Levelling up neighbourhoods - back to the very local future

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levelling up neighbourhoods—back to the very local future?

The UK government's continuing attachment to 'the neighbourhood', exhibited again in the Levelling Up White Paper, calls for careful consideration of what is achievable at the neighbourhood scale and what levelled-up neighbourhoods might look like, say Gavin Parker, John Sturzaker and Matthew Wargent

The Levelling Up White Paper (LUWP), published by the UK government on 2 February 2022,[1] covers a plethora of issues concerning place inequalities, with varying degrees of depth. One topic that has gone somewhat under the radar in the ensuing analysis is the persistence of 'the neighbourhood' in central government's policy imagination, references to it recur over 50 times throughout the White Paper. The idea of planning at the neighbourhood scale, with its familiar and cosy connotations, remains an attractive evocation for government Ministers, coupling warm words about local control with the long-standing liberal suspicion of big government and big planning.

Over the past decade, various tools have been deployed in an attempt to engage the neighbourhood in planning for place across the UK.[2] Of course, attention has long been paid to the neighbourhood as an active scale for planning, stretching back over a century.[3] Here, we are concerned with the implications for neighbourhood-scale planning in the context of planning reforms and the levelling-up agenda in the UK. As government renews its promises toward neighbourhoods—including a mooted review of neighbourhood governance—what is needed now is a frank conversation about what is achievable and what levelled-up neighbourhoods might look like in the context of wider efforts to rebalance the UK's economic geography.

Emerging policy for a renewed emphasis on the very local

Whether one agrees with what has been proposed in 2022, or indeed in the Planning White Paper of 2020, there is clearly renewed interest from the UK government in the idea that neighbourhoods should play a more active part in shaping local priorities. It is well established in the academic literature that the neighbourhood concept does important work in creating spatially-bounded units and mobilising 'active citizens' who are supposedly ripe for partnership within the complex world of policy and place governance. This scale is also a convenient, if romanticised one through which to play on a sense of local identity and bridge the problematic gap between state and community.[4]

The Big Society agenda that spawned the post-2010 brand of localism built on New Labour's interest in the neighbourhood as an idea, as much as a geographic scale.[5] In now familiar rhetoric, this sought to provide 'genuine opportunities [for communities] to influence the future of the places where they live'.[6] Sue Brownill in this journal recently

argued that interest in localism had been renewed, but noted that the efforts of the past decade have not reached those that need it most.[7] While attention on the English neighbourhood planning experiment is understandable given its statutory footing, there is much less consideration of similar initiatives in the UK's other constituent nations. Not enough is known about the limitations and possibilities of these varying forms of community planning, but what is known raises serious questions about simply assuming that they can play a significant role in levelling up if we take this to mean reducing local inequality.

Here we should add a point of further caution: that too often the matters that are most in need of attention are absent or peripheral from policy debates at the very local scale. Questions of social, economic and environmental urgency are displaced, in England at least, by a combination of rhetoric, resources and support that focuses on the number of plans made, sites allocated in those plans, and the housebuilding that results from it. We hope therefore that the LUWP's commitment to 'widen the accessibility of neighbourhood planning' (page 216) means more than simply more plans, but indicates an engagement with issues of representation, inclusivity, and social and environmental sustainability goals.

To its credit, the LUWP does discuss principles for a 'Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships' (page 214). This is underpinned by talk of making it easier for people to set local priorities and shape their neighbourhoods. The White Paper also appears to recognise difference across communities, under the banner of 'every community matters', with an acknowledgement that funding and other support will have to reach those most in need. There is an indication, too, that local agencies and planning authorities will need to be better at listening to communities and engaging with civil society to identify priorities, assets, and the policies and other actions needed to strengthen 'community infrastructure'. These recognitions are crucial, but, as ever, the devil will be in the detail concerning how this is delivered.

In the confines of formal planning we must also recognise the critical importance of the quality and forms of exchange between neighbourhoods and local authorities.[8] The establishment of durable platforms for communities to sustain their involvement is reflected in the LUWP, with the government looking at the role and functions of parish councils in England and considering how to make them quicker and easier to establish[9]—a positive aspiration in our view.

So the LUWP makes some of the right noises. Then again, it says so many things, so how could it not? As one of us remarked a decade ago, the 'genie is out of the bottle' on community engagement in planning at the neighbourhood level,[10] and it would be brave for any government to back away entirely.[11]

Reflecting on where we are now, if we want to harness social action at the neighbourhood level, then, counter-intuitively perhaps, we need to recognise its limitations. These include the limits on both voluntarism[12] and the ability of community-led participation to address with the deep structural issues that produce place inequalities. For instance, the jury is still out as to how, or indeed whether, planning at this scale productively engages with the persistent, new, and ongoing challenges of social and environmental justice. There is a clear need to reflect on the implications of the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda for neighbourhoods, including the design of participation, as well as its implementation and related oversight, to ensure that it meets an agreed set of quality criteria. More than this, we need to establish whether the 'genie' of community engagement aligns with wider ambitions to solve regional economic inequalities. How can we support neighbourhoods and What can we reasonably expect, and what can be reasonably expected from them?

Gavin Parker

'We need better evidence on what communities strive for when engaging in community-led planning, and to see how this chimes with the levelling-up agenda'

In line with this, we need a better understanding of 'what works' in and for neighbourhoods. Central government acknowledges that this will require evidence to understand better how to support communities, and engage with levelling-up challenges. In our recent research,[13] we argued for the need to persist with neighbourhood planning while also widening its accessibility. There are further important lessons to learn from a decade of neighbourhood planning and from similar initiatives across the UK if we are to foster engagement with important matters beyond housebuilding.

Perhaps there is still more optimism to be mined out of the LUWP; a rather grand-sounding review of neighbourhood governance in England is promised. It seems that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on neighbourhoods[14] have coalesced around fashionable concepts such as the 20-minute

neighbourhood[15] (or its 15-minute competitor), to create an exciting moment for neighbourhoods and a re-commitment from government about the political credit to be realised from persisting with this governance scale. This is even as questions persist over the efficacy and justice of existing planning activity at this level. We need not only to know what works in planning at the neighbourhood scale, but develop the focus on its 'just' credentials in terms of access, process, content, and outcomes.

Conclusion

It is hard to know what levelled-up neighbourhoods might look like. There is a distinct possibility that the neighbourhood agenda will get lost amid the new focus on regional inequalities. The government's commitment, set out on page 214 of the Levelling Up White Paper, to develop 'strong community infrastructure and social capital' and the recognition that this is often weakest 'in the most deprived places' is to be welcomed; however, more worryingly, the desire to put communities 'in the driving seat to level up' echoes the rhetoric of the early 2010s, when many communities came to believe that they were oversold on neighbourhood planning powers.[16]

We need better evidence on what communities strive for when engaging in community-led planning, and to see how this chimes with the levelling-up agenda. Clearly more research is needed to provide a detailed account of just what makes it into community plans, why, and to what effect. The resilience of neighbourhoods needs to be accompanied by improved understanding, objectives, resources, and support, too.

Let us assume for now that community-led planning can be an important vehicle to aid levelling up; what we need is a clearer idea of what a just neighbourhood looks like, before we repeat past mistakes of concentrating on superficial measures of success.

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Notes

1 *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Levelling Up White Paper. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Feb. 2022. www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom

2 Neighbourhood planning was introduced in England under the Localism Act 2011. In Scotland, Local Place Plans were introduced under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, and these are supposed to provide a framework for communities to take forward community actions themselves. In Wales, Place Plans were introduced in 2015 and authored by local communities — they require local planning authorities to work with communities to prepare the plan as Supplementary Planning Guidance. The Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 2014 placed a statutory duty on councils to engage with communities to produce Community Plans

3 For a history of the neighbourhood concept, see E Talen: *Neighborhood*. Oxford University Press, 2019

4 See, for example, M Tait and A Inch: 'Putting localism in place: conservative images of the good community and the contradictions of planning reform in England'. *Planning Practice & Research*, 2016, Vol. 31(2), 174–94. www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02697459.2015.1104219

5 See M Wargent: 'Localism, governmentality and failing technologies: the case of Neighbourhood Planning in England'. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 2021, Vol. 9(4), 571-91

6 *A Plain English Guide to the Localism Act*. Department for Communities and Local Government, Nov. 2011, p.12. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5959/1896534.pdf

7 S Brownill: 'Localism is dead — long live localism'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2021, Vol. 90, Nov./Dec., 364-67

8 See J Sturzaker, O Sykes and B Dockerill: 'Disruptive localism — how far does clientelism shape the prospects of neighbourhood planning in deprived urban communities?'. *Planning Theory & Practice*, published online Nov. 2021. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2021.2003425

9 It is notable that the largest gaps in coverage of English Neighbourhood Plans are in those areas without parish councils, illustrating the importance of such bodies

10 G Parker: 'Neighbourhood planning: precursors, lessons and prospects'. *Journal of Planning & Environment Law*, 2012, Vol. 40, 1-20

11 Although the *Planning for the Future* White Paper (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020) appeared to downplay neighbourhood planning, it was to retained amid the proposed radical shake-up — however, it was never established how communities' plans might interact with the 'growth, renew, protect' zones espoused in the White Paper

12 See G Parker, M Dobson, T Lynn and K Salter: 'Entangling voluntarism, leisure time and political work: the governmentalities of neighbourhood planning in England'. *Leisure Studies*, 2020, Vol. 39(5), 644–58

13 G Parker, M Wargent, K Salter, M Dobson, T Lynn and A Yuille: *Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning*. Final Report. University of Reading, for Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, May 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/929422/Impacts_of_Neighbourhood_Planning_in_England.pdf

14 See M Wargent and E Talen: 'Rethinking neighbourhoods'. *Town Planning Review*, 2021, Vol. 92(1), 89–95. https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/90872/1/Wargent%20and%20Talen%202020.pdf

15 See, for example, *20-Minute Neighbourhoods — Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities. An Introduction for Council Planners in England*. TCPA, Mar. 2021. www.tcpa.org.uk/the-20-minute-neighbourhood; and F O'Sullivan and Laura Bliss: 'The 15-minute city — no cars required — is urban planning's new utopia'. *Bloomberg Business Week*, 12 Nov. 2020. www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-11-12/paris-s-15-minute-city-could-be-coming-to-an-urban-area-near-you

16 G Parker, T Lynn and M Wargent: 'Sticking to the script? The co-production of neighbourhood planning in England'. *Town Planning Review*, 2015, Vol. 86(5), 519–37. https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/41465/1/Parker%20et%20al%202015%20TPR%20Sticking2Script.pdf