

Section 4 – new spaces for policy

Chapter 11 - Localism, neighbourhood planning and community control: the MapLocal pilot

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Introduction

In this chapter we examine a contradiction in contemporary regeneration between a discourse of putting communities in control whilst creating policy instruments that disempower the poorest. Our focus is the Neighbourhood Plan, introduced as part of the Localism Act, 2011, which epitomises this contradiction. The localism agenda apparently offers greater choice to communities, but in practice this new approach to the redevelopment of neighbourhoods requires expertise, organisational capacity and finance in a way that favours already well-resourced communities. Thus the rhetoric of community empowerment within this new policy landscape has done little to overcome the mechanisms by which the middle-classes have historically taken disproportionate benefit from public services (Matthews & Hastings, 2013).

MapLocal, the project described here, was an attempt to tip the scales back slightly by providing a tool for communities to begin the process of neighbourhood planning. The tool was limited to tackling the first stage of a plan-making process, gathering community intelligence about issues facing the neighbourhood and suggestions for change. In doing so, we placed community knowledges at the forefront of a plan making process, though with the important caveat that such knowledges and aspirations need to be analysed and mediated, both within a community and with expert knowledges from outside. This, arguably, requires a much greater degree of state involvement than is permitted within the current neoliberal discourse that dominates planning policy.

After assessing the potential the MapLocal offers to improve the neighbourhood planning process, we critically assess the issues with devolving decision making to neighbourhoods. We conclude that neighbourhood planning does offer some real opportunities for developing democratic discourse at the neighbourhood scale. Nonetheless, this potential is unrealised and the policy offers a sop to middle class NIMBYism while doing little to enable more deprived communities to shape changes and see improvements to the areas in which they live.

The ‘failure’ of community regeneration and the rise of localism

The New Labour period (1997-2010) saw a return to building in city centres at a scale not seen since the post-war reconstruction, characterised by shiny, high density

complexes of well appointed, if rather small, apartments. Distinct from flagship projects in city cores, however, a plethora of policies were focused on community renewal, attempting to help struggling neighbourhoods via a combination of social, economic and infrastructure investments. By dint of their greater visibility, over time it tends to be the infrastructure projects that are remembered, rather than, say, grassroots-driven attempts at social renewal through building confidence and skills. As such perhaps the clearest legacy of New Labour community renewal was in large neglected areas of housing undergoing major programmes of demolition/refurbishment, radically altering the tenure mix through bringing in third sector providers of social housing and a higher proportion of owner occupiers (Jones & Evans, 2013).

These kinds of New Labour community renewal schemes followed the general drift of policy established by the previous Conservative Government, bringing in private and third sector partners to deliver projects. Within these approaches, the idea of 'community' took on a particular importance as another partner within the process, giving these schemes a veneer of democratic accountability, although communities were, in practice, rather sketchily defined and always the 'partner' with the least resources to bring to any negotiation over priorities (Imrie & Raco, 2003). It should come as no surprise, therefore, that many of these policies, particularly the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders (Cameron, 2006), proved controversial, not least for the way that market mechanisms were assumed capable of solving entrenched socio-economic problems in communities (Webb, 2010).

Rather than examining the impacts of long term structural inequality, the right-leaning thinktank ResPublica has suggested that these kinds of schemes failed where community engagement was not taken seriously enough (Kaszynska et al., 2012). This has not just been a critique on the political right, with a clear tension between the New Labour rhetoric on community engagement in regeneration and a policy framework that fostered displacement and gentrification (Lees, 2014). The discourse that has emerged under the Coalition since 2010 has been one of arguing that communities should be able to take much greater control over developments within their neighbourhoods. In some ways this is a classic neoliberal move – emphasising individual choice to solve collective problems – and few politicians would want to come out against people being given more power. Thus while the Localism Act, 2011 represented a sea change in English spatial planning for many reasons, it was explicitly positioned against the perceived failures of New Labour era top-down planning by apparently placing communities at the heart of the process. The problem is that while the neighbourhood's totemic power as the seat of community policy has been reinforced by the Localism Act, this has been accompanied by a shift in approach from an at least nominal commitment to redistribution, toward self-help without any additional resources being devolved down to the neighbourhood (Bailey & Pill, 2011, 940). Thus the context for the Localism Act

was not demands for greater democratic accountability over local decision making, but a desire to enforce swingeing central government cuts to public expenditure, particularly targeting regional and local government and asking communities to solve their own problems (Westwood, 2011).

Governing the local

The Localism Act contained a number of policy innovations that alter the relationship between local government, communities and urban development. In this chapter we focus on just one, the introduction of Neighbourhood Plans. The Localism Act gives power to communities to produce statutorily-binding spatial plans for development in their neighbourhood. Although this is powerful symbol of devolving control to communities, in practice this transfer of power is somewhat less clear cut. Neighbourhood planning as it emerged in the Localism Act was developed in Open Source Planning, a Conservative Party policy paper published before the 2010 general election (Conservative Party, 2010). Bishop (2010) argues that this paper drew on false assumptions that the system of parish and market town plans promoted under New Labour could be a model for more devolved planning structures. In practice it was highly unusual for these rural planning documents to engage with one of the key tenets of spatial planning – determining what kinds of development should happen on which sites – yet this would be at the core of the proposed new Neighbourhood Plans (Bishop, 2010, 620).

Transferring an approach to planning conceptualised for rural areas into complex urban contexts is also problematic from a governance point of view. Although parish councils exist for small settlements in rural areas, there is no equivalent structure below the level of the local authority for neighbourhoods in urban areas. The Localism Act thus created a new governance structure – the Neighbourhood Forum – for coordinating activity at this scale. Neighbourhood Forums are intended to be established through grassroots efforts by communities to gather at least 21 people from across the geographic area they seek to control, write a constitution and then apply to the local authority to create a new Forum. From the outset, therefore, this privileges those with the time, money and education to determine that they want to write a Neighbourhood Plan and organise themselves to do this. It also raises the possibility of conflict as rival groups seek to draw boundaries around the same areas in different ways. In practice, larger local authorities like Birmingham City Council have therefore taken a lead on coordinating the establishment of Forums, although in Birmingham these still only covered around 40% of the population by the end of 2013 – and many of these remain inactive.

Even assuming enough interest in a community to sustain a Neighbourhood Forum, there are still considerable barriers to establishing a Plan. Plans need to conform to

both the local authority's own statutory plans and also the National Planning Policy Framework. Given that the NPPF places an emphasis on growth and removing the barriers to development, in practice Neighbourhood Plans are about saying 'yes' to development rather than resisting it. No matter how much local opinion might want to stop supermarket chains moving in to the neighbourhood, prefer affordable housing over luxury flats, or want to keep out undesirable facilities such as bail hostels and strip clubs, this cannot be written into the Neighbourhood Plan. Thus bottom-up, community-led planning is very clearly delimited. Haughton et al., (2013) have referred new governance structures like Neighbourhood Forums as being 'soft spaces' and argue that they are complicit in reinforcing neoliberal growth imperatives. Although there is some apparent community control, they only '...allow for particular demands to be voiced and negotiated, as long as they do not question and disrupt the overarching framework of market-led development.' (Haughton et al., 2013, 222).

Neighbourhood Plans also need to be produced to a format that fits with the formal strictures of the planning system since they will be given statutory weight. This requires considerable expertise both to gather local opinion on what the priorities should be and then condense this into a formal document. Finally, if approved by the local authority, the Neighbourhood Plan must then be passed in a referendum held in the area which it covers. Given this level of complexity, Colenut (2012, 15) has suggested that the majority of the money given to local authorities to facilitate Neighbourhood Planning will need to be spent examining the submitted plans and running local referendums, leaving little to give direct assistance to the Forums attempting to actually draw these up in the first place.

It becomes clear that putting a Neighbourhood Plan together is an exceedingly time consuming process, requiring considerable expertise and highly limited in what it can achieve. Unsurprisingly therefore, the wider Localism Act has elicited considerable cynicism. Durman (2012, 680), for example, argues that it can:

"...be read as an indicator of a state disillusioned with its capacity of fulfilling its role as long-term mediator and fair arbiter of social processes to such an extent that it outsources to its own citizens the capacity of mediating those conflicts without providing a structurally sound platform of social justice on which such mediations and adjudication can take place."

The issues around mediating conflict are exceedingly important and the ways discursive spaces are constructed poses a critical challenge facing more participatory approaches to governance (Fischer, 2006). This is a point we will return to later. Nonetheless, in the pilot project described here we wanted to move away from a somewhat despairing discourse of cynicism about the reforms to planning. We chose instead to try to engage

more positively with the potential Neighbourhood Plans offer, in theory at least, to give communities more control over their immediate environment, attempting to produce a tool that at least partly mitigated the lack of resources being offered to undertake this process.

MapLocal: facilitating localism?

From the outset, however, the MapLocal project deliberately dodged the issue of mediating between different priorities for action within a community. The reason for this decision was pragmatic. As a small-scale project funded by the AHRC's *Connected Communities* programme we simply did not have the resource to take on the wicked issue of reconciling community views. Instead we concentrated on producing a tool that would help communities that lacked external resource and expertise to undertake the first stage of drawing up a plan – gathering information from residents about their understanding of the neighbourhood, the issues they perceive to be problematic and their ideas for change.

MapLocal is an application designed for Android smartphones and tablets which is available to download from the Google Play store. It allows people to walk around their neighbourhood recording audio clips and taking photos which are tagged with GPS coordinates and uploaded to a community map. The app design emerged from conversations with two social enterprises, MADE and Chamberlain Forum which work on the built environment and community engagement. The interface was designed by Chris Speed and programmed by Chris Blunt of Plymouth Software.

The app links to a website which hosts maps that display the contributions from different community members. Photos and audio clips gathered by the app are uploaded to this website without user intervention so there is a low skill threshold to adding material to the community map. Smartphones are by no means ubiquitous, particularly in low income communities, but market penetration within the UK is such that they form by far the majority of phones being purchased today. This means that the technology is much more familiar, much less intimidating and much less likely to make someone using a smartphone in public space a target for mugging than even five years ago. Users of the app look unremarkable, appearing as though they are chatting into their phone, texting or taking photographs as they walk through their local area.

We worked across two different neighbourhoods in Birmingham. Balsall Heath is an ethnically diverse, densely populated inner suburb, which scores highly on the English indices of multiple deprivation. It received central government funding to act as a pilot ('pathfinder') for the neighbourhood planning process, which paid for local architect and urban designer Joe Holyoak to undertake a conventional participatory planning exercise and draw up a draft plan for submission to the local authority. In contrast the Jewellery

Quarter, just to the west of the city core, has a small, mostly white professional residential population and is home to service and creative businesses as well as small scale jewellery manufacture. A Neighbourhood Forum was not established in the Jewellery Quarter until mid-2014 meaning that at the time we did the data collection in November-December 2012 there was no active plan making process.

Holman and Rydin (2012, 77) have noted that participation suffers from the 'collective action problem' where individuals do not see the value of engaging in participatory processes because the likely outcomes of engagement are not commensurate with the time spent. The Neighbourhood Planning process is a clear case in point here – the reward is a plan that may or may not respond to specific local concerns and the cost is attending a great many meetings. More than this, the processes of engagement can itself be quite intimidating – with familiar problems of confident people dominating discussions and hard-to-reach groups being excluded from these processes (see, for example, the specific case of local sex workers discussed by Sagar & Croxall, 2012).

The intention with MapLocal was to produce something that had fairly low barriers to use and would be a relatively inexpensive way of collating a large quantity of material from people in the neighbourhood, without demanding that they come to meetings at fixed times and have to speak in front of other people. We also intended to develop something that could offer a relatively fun exercise, attempting to give an added value to participation in a process that might only distantly result in changes to the neighbourhood. Within the pilot there was the added complication that we were asking participants to act, effectively, as co-researchers, testing an unproven interface and giving us feedback. We therefore felt it was important to pay participants for their time as they were making a substantial contribution to undertaking the research itself (a similar position to that adopted by Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). Although payment made it easier to recruit participants, many commented afterward that they had enjoyed the experience and would have taken part even without the cash incentive.

All the participants were briefed about how to use the app and loaned either a smartphone or a slightly larger tablet (depending on preference) to undertake their survey of the neighbourhood. In total, 50 people took part across the two study sites, producing 626 audio clips and over 1000 geotagged photographs during the four weeks of data collection. The material within the audio clips falls into three broad categories. The first, like the photographs, describes and documents sites within the neighbourhood. The second category is in noting issues/problems that participants would like to see addressed – by no means limited to things which can be resolved through spatial planning. The final category consists of suggestions for actions that would make a positive change to the neighbourhood.

Knowing the local

The description/documentation category of the materials produced is interesting in terms of how it taps into local knowledge. Often this is quite banal, but it provides a grounded view of neighbourhood features which would be broadly invisible from a top-down perspective. For example:

We have 115 Ladypool Road, it's a dental surgery. It's a very popular surgery because these people can speak at least, 3, 4 foreign languages as well and the community really appreciates... (transcribed audio clip, Balsall Heath)¹

The speaker tails off and changes direction at the end of this quote, which typifies some of the stream-of-consciousness commentary that this technique can generate. One can see material like this as fitting into the broad 'citizens as sensors' mode described by Goodchild (2007). Here participants are simply acting as the eyes and ears of decision makers giving them information that they might be unaware of – the presence of a useful multilingual dental surgery in an area with a great many first generation migrants.

This kind of local, grounded knowledge can be highly valuable within a planning process. Nonetheless, from our perspective, the more interesting comments fall into the second two categories: identifying issues and suggesting strategies for changing the neighbourhood. For example:

This is the River Rea which crosses through the boundaries of Balsall Heath and crosses through the Calthorpe Estate as well. It could be more positive because the way it's built, it's not really visible to the residents and if it was, if it was created and designed better it could actually be a really nice, scenic part of Balsall Heath with steps coming down and making it a bit more beautiful. But it's a really nice bit of river with a lot of potential. (transcribed audio clip, Balsall Heath)

The Rea is a heavily engineered river of a design now out of step with best practice in environmental science; flood management today emphasises the socio-environmental benefits of creating more recreation-friendly and aesthetically pleasing natural-looking watercourses (Wild et al., 2011). 'Daylighting' engineered rivers is quite an expensive process, but is a good example of the kinds of longer term aspirations that it would be appropriate to include in a Neighbourhood Plan especially where it can be demonstrated that there is community buy-in to such an idea.

A number of people came up with suggestions for these larger scale interventions that

¹ All the recordings are dated between mid-November and mid-December 2012. We made a deliberate choice to keep recordings made via the app anonymous, although friends/neighbours are able to identify individual's voices.

could only occur over the longer term and with significant financial backing, such as reopening the local train station in Balsall Heath. Other suggestions were more modest and achievable in the short term. As one participant commented:

...the reason for this photo is right at the top on the gable, another architectural detail, which from here says H.A. Wronsborg Brothers, Goldsmiths and Jewellers. We really do need to preserve things like that, make a trail of them or something like that. It's not just the buildings, it's not just the people, it's the little features that make this place what it is. (transcribed audio clip, Jewellery Quarter)

This was one of many comments relating to the Jewellery Quarter that reflected on the rich architectural heritage of the area, one of the few parts of central Birmingham that was not comprehensively redeveloped during the post-war reconstruction. Things like heritage trails can be quite inexpensive to establish but validate a particular way of viewing the environment. This can be a low cost means of agenda setting within a Neighbourhood Plan, for example highlighting heritage value and thus establishing an atmosphere favouring refurbishment of existing building as against demolition and reconstruction.

Other suggestions related to the environment, but not so easily tied to what is achievable within a spatial plan. There were clear concerns, for example, about problems related to litter in parts of Balsall Heath (“lots of rats around there... this is very disgusting”). In many ways these are conventional socio-environmental justice issues, with insufficient public resource made available to meet the challenges of waste management in a neighbourhood with a very high population density – not something a Neighbourhood Plan alone could solve. In other cases, these kinds of everyday issues of maintaining the environment could have distinct implications for spatial planning:

I like to come to walk around Key Hill Cemetery. It's a nice peaceful green space in the Jewellery Quarter. However, the state of some of the graves and the gravestones is quite poor really and I think it gives a poor impression. The Council needs to improve the maintenance and look after this area more because I think it could be more valuable space for recreation in the Jewellery Quarter. (transcribed audio clip, Jewellery Quarter)

Here one can perceive a shortage of local authority funds for maintaining its public spaces as a barrier to an existing green space being given a more prominent role in the spatial planning of the neighbourhood. A poorly maintained open space is not necessarily a selling point to developers looking to invest in the neighbourhood.

Funding localism: winners and losers

The spatial planning process is potentially one route for tackling some of these maintenance-type issues. Section 106 (s106) agreements are negotiated between developers and local planning authorities as a mechanism for leveraging benefits into a community in exchange for granting planning permission. This could be anything from developers paying for a new access road, enforcing a proportion of affordable housing, to mitigating environmental impacts. S106 remains, however, a somewhat blunt instrument for bringing additional funding into an area. They are only ever paid by a small proportion of development projects that take place in a local authority area and the local authorities have been under no obligation to demand that the new infrastructure paid for in an s106 agreement was located in the neighbourhood where development was taking place. The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), introduced in the Planning Act, 2008 applies to a much greater range of developments but comes with a fixed tariff – giving certainty about the charges that will be applied to a development – and guarantees that a proportion of the money raised should be spent in the neighbourhood where the development takes place. Communities that have a Neighbourhood Plan in place are given 25% of the CIL raised on developments in their areas, as against 15% otherwise (Crabtree & Mackay, 2013).

Thus there is the possibility that the CIL mechanism could be used to tackle everyday neglect of the built environment in tandem with promoting new development through a Neighbourhood Plan. This represents a certain amount of joined up thinking at the neighbourhood scale. But this returns us to a key problem with how localism is being implemented within planning, in that it favours those who already have the skills and capacity to organise (Matthews et al., 2014). If you have enough resource to write a Neighbourhood Plan then you will get still more resource from the CIL. Similarly, the CIL generates more returns for a neighbourhood where more and higher quality development is taking place, which is likely to be in already relatively well-resourced areas. In our case study, there are far greater opportunities for undertaking high value developments such as luxury flats for professionals in the fashionable Jewellery Quarter than in the somewhat run down Balsall Heath, thus raising more CIL resource for general environmental improvements in an area which, arguably, needs it less.

More broadly these kinds of issues highlight the ways in which the 'local' is being constructed within the policy discourse. As Layard (2012, 135) has noted:

...the legal construction of these locals, with each apparently having a single purpose and separate from the rest, is interesting. It appears to create rather fixed, static, territorial units rather than reflecting an inter-linking network of scales of decision making.

The emphasis on creating fixed boundaries around a neighbourhood planning unit,

ignores the ways that localities overlap and intersect. This perhaps reflects the origins of the neighbourhood planning policy in the more coherent planning units of rural villages and smaller market towns. This fixing of the local within a set of legally binding boundaries is also significant because of the ways that the local has become almost fetishized as the most appropriate seat of decision making for issues affecting communities. Indeed, as Featherstone et al. (2012, 179) have noted, localism tends to be constructed as inherently positive, which closes down discussions about how this localism is being constructed. Fracturing local governance into a series of small, fixed, neighbourhood territories erodes the potential for thinking more strategically about resource allocation with an eye on redistribution. Simply moving some decision making to the neighbourhood scale cannot be seen as a solution to the structural inequalities that come hand in hand with the neoliberal agenda (Purcell, 2006).

Conclusions

As the MapLocal pilot demonstrated, communities have no shortage of knowledge and concerns about their neighbourhoods nor ideas for their transformation. Converting this into action is of course quite a different matter. There is also an issue about the valorising of local knowledge over external expertise. There is a danger that the volume of material from the 'ground-up' creates almost a reversal of the modernist, top-down paradigm where 'expert' knowledge was always privileged over local. It would be too easy to make claims that systems like MapLocal generate more 'authentic' knowledge because it is embedded in the local. This is an issue that Mohan and Stokke (2000) have identified in relation to the developing world and it plays into a particular neoliberal trap that starts to downgrade the importance of the state playing a coordinating role.

Padley (2013, 345) argues that it is simply spurious to assume the removal of bureaucratic structures at the local authority scale will stimulate 'the burgeoning of locally authored innovative solutions within communities'. Let us consider the proposal for de-engineering the River Rea as it passes through Balsall Heath. It is possible in theory (though highly unlikely in practice) that people within the neighbourhood would be able to persuade a developer to bring cash to the table to upgrade the river because of the potential uplift in sales values to any new development in the area. But there is no way that such a scheme could take place without considering wider implications for catchment management at the city scale which, frankly, requires coordination by the state. Fine grained local knowledge of a neighbourhood is simply insufficient when an issue cuts across multiple locals within the wider city and requires particular technical expertise in issues like hydrology, ecology and flood management.

In practice, Neighbourhood Plans do not represent a substantial transfer of power to communities. Instead they give a place to articulate local aspirations, very much within

the confines of a planning system that has been recast to maximise economic returns for developers. Haughton et al. (2013, 231) lament the fact that for all the rhetoric of community control, the system does not see 'a return of healthy democratic disagreement at the heart of the planning system'. As a tool, MapLocal offers the possibility of airing very different points of view without those opinions being shouted down or otherwise closed out in a public meeting or facilitated participatory planning exercise. As such, it does allow a more prominent role for multiple, contradictory views.

Where MapLocal is less successful is in resolving the paradox identified by Durman (2012) earlier in this chapter. People have different views about the future planning of their neighbourhoods. Writing a Neighbourhood Plan means attempting to reconcile these. Communities are being asked to take on the task of mediating disagreement without necessarily having the resources (financial, educational, cultural) devolved down to the neighbourhood scale in order to do this. MapLocal made it easier for people to express dissenting views. What it failed to do was provide a mechanism for collating those views, allowing people to rank those ideas that seemed most important, to explain why they disagree with someone else's position and so on. MapLocal does not itself create a space for analysis, reconciliation and developing a course of action.

Of course, MapLocal was never intended to do this and were it to be further developed, it would need to find ways of providing tools for sifting through the mass of material collected by participants, to start to crowdsource analysis as well as data collection. Even a simple ranking mechanism for prioritising particular issues raised or suggested solutions would be a way to move this forward. Clearly, however, when one starts to go beyond learning about the problems to setting out collective solutions the limitations on Neighbourhood Planning as offered by the Localism Act, 2011 become starkly apparent. When there is no possibility of dissent – and Neighbourhood Plans cannot challenge a centrally dictated agenda of growth – then there is no need to mediate conflict. This problem is at the heart of discussions around the post-political. A community's agreed compromise over a preferred course of action does not suddenly generate the resource to undertake such action at the neighbourhood scale. More so, if the preferred approach does not fit within a neoliberal growth paradigm it will not even get as far as a local referendum. So much for community-led decision making. These wider and more difficult issues require a much greater public debate than can be offered by interactions with a smartphone while exploring one's neighbourhood.

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