorities, central government, consultants and others) and discern how such divisions were shaped;

iii. Exploration of the inertias and challenges for *local authorities*, the knowledge of and attitudes to NP, as well as the benefits in terms of informing local policy and the behaviour of local authorities in terms of *inter alia* time taken, approaches to boundary setting / area designation;

iv. Closer understanding of the *basis and process of the drafting* or 'rescripting' of Neighbourhood Development Plan content and, linked to this;

v. A detailed review of the *content of neighbourhood plans* would be useful to reflect on the ambition/scope of the Plans, and to explore the rationale for inclusion or exclusion of topics or policies (linked to iv);

vi. Examination of the relationship and influence of neighbourhood planning activity and outcomes on *local planning processes and structures*;

vii. Assembly of case study evidence on the *inputs, costs and expenditures* involved in neighbourhood planning, overall and to the different parties involved.

viii. The tracking of *implementation and the revision of NDPs* after achieving 'made' status (i.e. when sufficient time and experience has passed).

Acknowledgement

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