

COLIN BUCHANAN

neighbourhood planning


Think Piece
**The Challenges Ahead:
How should the planning profession respond?**

Neighbourhood Planning is a central tenet of the Government's Localism Bill and it is hoped that a dozen or so Neighbourhood Vanguard areas will come forward to trial this approach before the Bill is enacted. The deadline for applications to be a Vanguard is 14 Feb and CLG advise that relevant parts of the Bill will be enacted and begin to be rolled out in April 2012. We thus have a year to see just how Neighbourhood Plans will work in practice.

In a recent survey of LPAs conducted by Colin Buchanan many respondents indicated that they are waiting for the lessons of the Vanguards before they progress, but the point of the Neighbourhood Planning initiative is that the plans are to be led from the bottom-up – by the neighbourhoods themselves – with appropriate support from the authorities. Indeed, there is a duty on all local authorities to provide advice and support to those communities and neighbourhoods wishing to bring a plan forward.

This raises numerous questions: what is a neighbourhood and the appropriate geography of a plan; how long will they take; is the profession geared up for the new agenda; and perhaps, most fundamentally, will it deliver on the Government's localism agenda?

It is perhaps unsurprising that, in the main, those authorities intending to apply to be Vanguards tend to be those where neighbourhood groups or parish councils have also expressed interest in preparing plans. In fact, this is essential to a successful Vanguard bid: applicants need to be able to demonstrate that they are 'good to go', that they can start work immediately and deliver the plan in good time. Although it is uncertain how long it will take for Neighbourhood Plans to be prepared, tested and adopted (some people we have spoken to have suggested in excess of two years), what is clear is that for the plan to be successful it needs to be proactive and positive, built upon the spirit of collaboration. Central to this will be the involvement of members: as much as anything it is political will that can drive a good plan forward. But perhaps more important is the issue of speed. It is now almost seven years since the 2004 Act and yet many authorities are still preparing Core Strategies and other associated LDF documents. Experience has shown us that a lengthy, drawn out process leads to apathy. Interest must be maintained throughout the process: there is little point in creating a fantastic, visionary plan if the people that are supposed to deliver it have lost all interest. To paraphrase a well known sports brand, just do it! And do it quickly!

This perhaps means that the traditional role of the planner might need redefining – from one of planning and managing change to one of facilitation and communication. We will need to be out in the field far more, engaging, mediating, assisting and even educating. It requires a cultural shift and – given the potential for both Neighbourhood Plans and Neighbourhood Development Orders to be prepared – a move away from the silo mentality of separating forward planning from development management. We as planners will need to embrace a wider, all embracing role that can lead on all aspects of the agenda. But, do the skills exist within the profession to do this? And if they do, are the resources even there? At this time of economic uncertainty and budget cuts, the duty for local planning authorities to cooperate in the production of Neighbourhood Plans could place a major burden on departments – which flies in the face of the rationale behind the BIG Society: local people taking responsibility and removing the burden in local services.

Contact us

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The Challenges Ahead: How should the planning profession respond?

Think Piece Continued:

Notes:

1. For summary results of the Colin Buchanan Neighbourhood Planning Survey, go to www.colinbuchanan.com/view/news/neighbourhood-planning
2. To discuss, debate and share best practice on Neighbourhood Planning, join the LinkedIn Group at <http://lnkd.in/aVatYm>

So perhaps we need to take the opportunity now to identify what type of assistance might be required, where and how. Training is one potential area – providing the community with the skills to make informed and judged decisions so that they can create a strong and lasting legacy for the neighbourhood. Whether this will be provided by officers, through consultancy or other means – whither Planning Aid? – remains to be seen, but it is likely to be a major growth area over the next few years.

And this needs to be put in the context of just how many plans could come forward. Some districts in the country have in excess of 100 parishes: if all were to come forward with Plans how would the authority cope? We also need to consider whether the use of a parish is appropriate or not for a Neighbourhood Plan. The Localism Bill suggests that a Plan can be set up if three people agree to it: what does this imply with regard to scale and geography? And could Neighbourhood Plans have sub-neighbourhood plans within them? In un-parished areas how will the geography be defined? As suburban areas? Or town and district centres plus their residential hinterland? Will this just add a layer of confusion to an already over-complicated system of plan making and place shaping? The independent assessors of the Neighbourhood Plans – whoever they may be – are in for an interesting ride!

And this comes to the nub of the matter. If, when assessing the plans, it needs to be demonstrated that they are in conformity with the Core Strategy – as the Localism Bill requires – is this really bottom-up planning? In the spirit of localism, should the Neighbourhood Plans actually be informing the Core Strategy rather than vice versa? Clearly there needs to be a degree of reconciliation between the local issues and the bigger strategic picture. Again, this is where the role of the Planner may change and develop – becoming one of facilitator and indeed mediator between neighbourhoods and competing interests and different spatial levels. Perhaps that well worn phrase, 'joined-up thinking', needs repeating. This is important: if the Plan needs to be in conformity with the Core Strategy, just how much autonomy will the neighbourhood have to develop its own ideas?

We must ensure that this new approach to planning does not just pay lip-service to communities, but fully embraces ideas and opportunities as a force for good. After all, we are all in this to make our places better for everyone and improving quality of life. It is only through a local – or neighbourhood – based approach that we can get under the skin of an area.

The fact that our survey of LPAs showed that a quarter of respondents will apply to be a Vanguard and, interestingly, that 30% will look to bring Neighbourhood Plans forward in advance of an adopted Core Strategy demonstrates that the profession is beginning to recognise the benefits of this new approach. Although there are many unanswered questions, the survey response suggests a positive outlook. Many commentators have suggested that Localism is no more than a charter for Nimbyism. I would disagree: this is a real opportunity to proactively engage residents and community groups and help deliver meaningful change at a local level.

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