

What is a neighbourhood, when it isn't a Parish?

A summary of the key issues emerging from the discussion on the
Neighbourhood Planning Group on LinkedIn

April 2011

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In January 2011, Colin Buchanan set up a Neighbourhood Planning discussion group on the professional networking website LinkedIn. The group has proven very popular with nearly 400 members by end March 2011. Members comprise built environment professionals and community volunteers (not always mutually exclusive).

One of the first discussion topics posted on the group questioned how a neighbourhood will be geographically defined in those areas which do not benefit from having a Parish Council. This has generated a popular and lively debate among the group and raises a number of practical issues about how the relevant provisions of the Localism Bill can be made to work on the ground.

The original question posed is set out below followed by an overview of the key issues raised in response. However the debate ranged far and wide around this original question as one contributor said 'This debate has identified the complexity of issues...'.

Please note that comments have been made between January and March 2011 and some of the points raised have been overtaken by more recent Government announcements.

The Localism Bill proposes a minimum of three residents for establishing a Neighbourhood Forum. So could we see multiple proposals for Neighbourhood Forums within a single street, or housing estate or any non-parished area? It's going to be fascinating to see whether competing proposals come forward in some neighbourhoods and how this issue will be resolved. Surely forcing different Forum's to amalgamate is not in the spirit of localism. Perhaps the Bill's proposed duty to co-operate should apply to Neighbourhood Forums?

Key Issue 1: The characteristics of a neighbourhood

As one contributor neatly put it: 'neighbourhoods are what they are'. There is no accepted definition of a neighbourhood; although there have been many attempts to provide one. So how do you define or isolate a neighbourhood in a large urban area? One suggested list of criteria (that could be employed by a local authority) comprised: a mix of homes around a local shopping or service centre, shared open space, sports, leisure and faith facilities. Unsurprisingly perhaps the discussion served to highlight the complexity of identifying urban neighbourhoods in this context. It is relatively straightforward to locate the centre of a neighbourhood, but the boundaries are often fuzzy.

It is perhaps best summed up by the following contribution: 'The short answer is you can't. The planning answer is you can try. The political answer is it will fail. The physical answer it is wrong.' So how does this help us define neighbourhood boundaries in order to establish a Forum and prepare a Neighbourhood Plan? This leads us onto the next key issue...

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Key Issue 2: How to define a neighbourhood: bottom up or top down?

Perhaps the most controversial issue debated has been how, and by whom, neighbourhood boundaries should be defined. Although there is a consensus that ward boundaries have little relevance to most communities, there is also a view that they provide a coherent basis for ensuring a coherent fit with wider local governance, including access to resources and political representation.

Others see this as irrelevant; arguing that local town centres for example provide a geography of catchments which doesn't relate to wards. This can be particularly problematic where urban neighbourhoods naturally cross borough boundaries (e.g. Highgate Village, Crystal Palace, Knightsbridge). The issue has been neatly summarised as a choice between (a) making sure the geography is right to engender support within the community but accepting this may take some time or (b) accepting the boundaries suggested by the local planning authority (which will tend to be larger than those generated bottom up) and getting on with it.

The majority view appears to be a pragmatic one – one size will not fit all. Where authorities don't wish to be prescriptive then they should work with those neighbourhoods that come forward in accordance with their own self defined boundaries to avoid unnecessary delay. Where there may be issues of overlap or fuzzy boundaries it has been suggested that the duty to co-operate should apply to ensure that boundary issues can be effectively resolved.

Key Issue 3: New communities

In the case of large urban/suburban extensions or regeneration projects which are likely to lead to an influx on new residents and businesses, the Localism Bill provides for the involvement of those who wish to live in a neighbourhood. But how do you actually canvass their views? And even if you do, they will not have a vote in any subsequent referendum on the Plan or the Order? This raises the bigger question as to whether neighbourhood plans are an effective mechanism for planning large scale developments of this nature?

Key Issue 4: What about those who don't have a vote?

The Budget Statement confirmed that business groups would be able to lead the neighbourhood planning process, working alongside local communities. How will business owners and employees who actively participate in the process be able to make their voice heard in a referendum on a Plan or Order? The same is true for young people (below age of 18). Many young people make an incredibly valuable and creative contribution to communities and have a strong stake in their future – how can we ensure that their views are taken on board?

A significant risk in the process is that those individual people and organisations who may have given considerable time and resource to the plan could have no direct say in whether it is finally adopted.

Key Issue 5: Identify quick wins

There is some concern that the planning process can be slow, and that individuals may lose interest in neighbourhood planning unless they can see clear results along the way. Small scale initiatives such as streetscape works and public realm improvement projects are good examples of existing activities that can be built upon to generate interest in more ambitious neighbourhood planning whilst retaining a very practical focus week to week. Small, inexpensive improvements to streets and parks can offer real improvements to quality of life which should contribute to longer term aspirations as well as help sustain ongoing engagement in longer term planning processes.

Implications for the 'frontrunners'...

The range of discussions from this LinkedIn group point to some fundamental worries, ideas and opportunities about neighbourhood planning. Drawing on this wealth of material, Urban Design London and Colin Buchanan have identified a number of areas of uncertainty that DCLG could usefully address and clarify, including through the recently announced 'frontrunners' that will be piloting Neighbourhood Planning over the next 12 months.

Who has a say?

How can the system respect the rights and interests of those on the electoral role, those not eligible to vote (such as young people) and others with an interest in the area (including some businesses, and land owners)? Can councillors become champions for Neighbourhood Plans in their areas or will they be sidelined? Answers to these issues are not clear and threaten to undermine the implementation of the Bill.

Conformity with the local plan.

What are the strategic policies in a local plan, with which a neighbourhood plan will be required to conform? Without understanding this, and what the presumption in favour of sustainable development will actually mean in practice, it is hard for community groups and others to decide if a neighbourhood plan would be useful.

Geographically defining neighbourhoods and cross boundary issues.

There are lots of comments and different points of view on these issues but are they red herrings? It might be more useful to discuss how the duty to co-operate, common sense and applying existing good planning practices can resolve such issues. In planning terms it might be better to allow boundaries to change as people consider the characteristics of an area and what a neighbourhood plan should look to achieve, rather than necessarily tightly defining them at the outset – but how could this be done within the system as proposed at the moment?

There is significant interest in neighbourhood planning but confusion and unanswered questions like those above are threatening to undermine what could be an exciting chapter for localism, planning and communities. It is understood that some of the issues mentioned above have not been finalised, but some interim advice would be useful while we all follow the progress of the 'frontrunners' with interest.

Our thanks go to those individuals who have contributed to this lively discussion. We do not pretend to have reflected the full and diverse range of views expressed, but hope that some of the key messages have been drawn out. A full transcript of the discussion is available from LinkedIn (see weblink below) and www.neighbourhoodplanning.info.

Michael Bach

Richard Blyth

Chris Bowden

Roland Brass

Jeremy Caulton

Richard Crappsley

Richard Crutchley

Ben Derbyshire

David English

Nick Falk

Michael Hardware

Jon Herbert

Neil Johnston

Angela Koch

Esther Kurland

Warren Lever

John Pounder

David Randall

James Renwick

Hugh Roberts

Deborah Sacks

Hilary Satchwell

Paul Stanton

David Tittle

Angus Walker

What can go into a neighbourhood plan?

Local priorities are likely to include improvements to parks and streets, and the way services like rubbish collection and libraries are provided etc. Linking planning to wider public service delivery is not a new idea but could be very exciting at the local level, and central to taking forward the big society.

Maintaining momentum.

All stakeholders will need to be realistic about timescales; adopting a plan will not be a quick process. Therefore, delivering quick wins will be very important. Including existing projects for things like better street lighting or improvements to open space within the scope of neighbourhood planning will be useful to maintain momentum and enthusiasm.

Funding neighbourhood planning.

Who is going to pay for plans and the work required to adopt them? Clarity over funding for local authorities and some more realistic information on the cost of producing plans would be very useful. Confusion over who can pay for what, and the role of developers in the process may impact on the level of take up.

Paying for local improvements and services.

There is also confusion about who will 'pay' for infrastructure and services identified in plans. A better understanding of how all the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), New Homes Bonus (NHB) and other monies will be allocated to neighbourhoods, who will manage them and what they can be used for will be essential to build confidence in the process.

Join the
debate

on LinkedIn at: <http://lnkd.in/aVatYm>