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Re-imagining neighbourhood governance: the future of neighbourhood planning in England

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Matthew Wargent*, University of Sheffield, UK

Gavin Parker, University of Reading, UK

*Corresponding author. Address: Department of Urban Studies and Planning, University of Sheffield,Western Bank, Sheffield, S10 2TN, United Kingdom. Email: m.wargent@sheffield.ac.uk.

Abstract

Neighbourhood planning is arguably the most radical innovation in UK local governance in a generation, with over 2,200 communities in England now involved in statutory development planning at the neighbourhood level. Following incremental policy reforms, we argue that neighbourhood planning has reached a critical juncture where the future of the initiative is at stake. In this paper we reflect on existing research to assess the policy to date before imagining what an optimised version of the policy might look like. Despite being a state-led initiative, central government has failed to provide an image of success for neighbourhood planning which we argue has held back widespread innovation and progressive participation. We therefore outline a normative guide against which future iterations of neighbourhood planning might be assessed, and employ this in order to imagine a more comprehensive form of neighbourhood governance.

Key words: neighbourhood planning; participation; community; governance; localism; collaborative democracy.

Re-imagining neighbourhood governance: the future of neighbourhood planning in England

Introduction

Neighbourhood planning is a community-led, participatory initiative on offer to communities in England. It seeks to provide local residents with 'genuine opportunities to influence the future of the places where they live' by developing a statutory planning document that sets out a vision for development in their neighbourhood (DCLG, 2011: 12). The most popular tool on offer - the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) - had been taken up by over 2,200 communities since its inception in 2010 (with around 410 passing community referendum as of late 2017), and in that time the initiative has undergone a series of regulatory modifications and numerous iterations of funding, support and guidance. In this paper we argue that the mixed picture of success achieved by neighbourhood planning revealed by the now extensive research literature suggests that the initiative has reached a critical juncture where its future is at stake. We foresee three trajectories with the following potential outcomes: first, neighbourhood planning fades from the policy landscape as fewer communities come forward and plans become out of date (policy decline); second, the policy ossifies as the best resourced communities continue to dominate uptake with the aid of private consultants with, in many cases, identikit plans with minimal added-value (policy stagnation); or third, it evolves into an innovative, responsive and even radical tool of local democracy (policy innovation).

This paper has two simple aims: to consolidate what we have learnt about neighbourhood planning to date, and then to re-imagine what neighbourhood planning might look like in the future if the third outcome is to be realised. We harbour some concern about the longevity of neighbourhood planning as a progressive democratic project in its current form given NDPs are already becoming out of date in terms of their strength and validity, plans are increasingly recognised as a focus for litigation and are situated within a contested planning system that is in a state of near permanent reform (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2015). Moreover, attracting greater numbers of communities to participate appears neither likely (many communities with the capacity and predisposition are already involved), nor a priority for under resourced Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) (Parker and Wargent, 2017). Therefore if neighbourhood planning is to be retained or extended as a positive influence on neighbourhoods and local democracy, then further consideration is needed regarding: refining the process; deepening the support on offer (from both public and private sectors); ensuring the deliverability of outcomes; and undergirding the resilience of the policy overall.

This paper contributes to this debate by outlining a set of normative aims against which neighbourhood planning might be assessed and challenged over time. Currently the lack of an 'image of success' by the promotors of neighbourhood planning serves to constrain constructive debate surrounding alterations to the policy and thereby inhibits progressive change in the form and function of citizen-led planning. The criteria we establish are therefore designed to occupy the space left by central government's exclusive pursuit of economic growth via housebuilding that has crowded-out broader, more progressive metrics which could be employed to test both local planning outcomes and the positive externalities of citizen participation. We contend that if citizen-led planning, and the putative 'collaborative democracy' envisioned (Conservative Party, 2010: 1), is to be viable then it needs to be defensible across six core issues, namely: more equitable plan-making (i.e. geographic distribution); deeper co-production (principally between local government and communities); greater social inclusion; improved quality and value added; reconciliation of hyper-local and strategic concerns, and enhanced community control (e.g. neighbourhood planning's 'authority') (see Table 1).

These themes coincide with early attempts to highlight what the foundations of 'good localism' should involve (see Cox, 2010; Vigar, 2013). Consequently - as reflected in the title of this paper - we hope to show that by re-imagining neighbourhood planning practice we can promote its potential to add value to the planning system but also more widely to reinvigorate local democracy and conceptions of progressive localism (Williams et al., 2014) and contribute to the significant debate concerning neighbourhood governance. This is particularly salient in urban areas where Neighbourhood Forums (the qualifying body that produces an NDP in a non-Parished area) can be seen as voluntary institutions of hyper-local governance. The paper proceeds in two sections: first, the now extensive research literature is reviewed in order to consolidate what we know about neighbourhood planning in England so far (see Figure 1). Second, we reflect on these findings to consider neighbourhood planning's future. In so doing we ask what an optimised institutional design might look like and establish the importance of re-imagining future practice in this way. The discussion includes how such favourable conditions of operation might be achieved and establishes a set of normative criteria against which a re-imagined form of neighbourhood planning might be assessed. In concluding, we reflect on the need for neighbourhood planning to act as both an instrument of public policy and a potentially powerful democratic mechanism of neighbourhood governance, and underscore the importance of listening to the concerns of citizen-planners in realising these goals.

Neighbourhood planning: what we know so far

In the run up to the 2010 election, the Conservative Party (2010: 1) called for a radical change to local planning, positing 'collaborative democracy as the means of reconciling economic development with quality of life'. On forming the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition, reforms were brought forward including reducing detailed, specialised central planning guidance to a single National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), abolishing Regional Spatial Strategies, and formally recognising the smaller-than-local spatial scale (i.e. the neighbourhood) as a unit of modern statutory planning governance. Amongst other justifications that have drawn on discourses regarding the inefficiencies of an interventionist state, these reforms were underpinned by the long-standing criticism that the planning system was failing to deliver the desired levels of housebuilding. Following evidence that greater citizen participation might increase acceptance of, and certainty during, the development cycle (Sturzaker, 2011; Parker and Murray, 2012), the new administration sought to devolve greater power to communities, thereby hoping to build consensus around the need for more homes and infrastructure investments deemed necessary to deliver growth and economic prosperity (DCLG, 2011).

The central tool of this new collaborative democracy was to be neighbourhood planning. This sought to marry the *a priori* growth imperative with local knowledge through the recognition of newly empowered citizen-planners, thereby reducing costly and time-consuming opposition to new development (Stanier, 2014). The familiar planning conflicts surrounding housing allocations and housebuilding were therefore re-framed not as a reaction to development *per se*, but rather as a response to the process by which decisions were reached (Gallent et al., 2013). After an initial raft of 'Frontrunner' neighbourhood plans initiated in 2010, neighbourhood planning became the flagship policy of the Localism Act (2011) and has subsequently generated a significant field of literature. An agenda for neighbourhood planning research published in this journal set out eight areas that merited investigation (Parker et al., 2015: 534), with these avenues and others having been taken up enthusiastically. creating a body of work that voices a critique of the design, operation, and to some extent the outcomes of the initiative, and it is this literature that we turn to below.

As the initial Frontrunner communities got underway, early commentary sought to manage expectations about neighbourhood planning's influence whilst retaining hope that it might act to bridge bottom-up planning models with the more strategic, top-down planning system - if only consolidated learning from similar past initiatives were heeded (Colenutt, 2012; Parker and Murray, 2012). The desire to capitalise on past learning proved optimistic as the language of post-2010 localism soon became an important means through which the new

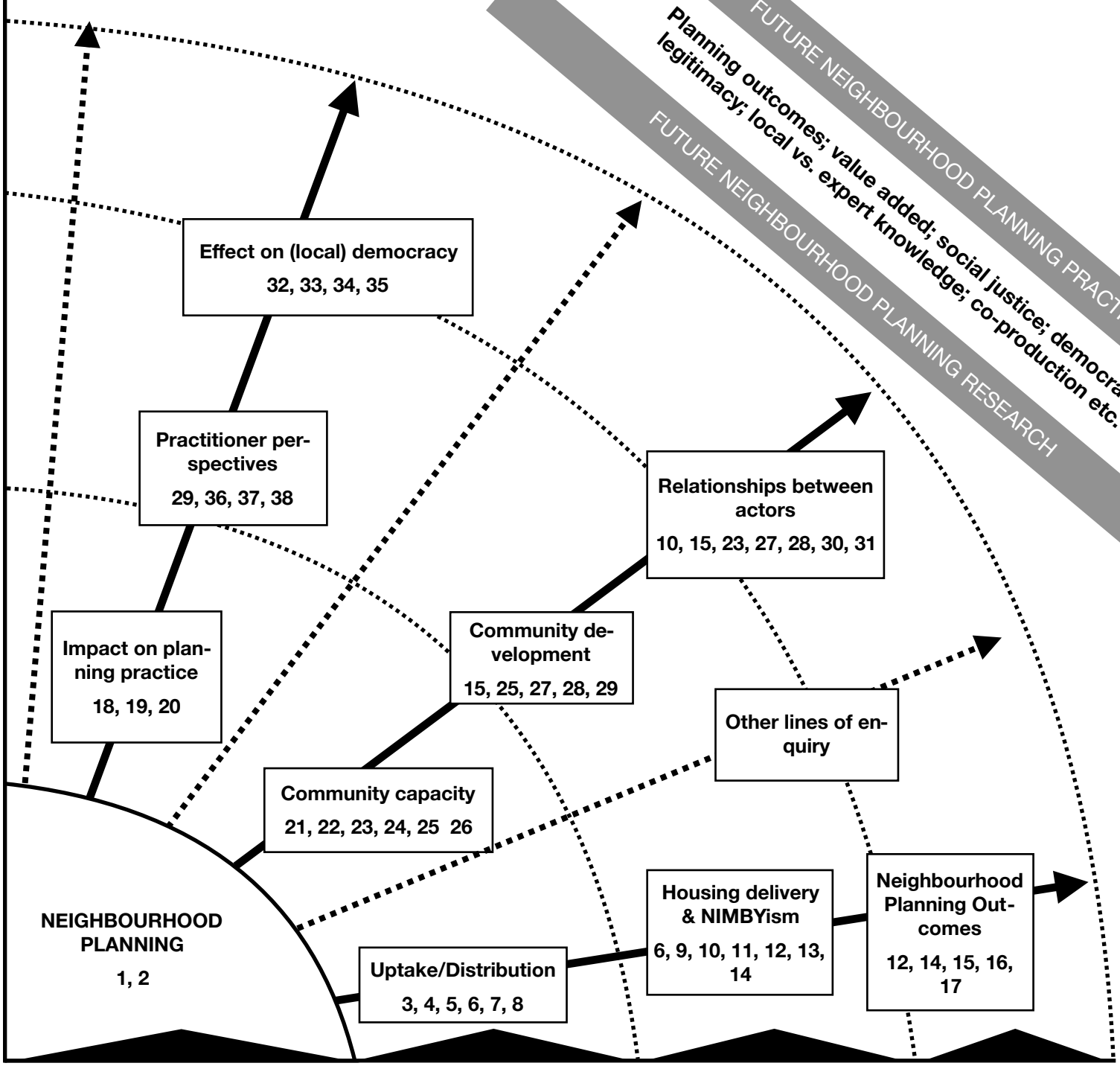
Conservative-led administration sought to differentiate itself from New Labour (Tait and Inch, 2016). A notable departure from the 'New Localism' - which was a particular priority during the early years of New Labour's period in office between 1997 and 2010 - involved replacing the targeting of deprived neighbourhoods as potential sites of empowerment with a 'first come, first served' approach. The shift in focus away from spatial inequality and towards 'community control' has, unsurprisingly, in practice resulted in higher take-up in affluent, rural and semi-rural areas with stable communities and active local government bodies (i.e. Parish or Town Councils). The profile of neighbourhood planning take-up also shows more deprived communities being significantly less likely to participate (Parker and Salter, 2016; 2017).

Early recognition that NDPs are created by those with capacity rather than the need to participate (that is, they are driven by conditions of supply rather than latent demand) has become widely recognised (Davoudi and Cowie, 2013; Cowie and Davoudi, 2015). Many commentators have highlighted the impact of communities' internal capacity and skills on their ability to utilise these new rights (Holman and Rydin, 2013; Gallent, 2013; Sturzaker and Shaw, 2015; Gunn et al., 2015; McGuinness and Ludwig, 2017; Brookfield, 2017). Given how even at the neighbourhood scale spatial planning is a complex and technical undertaking, some have argued for a community development phase that proceeds the body of 'planning work' that might allow communities to develop the requisite knowledge and construct the required governance structures needed to recalibrate the otherwise uneven relationship with planning professionals (Parker and Murray, 2012; Stanton, 2014; Cowie et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2017). Such a phase is not only necessary for communities' tacit knowledge to converge with the realities of the planning process (McGuinness and Ludwig, 2017), but also as an ongoing source of community resilience (Parker and Wargent, 2017).

Despite the importance of a largely introspective community development phase, greater external connectivity between traditional planning users, intermediaries and producers is still seen as the best means of fostering robust plans (Gallent, 2013; Parker et al., 2015). This contention was underlined by the centrality of genuine co-production in successful neighbourhood planning for many communities highlighted in Parker et al.'s (2014; 2015; 2017) nationwide research - where communities were often in a position of critical dependency with governance partners and plans faring best where there was sustained support from the LA. As per the nature of localism, the LA/community relationship varies from case to case, often being determined by the informal 'rapport' between individuals on each side (Sturzaker and Shaw, 2015). Given that plans are typically progressed by small groups of citizens - commonly fewer than 12 individuals and in practice largely led by one or two people - the room for manoeuvre in this regard is small (Vigar, 2013). In line with these findings,

Sturzaker and Gordon (2017) have questioned whether the neighbourhood planning agenda is sufficiently cognisant of power dynamics at the local scale. Overall it is generally held that the response of local actors to the tensions manifest in the process is central to the success of neighbourhood planning outcomes.

Figure 1 - Neighbourhood Planning: existing and future research



LESSONS FROM PAST INITIATIVES

47, 48, 49

CONFLICT AND PLANNING

5, 15, 39, 40

UNDERSTANDING (PROGRESSIVE) LOCALISM

41, 42, 43 , 44, 45, 46

GOVERNANCE, DEMOCRACY AND PLANNING LITERATURES

50

1. Gallent & Robinson (2012)
2. Brownill & Bradley (2017)
3. Parker & Salter (2016
4. Parker & Salter (2017)
5. Colomb (2017)
6. Mace & Tewdwr-Jones (2017)
7. Vigar et al. (2012)
8. DEFRA (2013)
9. Sturzaker (2011)
10. Gallent et al. (2013)
11. Matthews at al. (2015)
12. DCLG (2016)
13. Bradley & Sparling (2017)
14. Field & Layard (2017)
15. Parker et al. (2017)
16. Bradley (2017b)
17. Bradley & Sparling (2017)
18. Lord et al. (2017)
19. Parker et al. (2016)
20. Cowie (2017)
21. Holman & Rydin (2013)
22. Gallent (2013)
23. Sturzaker & Shaw (2015)
24. Gunn et al. (2015)
25. McGuinness & Ludwig (2017)
26. Brookfield (2017)
27. Stanton (2014)
28. Cowie et al. (2015)
29. Parker & Wargent (2017)
30. Parker et al. (2014)
31. Parker et al. (2015)
32. Davoudi & Cowie (2013)
33. Cowie & Davoudi (2015)
34. Brownill & Downing (2013)
35. Sturzaker & Gordon (2017)
36. Ludwig & Ludwig (2013)
37. Stanier (2014)
38. Bradley & Brownill (2017b)
39. Bradley (2015)
40. Vigar et al. (2017)
41. Featherstone et al. (2012)
42. Vigar (2013)
43. Williams et al. (2014)
44. Bailey & Pill (2015)
45. Healey (2015)
46. Tait & Inch (2016)
47. Colenutt, 2012
48. Parker & Murray, 2012
49. Farnsworth, 2012
50. Parker & Street (2018)

Despite the supposedly light touch regulatory process set out by central government, the burdensome nature of the process and the technical issues confronted, have driven the necessity for partnership working (Parker et al., 2014). Community participants have persistently spoken about the steep learning curve required, the need to jump through regulatory hoops and learn 'planning speak'. This has precipitated the high use of private planning consultants, with more than seven in every ten communities employing outside help in some capacity (Parker et al., 2014; Parker and Wargent, 2017). Examples of particular burdens include relatively minor procedural issues such as communities experiencing false starts and having to re-write planning policies in order to comply with subsequent regulations (Parker et al., 2015; Lord et al., 2017), to more fundamental concerns about the ability of NDPs to be overlaid on complex social fabrics. For instance, concentrating on the early stages of neighbourhood area formation, Colomb (2017) found evidence that instigating a neighbourhood plan can divide rather than unite individuals and social groups and fuel local conflicts, particularly in highly diverse and heterogeneous urban areas.

Yet where local place specifics and their dynamics are recognised and integrated more transparently with local and national policy aims, positive outcomes have resulted. Drawing on agonistic pluralism, Bradley (2015) contends that the literal and figurative boundary work performed during neighbourhood planning demarcates the possibility for democratic politics, marking as it does the end of a particular political order and the beginning of a new collective identity. Such new boundaries allow local identities to be contained and integrated within a representative political system, as well as be responsive to (and even challenge) dominant market rationalities (Bradley et al., 2017). These boundaries demarcate where feelings for place can be enacted around a locus of political antagonism and give voice to residual anger at exclusion from traditional political decision-making. This allows communities to challenge the orthodoxies of market democracy whilst 'enlivening' representative democracy and recognising the conflicts and issues faced at the local scale (Healey, 2015: 105). Indeed research in this vein has noted a revitalisation of democracy in Town and Parish Councils (Brownill and Downing, 2013; Parker and Murray, 2012; see also Parker, 2008). Bradley (2017a) has gone on to demonstrate how attachments to place can be 'scripted' into spatial practices in ways that can positively inform local development policy: that is, local policies (i.e. regulating the size and scope of specific housing sites, regulating the mode of housing delivery, meeting local housing needs and so on) and the evidence that underpins them are evaluated and rationalised in reference to the shared yet multi-dimensional identification of place that 'forges a connection between place characteristics and social interactions and affiliations, or … a community identity' (Bradley, 2017a: 238). Even where plans have ended up as 'unrecognisable and alien' to

residents, the neighbourhood planning process can push the boundaries of authoritative knowledge in planning Bradley (2017b) argues. How to fully represent, let alone enable and expand, such processes is disputed, yet this undoubtedly remains a worthwhile avenue to pursue in order to support progressive development outcomes.

Reflecting the 'creative tensions' that typifies both neighbourhood planning practice and analytic interpretation (Bradley and Brownill, 2017), others have suggested that the promotion of agonistic debate concerning the future of citizens' immediate lived environments is problematic. Intermediaries and participants on all sides often shy away from confrontational debate for the sake of preserving community capital, whilst those in charge of the process are often able to narrow its design to prevent such agonistic debate from occurring (Vigar et al., 2017). This reflects the bounded collaboration indicated by Parker et al. (2015) that includes the rescripting and enforcement of norms enacted on communities' priorities and policies, circumscribing their agency (see also Bradley, 2017b). The result is that many communities have adopted anticipatory conservative positions and/or are finding their NDPs limited by local planning officers, consultants, and notably examiners (Parker et al., 2016), all of whom to some degree enforce the norms of the planning system (Parker et al., 2015; 2017). This conformity is often derived from concerns about how NDPs will fare in the contested environment of planning and development in neo-liberal times, leading to questions about to the extent to which neighbourhood plans are a true reflection of community wishes (Bailey and Pill, 2015) and the degree to which communities can demand distinctively local policies (Stanton, 2014). Further research is required to ascertain the extent to which communities are simply 'doubling up' on strategic policies as implied by Brookfield (2017)- whilst of particular use would be a nuanced typology of NDPs such as the one initially put forward by DEFRA (2013: 9).

With regards to the need for NDPs to conform to higher tier policies, Parker et al.'s (2016) consideration of the examination process has revealed that whilst very few NDPs had failed at this stage, many had noteworthy flaws or had been contested by the examiner, the LPA, or both. This, coupled with discrepancies regarding LPA interpretations of 'conformity' (Brownill, 2017), has given rise to considerable unease among participants as well as some examiners, and these concerns have developed in the light of the rising number of legal challenges and decisions being called in by the Secretary of State. One concern is that the light touch regulatory approach adopted, and the coincident lower threshold of tests (compared to local plans), may have resulted in NDPs not being able to withstand the rigours of implementation.

Other aspects of the regulatory process have also come under scrutiny. Neighbourhood Forums can be formed by any group of local residents (in non-Parished areas) by applying to the LPA with a minimum of 21 signatories. Due to the self-selecting nature of their formation and their self-defined constituency boundary, it is arguable whether Forums adequately represent their neighbourhood on either formal or informal grounds (Davoudi and Cowie, 2013). The role of the community referendum at the end of the neighbourhood planning process is often considered the litmus test for community support and many citizen participants found a successful vote to be highly encouraging (Parker and Wargent, 2017). However this can only be considered a form of output legitimacy where the plan's substance is legitimised rather than, necessarily, the process (Davoudi and Cowie, 2013). Furthermore, local residents generally perceive that having some say over local decisions is better than none, and are therefore often showing support for the efforts of their peers (and potentially the concept of neighbourhood governance generally) rather than for new development or the plan's specifics *per se* (Parker et al., 2015). Given the consistently high 'Yes' votes (on average approximately 88%) coupled with relatively modest turnouts (approximately 33%), some planning officers have questioned the role of the referendum, particularly given the high costs associated with election services in larger and more complex areas (Parker and Wargent, 2017). Such considerations take on added significance at a time of local government retrenchment with LPAs expected to 'do more with less' (Ludwig and Ludwig, 2014). Although early fears about LPA intransigence (Farnsworth, 2012) have for the most part failed to materialise (although there do appear to be some notable exceptions), capacity issues mean that many LPAs have struggled to engage constructively with communities while still producing or updating their local plan (Parker and Wargent, 2017). It remains highly questionable therefore whether the hypothesised 'control shift' (Conservative Party, 2009) in planning has fully materialised; in particular, evidence suggests that the often problematic latter stages of NDP production (i.e. finalising policies, examination) have undermined community 'ownership' in some areas (Parker et al., 2015).

As increasing numbers of NDPs become adopted, research has begun to focus on planning outcomes, not least the role of NDPs in promoting models of sustainable housebuilding with a social purpose (Bradley and Sparling, 2017). For instance, a content analysis of the first 50 NDPs adopted identified a near-unanimous concern for the availability of affordable and accessible housing supply - whilst interest in community-led initiatives such as community land trusts, self and custom-build projects, 'co-housing' and other models has also been a feature (Field and Layard, 2017). Work by Bailey (2017) also found a widespread focus on locally relevant location, housing mix, occupancy and design of new developments. Bradley and Sparling (2017: 116) argue

that when evaluated solely against its ability to boost housing numbers, neighbourhood planning appears to demonstrate 'citizen acquiescence to the agenda of spatial liberalism', yet the bottom-up prioritisation of alternative models of house-building (and the hostility towards speculative volume house-builders) suggests that communities are trying to balance the imperatives of growth with the priorities of 'place identity, heritage and environmental protection'. In so doing, communities are acting as a potential corrective to, or moderator of, spatial liberalism, and whilst this can bring them into conflict with the corporate interests of a liberalised housing development market, it does indicate a promising concentration on 'socially inclusive' growth. Examples of innovation concerning housing provision is also a positive outcome of NDPs, however the question becomes whether such progressive agendas are 'winning out' and whether locally innovative solutions are the exception rather than the rule.

The countervailing narrative to such progressive possibilities is the widespread conservatism encouraged by both latent scepticism about new development in local populations and neighbourhood planning's conditions of operation (Parker et al., 2017). Bailey and Pill (2014) are pessimistic about the ability of neighbourhood planning to promote local regeneration, particularly in the most deprived areas that may lack market interest and development opportunities, in turn nullifying the possibilities of income for communities from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) which was offered as a financial incentive for accepting new development. Moreover they suggest that the time-consuming nature of establishing neighbourhood governance may be a distraction from the implications of declining government services and budgets previously taken for granted. This must also be considered alongside evidence that participatory initiatives are particularly susceptible to middle-class activism (Matthews and Hastings, 2013), reflected in neighbourhood planning's high take-up in affluent and rural neighbourhoods (DEFRA, 2013; Vigar, 2013; Parker and Salter, 2016; 2017). The ability of well-connected communities to potentially mobilise neighbourhood planning 'as a vehicle for legitimisation of activist, influential opposition, driven by socio-cultural identity, as a spoiling tactic in debates about how much housing gets built where' (Matthews et al., 2015: 69), suggests that the socially just outcomes mooted by Bradley and Sparling (2017) may be undermined by the displacement of unwanted development into poorly mobilised and less defensive communities.

Despite the promise that neighbourhood planning holds for some, for others it constitutes part of a wider agenda to de-professionalise planning (Lord et al., 2017), contributing as it does to the competing and often contradictory priorities that local government receives from the centre (Ludwig and Ludwig, 2014). This has led to calls for sustained funding for direct professional involvement in neighbourhood planning in order to

maintain the policy's efficacy (McGuinness and Ludwig, 2017). This said, there is no evidence that neighbourhood planning is negatively impacting the role or status of LPAs, with many planning officers welcoming the injection of enthusiasm that communities can bring (Parker and Wargent, 2017). Perhaps more problematic is Gallent's (2013) finding that there is actually little appetite for extended community responsibility: rather communities are overwhelmed by existing levels of 'engagement' and are underwhelmed by the quality and authenticity of local government responses. Using Parker and Murray's (2012) rational choice criteria for participation, Mace and Tewdwr-Jones (2017) suggest that at present, neighbourhood planning appears to be as much about faith as rationality for community participants. Noting the delicate balance that must be struck between managing expectations and fostering disillusionment, they describe the contingent factors upon which neighbourhood planning rests, namely ongoing reforms to national planning policy and law, alongside relationships with local government which are often distinctly fragile. This 'delicate settlement' suggests that neighbourhood planning may yet fall into the trap of promising too much and delivering too little.

A paradox of neighbourhood planning activity - reflected in the heterogeneity of 'emerging localisms' (Bradley and Brownill, 2017) - is the contrasting lenses used to analyse community involvement. In many instances an agonistic reading reflects both the innate contestation that marks planning activity, as well as the importance of community identities. For others, the emerging consensus and processes of co-production between traditional 'governors and governed' reflects the progressive potential of a more communicative form of planning. As Parker et al. (2017) have argued, participatory initiatives can open up spaces where inequalities of power between the community and other interests may be negotiated, yet too often such contestation is closed down by the policy's instrumental and proceduralist ends. Brownill (2017) has suggested the concept of assemblages as a useful way to understand the multitude of actors, inputs, processes and interpretations involved in producing NDPs. Whilst the use of assemblage theory can be criticised for privileging process over outcomes, it does reflect the specificity of neighbourhood planning activity and the recognisable composition of various elements into a coherent, if not consistent form. Stemming from this analysis, Brownill (2017: 151) has suggested that NDPs can be viewed as a negotiating tool for local communities, as opposed to projecting definitive visions of the neighbourhood; 'conformity' to higher tier policies can also be regarded as flexible, with some local planning officers indicating that their LPA had supported NDPs in order to be seen to encourage neighbourhood planning despite the conformity of individual plans with the policy hierarchy being questionable. More problematically the use of assemblages can dilute analysis by becoming too relational, how-

ever Brownill's (2017) analysis does reflect the multitude of differing neighbourhood planning experiences that the research literature has explored and those it has yet to consider.

The future of neighbourhood planning

Building on the lessons above, this section asks what a re-imagined form of neighbourhood planning might look like. This is necessary for three reasons: first, research into new initiatives understandably tends - although not exclusively - to focus on understanding what *is* happening and how this is interpreted, to the exclusion of what *might* happen. Second, theorising possible futures is necessary before they can be achieved. By exploring the potential of radical policy alternatives, those ideas may be moved into the so-called 'Overton window' - denoting the range of ideas tolerated in popular discourse - effecting a shift in the perception of policy ideas from 'unthinkable' towards 'sensible' or even 'popular'. Third, and perhaps most importantly, this section addresses the lack of substantive objectives coming from central government regarding how neighbourhood planning might be assessed - whilst also reflecting the need to understand neighbourhood planning' value to the planning system and local social fabrics more generally.

As the sponsoring department, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) (or DCLG in its previous incarnation) appear reluctant to be drawn on the means by which to assess neighbourhood planning, beyond rhetoric that acclaims community influence over decisions (see DCLG, 2011). This leaves interested observers to interpret the intermittent reports, presentations by civil servants, social media, and other policy paraphernalia for clues. Here, significant stock appears to be placed in quantifiable measures such as the number of NDPs made and in progress, and perhaps more importantly the number of houses planned for above the levels set out in local plans (Stanier, 2014; DCLG, 2016). Such simple and ostensibly quantifiable metrics say nothing the quality of built environment, the provision of appropriate housing, or environmental protections - let alone the 'soft' benefits of participation (such as increased community wellbeing, cohesion, capacity and so on) or enhanced local democracy and more responsive local governance. More progressive measure of success are therefore necessary if the instances of innovation and value added planning practices are to become the norm rather than the exception.

In light of the present articulation of neo-liberal 'austerity localism' that promotes individualism and market-based technologies often inimical to local democracy (Featherstone et al., 2012), there is no reason to suggest

that the reforms suggested here will be implemented. However we take some consolation that successive Ministers and administrations have invested political capital in the success of neighbourhood planning, whilst the shifting architecture of local governance has opened up opportunities for the appropriation of governmental structures by communities pursuing progressive outcomes (Williams et al., 2014). Moreover the incremental modifications made to existing regulations and support structures have been largely welcomed by communities and planning officers (Parker and Wargent, 2017). Therefore we seek to advance this positive direction of travel and provide a positive imaginary in which an optimised model of neighbourhood planning (and more adventurously, an extension of neighbourhood governance) might develop, given sufficient political will, funding and support. The discussion that follows is structured by six normative criteria against which we argue neighbourhood planning might be usefully assessed (see Table 1).

Table 1: Normative criteria for a re-imagined neighbourhood planning

Normative criteria	Examples of re-framing and change
1. More equitable plan-making (distribution)	▪ Target and incentivise deprived neighbourhoods to participate ▪ Ensure consistency in provision in terms of support and funding ▪ Ensure the depth and quality of participatory processes
2. Deeper co-production (better integration between community and local government)	▪ Consolidated neighbourhood planning advice into a definitive form ▪ Deepen, clarify and codify the 'duty to support' on LPAs ▪ Introduce co-design programmes for new development (e.g. charrettes) ▪ Introduce neighbourhood planning specific training for planning officers (across both planning policy and development management teams)
2. Greater social inclusion *within* plan-making	▪ Recognise and encourage deliberative activity (within communities and between communities and governance partners) ▪ Recognise and demarcate a community development stage of planning from plan production ▪ Facilitate outreach programmes to 'hard to reach' groups and trial consultation bonuses
4. Improved quality of neighbourhood plans (recognising the 'value added' - e.g. nuanced housing provision, place-shaping, environmental protection etc.)	▪ Introduction of formal critical friend roles ▪ Provide a database of example plans and policies categorised by neighbourhood characteristic and planning issue ▪ Provide pro forma documents and boilerplate texts for formal documentation within neighbourhood plans (e.g. Consultation and Basic Condition Statements) ▪ Encourage process of demarcation and enhancement of content of NDPs over local plans or past plans ▪ Scope early evidence bases and visioning to help bridge very local and strategic visions of the future
5. Reconciliation hyper-local and strategic concerns	▪ Nest or integrate neighbourhood plans into emerging local plans and provide neighbourhood groups (or blocs of local groups) added weight when consulting on Local Plans and resultant decisions ▪ Produce co-created visioning statements to inform the general orientation of both local and neighbourhood plans
6. Enhanced community control and neighbourhood planning 'authority'	▪ Remove ambiguities regarding the legal status of Neighbourhood Forums after plan adoption ▪ Ensure that qualifying bodies maintain good practice in self-governance and intra-community accountability ▪ Embolden communities to pursue radical policies

(1) More equitable plan-making

The unequal distribution of neighbourhood planning activity to date has led to questions concerning structural exclusion and spatial justice. Increased awareness and accessibility should therefore be paramount in a revised neighbourhood planning. We imagine a landscape whereby all neighbourhoods are proactively encouraged (although not compelled - an approach briefly mooted by the Labour Party prior to the 2015 election) to develop an NDP, and ask how this might be achieved. The ability of a given neighbourhood to participate is dependent on many contingent internal factors, not least cultural capital, capacity, employment levels, financial resources and demographic make-up. External factors also contribute such as the availability of state support, levels of facilitation from local stakeholders, the nature of participation on offer and so on. Removing key barriers to entry - for instance, reducing excessively technical and exclusionary language and extending means-tested financial support - and targeting non-participation is central to achieving equality of participation. Such concerns are not new and indeed were central to advocacy planning dating back to the 1960s (Parker and Street, 2018). Local Authorities (LAs) have a central role in promoting participation's benefits through, for example, co-opting communities already known to, or in partnership with, the LA. This should involve targeting structurally excluded areas, typically low income and more often than not urban neighbourhoods. Many such communities will already be known to local stakeholders or be otherwise easily identified via the Index of Multiple Deprivation and could be granted extra support. Non-state support should also be explored: LPAs increasingly commission inputs from private sector consultants to deliver statutory obligations such as producing local plans (Parker et al., 2018), therefore novel commissioning processes (see Bovaird, 2007) could be adapted to elicit commitments from consultants, especially larger outfits, to assist in the production of evidence for communities, or even to second professional planners to communities (Parker and Street, 2018).

Frontloading community development exercises prior to starting an NDP could also assist inner urban areas that are disadvantaged by the lack of formal institutional structures such as Parish Councils, or conversely are the site of competing community groups. Such areas are also often sites of significant diversity, high population turnover and potentially intra-community conflict (Colomb, 2017). Community development is therefore vital to identify unifying objectives whilst proactively involving underrepresented groups - typically BAME groups, the elderly, the disabled, those on low incomes, and those with young families - through active and considered consultation. This can involve creative practice with innovative consultation methods such as per-

formance-based arts projects being seen to benefit local understanding and encouraging the emergence of 'compromise solution through creativity' (Cowie, 2017: 418).

(2) Deeper co-production

The role of local government as regulator and facilitator in new forms of neighbourhood governance is perhaps the most complex issue for future practice. Many potential improvements revolve around local government's role, particularly the ways in which opportunities for engagement are framed and the necessary mediation between top-down priorities (e.g. prioritisation of economic growth) and bottom-up community interests (typically securing local infrastructure, protecting green spaces, tailoring housing to local need and so on). Ironically, given the anti-statist underpinnings of localism post-2010, LAs retain a crucial role in translating and thereby re-producing (or not) central government agendas; yet as Newman (2014) has argued, 'the local' remains an ambiguous site within processes of neo-liberalism, neither a passive recipient of top-down programmes, nor an exclusive site of resistance. The extent to which neighbourhood planning is presently a tool of neo-liberal governmentality is an important question that is beyond the scope of this discussion - although its decidedly pro-growth orientation makes such a conclusion plausible (see Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013) - it is crucial to stress that LAs can to some degree choose how to interpret and apply central government programmes. The framing of community participation is one such example since practice demonstrates that new spaces of governance can either promote economic regeneration 'from below', contribute to the construction of political alternatives (Featherstone et al., 2012; Bradley, 2017a; Bradley and Sparling, 2017), or in some cases be rendered entirely ineffectual (see for example the lack of neighbourhood planning uptake in Manchester).

In practice, participating communities are often in a position of critical dependancy with their LA and therefore the latter's role in attracting and facilitating communities, strengthening plans themselves, and later implementing them is crucial (Parker et al., 2017). There is a need therefore to reflect on the 'openness' of administrative and political structures and more concretely the innovations in support provided by LAs at a time when local government funding is being reduced. Shortening deadlines for LPAs to respond to community actions have been welcomed by communities - if not always by planning officers (Parker and Wargent, 2017), but there is still scope to increase accountability between governance partners beyond *ad hoc* arrangements such as Memoranda of Understanding. This might be achieved through the introduction of closer defined

stages of plan production and integrating LPA inputs (e.g. an early vision and expectations meeting, a draft revision meeting, examination preparation support etc.). Many of these inputs are already happening but are extemporary rather than formally stipulated. Movement towards more formalised LA inputs could ensure that common pitfalls are avoided by communities learning 'on the job' and ensure that an NDP is the most appropriate tool to deliver communities' aspirations. This said, the role of LPAs should not be limited to such inputs and a more enterprising model of neighbourhood planning would be the result of a refined process of co-production. This would be based on genuine partnership and mutual recognition of both local and professional knowledges, the open sharing of information, and utilisation of each other's resources in order to generate mutually desired outputs. In line with criticisms levelled at communicative approaches, there is a need to mediate between professional and volunteer cultures in ways that combat the subordination of 'place-based knowledge' (Bradley, 2017b) to expertise without resorting to the professionalisation of community participation. This may require additional training for planning officers in the fields of cultural awareness and community development, or indeed co-designed training arrangements between planning officers and community members. The principle of co-production may appear at odds with agonistic readings of neighbourhood planning, but as we have sought to show elsewhere, community participation involves a 'mixed game' embracing both consensus and contestation (Parker et al., 2017). A more nuanced understanding of co-production as a political strategy could see citizen groups secure effective relations with local government by addressing immediate needs but also enabling them to negotiate for future benefits (Mitlin, 2008; Parker and Street, 2017). Any such form of co-production would therefore have the dual benefit of reinforcing the quality and probity of plans and fostering fairness through negotiation, since as Albrechts (2012: 57) argues, co-production is 'a process of becoming, a process of negotiating and discussing the meanings of problems, of evidence, of (political) strategies, of justice or fairness and the nature of outcomes'. This conceit is central to the future of neighbourhood planning as it forges understanding between communities and local government in ways that extend beyond the mere production of plans (as currently promoted by central government) and opens up the possibility of more comprehensive forms of neighbourhood governance.

(3) Greater social inclusion

Fostering co-production should be combined with more classically progressive approaches to participation. Both central and local government must combat the structural barriers to participation whilst developing re-

porting mechanisms and systems of accountability to ensure consistent geographical coverage and prevent support becoming another example of a 'postcode lottery' in public services (Cox, 2010; Parker and Street, 2017). Ensuring equality of participation is not simply a matter of combatting insufficient participation overall, but addressing social gradients (where better resourced groups are far more likely to participate); geographic inequalities (where uptake is stronger in particular regions or 'types' of community than others); and temporal discrepancies (for example how institutional support and funding regimes change over time). Where greater uniformity and formalised support is achieved, focus could shift to encouraging and enhancing community-wide capacity to avoid simply consolidating the skills of pre-existing active citizens. Such efforts should be introduced alongside mechanisms that encourage the participation of marginalised groups within communities, with consultation practices being frontloaded to ensure policies are rooted in local needs for their inception. Ensuring deeper participation in this way may also constrain the ability of local elites to establish themselves as experts and position others as 'amateurs' (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004). Such modifications should engender social inclusion in both the neighbourhood planning process (i.e. the inclusivity credentials of participating groups in terms of local representation) and also outcomes (i.e. policies are more likely to promote socially just outcomes given the plurality of views expressed in establishing them).

In this vein, neighbourhood planning would benefit from explicit engagement with the principles of deliberative democracy. Despite the somewhat insincere genuflection towards 'collaborative' democracy (Conservative Party, 2010), state-led participation since 2010 have conspicuously avoided established 'prefix democracy' labels, some of which were linked to area-based initiatives under New Labour. In line with the proposed community development phase above, genuine attempts to deepen intra-community and particularly state/citizen deliberation may help manage expectations, clarify support structures, and otherwise ground participation in communication in a way that addresses the unequal power relations between partners. At present, despite the stated desire to utilise local knowledge (Stanier, 2014), the difficult process of translating community aspirations into technical 'planning speak' reveals the relative position of citizen input against the formal planning system (Bradley, 2017b; Natarajan, 2017). The legitimation of alternative forms of knowledge and expression would not only aid processes of social inclusion but would allow communities the space required to develop their own understandings of local circumstances and mobilise necessary practical and political discourses and/or counter-tactics (see Parker and Street, 2015) to secure their aims. As before, advocating a deliberative approach may seem counter-intuitive given the agonistic readings apparent in the literature, yet the increasingly well-rehearsed debates between agonistic and deliberative traditions (Inch, 2015), reveals the need for democ-

ratic practice to embrace both 'unitary' and 'adversary' forms of democracy well established in the wider democracy literature (Mansbridge, 1983).

As the sponsoring department, MHCLG should also extend its co-ordinating role to target funding to LPAs with low uptake and seek to incentivise communities into neighbourhood planning or indeed alternative community-led initiatives. An example of innovation here would be financial inducements (e.g. uptake and consultation bonuses) which could operate in a similar the same way as the CIL, enabling high quality community development activity across all communities. Without sufficient orchestration at the centre, particularly concerning the fair allocation of resources, participation will continue to be partial and dominated by those with greater access to resources and pre-existing skills. Furthermore the narrow range of existing participants suggests a need for forms of positive action to give voice to the excluded groups mentioned above - without interventions to combat structural exclusion 'the possibilities for transformative action within the discursive spaces of 'localist action' remain circumscribed and accessible to only those individuals with access to the necessary resources, infrastructures, and repertoires' (Parker and Street, 2015: 806).

(4) Improved quality of neighbourhood plans (and recognising the 'value added')

The facilitative role of the state outlined above also extends into the need to improve the quality of neighbourhood plans themselves. A simple but key means of encouraging quality could be achieved through simplifying the currently ambiguous regulations, accompanied by explicit government-issued guidance that all communities can utilise. Despite the surfeit of advice presently available from different sources, the lack of definitive guidance has been compounded by the inherent difficulty of horizontally disseminating the context-specific knowledge and ideas created by heterogeneous communities. The desire to remove red tape and provide light touch regulations has had the adverse effect of driving bureaucracy and uncertainty down to neighbourhood level, resulting in higher workloads for participants, delays, and participation fatigue. There are opportunities to reduce the regulatory burden, for instance for many communities the referendum at the culmination of the process has proved to somewhat of a box-ticking exercise, demonstrated by the low turnout and high 'Yes' vote outcomes. Whilst it may be premature to suggest that referendums should be abolished in all instances (given the contested votes in some communities), this approach could become discretionary since the aggregative approach may actually reduce the incentive for participants to work towards collaborative solutions. Further measures could be implemented to facilitate plan quality such as the use of critical friends, which could

ensure a consistency of approach, prevent groups pursuing dead-end policies, and facilitate 'best practice' learning. Other simple improvements in support include providing authoritative pro-forma documents (for example for Consultation and Basic Conditions statements) and a searchable database of neighbourhood planning policies that all communities could utilise with minimal effort or technological skill.

Linked to issues of quality is the need to recognise and encourage the value added by the plans themselves. The current evaluative frame is too narrow and should go beyond crude quantitative measures (see DCLG, 2016) and embrace a richer perspective that recognises place-shaping, providing housing better suited to local need, environmental protection, questions of design, and 'soft' benefits. At present, the scope of NDPs are limited so that content has to reflect narrow land-use planning considerations rather than promoting the benefits and detail that might inform local plans (see point 5 below). Indeed the evidence gathering and consultation performed by communities inevitably goes beyond statutory land-use planning considerations to reflect wider community concerns: here too is an opportunity to utilise neighbourhood planning practice to feed into established political structures and/or facilitate a more comprehensive role for communities in the governance of their neighbourhood.

5) Reconciliation hyper-local and strategic concerns

As noted above, gaps and tensions presently exist between local plans and NDPs (not least where the former is absent or out of date) as well as between hyper-local and strategic concerns. One manifestation of this is the antagonism shown by many developers towards neighbourhood planning (Bradley, 2017b), with volume house-builders arguing that neighbourhood planning communities are too focused on their own community and are too conservative. Such conditions are proving a significant obstacle to both the uptake and progressive potential of NDPs. Improving the quality of plans in the ways outlined above can only go some way in ameliorating such tensions - further clarification regarding the legal status of NDPs in the context of the wider planning system is likely to be required from central government if plans are to retain any influence. Indeed there should be further debate about how to make better use of the processes of both local and neighbourhood plan-making to each inform the other. One option worth consideration is shared and nested methodologies in both forms of plan-making to ensure quality, transparency and inclusiveness, as well as to make better use of the different resources and knowledges featured at both scales of plan-making. Easier to introduce would be shared vision statements that could encourage buy-in from both communities and professional planners alike.

A further site of local/strategic tension occurs once NDPs are adopted and used as a decision tool by planning officers. Anecdotal evidence suggests the interpretation of NDPs by such planners post-adoption can diverge significantly from communities' intended meaning (and the advice provided by planning policy colleagues during plan preparation). This again, is an issue that can at least in part be rectified by better communication between planning professionals and NDP participants throughout the process, but further research is required into such discrepancies as well as the material consequences of NDPs within planning decision-making. This paper has necessarily concentrated on the process of neighbourhood planning - following the vast majority of research to date, yet as more NDPs are adopted and decisions made using NDP policies then research exploring direct influence on local development decisions (and subsequent material changes to the built environment) should be prioritised to inform all concerned about how NDPs are actually being applied.

(6) Enhanced community control and neighbourhood plan 'authority'

Finally, the majority of participating communities have opted for NDPs over the multitude of alternative tools on offer (e.g. the various Community Rights or the Neighbourhood Development Order, or even Community Governance Reviews). This can be attributed to the perception of enhanced control heavily promulgated by government rhetoric around 2011-2012, despite this being more limited in practice (Parker et al., 2015). This suggests that reforms designed to encourage deeper and wider participation should reflect the early optimism of participants attracted by genuine community control. One facet of this could include a greater say in strategic decisions, for example blocs of communities with completed NDPs could feed into the local plan process or emphasising the representation of neighbourhood planning networks on strategic planning bodies where successful examples exist. Such moves would have to be reconciled with evidence that suggests that local communities struggle to engage with policy at a strategic level (Matthews, 2012; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2015), yet linkages into the wider planning system needs to be facilitated if neighbourhood planning is to move beyond its present geographic, social and institutional boundaries.

A re-imagined and reinforced neighbourhood planning such as we have tried to set out would help create a more comprehensive system of neighbourhood governance (i.e. that one moves beyond land-use planning). This idea has given credence by Locality's (2018: 19) recent commission on the future of localism which has advocated both making it easier to establish Parish Councils and using Neighbourhood Forums as 'a blueprint for other forms of community control beyond neighbourhood planning … strengthening an enhanced frame-

work of Community Rights, including new powers to shape local public services and priorities on local spending'.

Conclusion

To date neighbourhood planning has encountered numerous issues and has lacked an 'image of success' against which citizens, policy-makers, or researchers might productively assess the policy. This situation has allowed many commentators to project their own expectations onto existing governance arrangements, particularly concerns over local empowerment, inclusivity and democratic legitimacy. However we feel that neighbourhood planning can still act as a catalyst for genuine bottom-up community action, centred around local attachments to place and emergent political identities, by providing space for local knowledge to be better integrated within the planning system - but only if steps are taken to learn the lessons on offer from the wide range of research recounted here. Notwithstanding the inequities of geographical take-up and concerns over representation legitimacy, it should not be overlooked that neighbourhood planning has successfully embedded a form of participatory democracy into a wider representative model without causing significant ructions in the fabric of democracy.

Deeper forms of public engagement - particularly regarding aspects of system design and ensuring democratic legitimacy and accountability - are both possible and likely to be productive, as demonstrated by Prosser et al.'s (2017) analysis of devolution in England. Somewhat unlike the City Deals already in place, neighbourhood planning has greater flexibility in adapting to ongoing concerns. The research detailed above reveals how participant voices are central to the neighbourhood planning's overall narrative, with citizen-planners knowing - often better than researchers - both what it takes to produce nuanced local planning policy in the face of significant blockages, and how participatory spaces can be improved to this end. Therefore the deepening of participatory planning cannot simply be a case of encouraging better engagement between citizens and democratic structures, it also requires the transformation of those structures themselves through the direct involvement of community participants. The aim of this paper has been to contribute to this iterative processes of reformulation, where citizens and researchers are able to simultaneously contribute to, but also shape, democratic institutions through their continual participation.

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