

1 “The planners’ dream goes wrong?” Questioning citizen-centred planning

2 “Letting loose the lunatics - wasn’t the greatest of ideas” (Weller, 1982)

3 Introduction

4 Following his appearance on Desert Island Discs in 2006 – the popular BBC Radio 4
5 programme in which a public figure is invited to choose just eight songs to accompany a
6 hypothetically indefinite stay on a desert island – David Cameron’s selections were
7 dissected by the British media. The leader of the **opposition** Conservative Party’s choices
8 included R.E.M (*Perfect Circle*) and Radiohead (*Fake Plastic Trees*) as well as Mendelssohn
9 and the comedy song, *Ernie*, by Benny Hill. These choices, together with other comments
10 Cameron made regarding his preferences for The Smiths and similar ‘graduate alternative’
11 bands, came to be understood as providing an insight into his position within what was
12 termed “the Jam Generation” (McElvoy, 2008) after the early 1980s band, an outfit for
13 which Cameron had also expressed a particular preference. “The Jam Generation”,
14 according to McElvoy, is defined by a shared political commitment to social liberalism and
15 an understanding that “the state cannot deliver all ends”.

16 The identification of the future Conservative Prime Minister with the “Jam Generation” is
17 somewhat problematised by the fact that the band’s principal songwriter, Paul Weller, had
18 also been a leading figure in ‘Red Wedge’, the loose network of celebrities who sought an
19 association with the Labour Party in an attempt to popularise the leadership of Neil Kinnock
20 and ultimately help defeat the Conservative Party in the general election of 1987. However,
21 whilst their politics were, and evidently remain, quite different, there appears one respect in

22 which Weller, The Jam Generation and the Coalition Government unexpectedly converge:
23 they share a common enemy in the form of the planning system.

24 The quote that opens this paper is from The Jam's *The Planners Dream Goes Wrong*, which
25 featured on their 1982 album, *The Gift*. The 'lunatics' of its opening line are urban planners:
26 or, rather, the rational-comprehensive urban planners of 1960s lore. This clearly derogatory
27 characterisation of the profession chimes with the tenor of policy on planning produced
28 under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition from 2010-2015 and the subsequent
29 Conservative administration from 2015. Associations with Communism made by Eric
30 Pickles, at the time the Secretary of State responsible for planning (Donnelly, 2011), the
31 characterisation of the professional activity as not "brain surgery" by the Communities
32 Minister Andrew Stunell (Carpenter, 2011), and the claim that planning should not "be the
33 preserve of some professional priesthood" by the Planning Minister Nick Boles (The Planner,
34 2014), are descriptions that could almost have been taken from later verses of The Jam's
35 original song.

36 In this paper we hope to put forward a corrective to the image of professional planning *in*
37 *any form* as 'lunacy'. Through an examination of the real-world politics and peculiarities of
38 the English planning system since it was remade through the 2011 Localism Act we hope to
39 explore the degree to which the erosion of planning as a professional activity lodged within
40 the democratic organ of local government has been the result of a peculiar alliance between
41 a 'progressive' brand of planning theory and a succession of neo-liberal governments,
42 reaching its zenith under those led by the Conservative party. We argue that the set of
43 reforms made to planning in England over recent years could be understood as strongly
44 redolent of the prescriptions of the academic-theoretical planners who have long argued for

45 citizens to be situated at the centre of urban and environmental planning and management.
46 However, those advocating this approach assumed it would be accompanied by strong
47 support from a progressive state, whereas in the current context the de-professionalisation
48 of planning has been accompanied by cuts to public services under the badge of “austerity”
49 and an ideological opposition to state-led activity of any form. Through a combination of
50 literature review, analysis of surveys of recent planning reforms and the report of a pilot
51 project from North West England, we argue that in making the dream of citizen-led planning
52 come true an opportunity has been created for the powers that were once invested in
53 professional planning, and situated within a formal tier of democratic local government, to
54 be co-opted by untrained private individuals and businesses.

55 **Foreclosure of a dream: The construction of ‘nightmare planning’**

56 Identifying state and municipal planning as an organised attempt to create dystopian
57 futures has been a popular pastime among both academic and popular commentators.
58 Following the late Sir Peter Hall’s popular 1982 book, *Great Planning Disasters*, a broad
59 literature has served to draw attention to the many negative consequences of planning -
60 physically, environmentally, socially, economically. There are few ills it seems that cannot be
61 laid at planning’s door. Of course, the assignation of responsibility for these multiform
62 disasters is counterfactual: we can only speculate about what might have been the case had
63 an alternative course, or no action at all, been taken. It is also true that some of the
64 examples that serve to illustrate planning’s *potential* barbarism are buried in plans that
65 were never actually enacted (for example, BBC, 2013), part of the ‘visioning’ that provides
66 strategic scale planning with its vitality (Ratcliffe and Krawczyk, 2011). Nevertheless we
67 often dwell on the social problems said to be the hallmark of life in 1960s housing

68 developments, re-christened 'sink estates', whilst conveniently omitting to mention
69 examples like London's Barbican, simultaneously a monument to brutalism and a landmark
70 in the centre of global finance capital where apartments routinely sell for in excess of
71 £1,000,000. Similarly, forty years or more of rubbishing the less successful new towns -
72 Kirkby, Cumbernauld - distracts attention from the fastest growing and most economically
73 prosperous settlements in the country, Milton Keynes, Hounslow, Welwyn Garden City.

74 This is not to say, that all planning practice has always been wholly positive but simply to
75 add a corrective to the (now) received view that much planning practice has always been
76 almost wholly negative. Yet offering any counter to the received view is made difficult
77 when those who have been busy installing it - the press, political élites and even celebrities
78 (including, but not limited to, pop stars) - choose to focus primarily on negative aspects of
79 either outcome or process.

80 Of this group probably the most successful in characterising planning practice over the
81 second half of the twentieth century as in some sense deficient has been the academy.
82 Criticism has come from many different directions and has demanded quite different
83 responses from the profession. Planning, for instance, has been charged by some with a
84 failure to understand, respond to or actively shape the economic environment that defines
85 planning practice (for example, Pennington, 2000; Morton, 2011). Others have sought to
86 argue that planning practice should be more technocratic. The use of cartographic software
87 (principally GIS) and its application to the management of issues such as, for example, flood
88 risk are said to demand a greater understanding of data-modelling and environmental
89 sciences (Condon, Cavens and Miller, 2009). More widely the acknowledgement that what
90 counts as 'professional practice' can vary markedly even within an administrative territory

91 has moved some to look closely at this variation – often with the conclusion that what
92 prevails in practice is a patchwork of misaligned activities (Brindley, Rydin and Stoker 2005).
93 This lack of coordination is an important ingredient of what is often said to be
94 fundamentally wrong with ‘planning’: that it is an activity that consistently fails to live up to
95 its own name.

96 Finally, the post-positivist turn in planning theory has sometimes diagnosed planning’s
97 shortcoming as partly a function of its professional status, something which produces élitism
98 and exclusionary ways of working. From this perspective, one grounded in a variety of
99 epistemological frameworks, professional planning has been understood as a technocratic
100 activity that often entails deleterious outcomes, particularly for the poor (Gower-Davies,
101 1974; Dennis, 1970; Watson, 2009), as well as being systemically neglectful of gender (see
102 Fainstein and Servon, 2005), ethnicity (Sweet and Etienne, 2011), age (Gillespie, 2013) and
103 disability (Seeland and Nicolè, 2006). As a consequence, the prescription of many planning
104 theorists, closely or more tangentially associated with this turn, has been for a fundamental
105 reorganisation of the ethos upon which professional planning is built: a move away from a
106 professional orientation that seeks to establish and act in the public interest at a strategic
107 scale to one in which the citizenry is situated at the centre of decision making.

108 The lasting impression is that the planning academy has rarely been happy with professional
109 planning and professional planners. It is within this context that British political élites have
110 begun to ask what kind of professional planning, if any, is desirable in the modern era and
111 why? The answer, in England at least, appears to have been strongly influenced by the
112 academic diagnoses of professional planning’s historic propensity to result in ‘disasters’ and

113 the popular/political construction of the activity as one led by ‘lunatics’, ‘communists’ or
114 ‘enemies of enterprise’.

115 Making this connection between the planning academy and the political construction of
116 nightmare planning in urgent need of reform is provided by those whose research
117 disentangles the anatomy of this academic-political association in animating changes to
118 policy. For example, some commentators have chronicled the process of reform that began
119 with the creation of a ‘spatial planning’ system in 2004 and the successor regime ushered in
120 by the 2011 Localism Act so as to draw a direct connection between the reification of public
121 participation and the theoretical prescriptions of the collaborative school(s) of planning
122 theory – at one point said to be so dominant as to have attained the status of a paradigm
123 (Innes, 1995):

124 Despite ongoing critique collaborative planning theory has exerted a
125 powerful influence within planning academia, which gradually influenced
126 wider thinking about planning as an activity, providing a coherent
127 framework for the reinterpretation of planning as a progressive
128 enterprise. From this thinking (and advocacy) came a series of important
129 implications for the roles of epistemologies of planning, including
130 effectively decentring the role of the planner to that of partnership and
131 consensus-based facilitator who works with disparate groups and
132 stakeholders towards agreement or consensus (Allmendinger 2009),
133 presented in idealised form as a means of helping even-out access to
134 expertise, knowledge and resources between well-resourced and less
135 well-resourced participants (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012:96).

136 At the same time as this “paradigm shift” in planning theory, the notion of a strong
137 regulatory state, particularly in relation to urban and environmental planning, has come to
138 be seen as at odds with the wider neoliberal polity. Consequently, the planning profession,
139 as with other congruent aspects of local government, has been identified as a prime
140 candidate for the first cuts of austerity. Achieving this has been accompanied by an
141 narrative that clearly points to the dissonance between professional, regulatory planning as
142 a brake on development and the breathless urgency of economic growth with (professional)
143 planners castigated as “enemies of enterprise” (Watt, 2011). Lord and Tewdwr-Jones (2014)
144 have argued that this neo-liberal trend is the long run leitmotif evident in waves of reform
145 aimed at de-professionalising public sector planning instigated by successive governments
146 of all political stripes in the UK over the last 35 years and more.

147 The persuasiveness of this case can be seen in the general tendency for power to be
148 devolved, at first tentatively and subsequently much more fundamentally, to autonomously
149 organised groups of citizens. A much greater role for public participation was an explicit aim
150 in waves of legislation during the New Labour administrations 1997-2010. The centrality of a
151 Statement of Community Involvement as a procedural necessity for plans to be formally
152 adopted, brought about by the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, was an
153 important element of the New Labour reform agenda of the time. However, throughout
154 this period the government continued to support planning as a professional activity
155 embedded within the established structure of local government. Whether this is due to a
156 belief in the importance of planning or to the well-established tension within New Labour
157 between the espoused wish to promote civil society and the need to maintain control
158 (Mooney and Fyfe, 2006) is open to debate. In any case while the legislation that comprised

159 the purported transition from land-use/regulatory planning to ‘spatial planning’ had far
160 reaching implications for the planning profession, the activity itself remained precisely this –
161 a *profession* rooted in a democratically elected organ of government.

162 By contrast, the reforms of the 2011 Localism Act are far more fundamental (Holman and
163 Rydin, 2013). The Act makes legislative provision for autonomously organised groups of
164 residents to self-assemble, constitute a *Neighbourhood Forum*, author a plan for a self-
165 defined neighbourhood and, if endorsed via a local referendum, have this adopted as part of
166 the basis for development control in that area (in rural areas, pre-existing Parish and Town
167 Councils have been given the power to prepare these plans). It is important to note here
168 that the legislation does not limit authorial status to Neighbourhood Fora constituted solely
169 by private individuals: local businesses may also lead the process and shape a plan for the
170 area in which they are located. The result is now a radically reformed planning system in
171 which non-professional actors – either residents or businesses - are empowered to create
172 plans that may become legally binding for very small areas, in some cases a few streets and
173 fewer than 200 residents. Evidence of the effects of this legislation can be seen in the use of
174 Neighbourhood Planning powers to block development. The proposal for 4,000 new homes
175 in the Buckinghamshire market town of Winslow which was reduced to 450 following a
176 Neighbourhood Planning referendum that *The Times* newspaper reported the developer
177 responsible tried to prevent from taking place (Webster 2014a, 2014b).

178 For proponents, Neighbourhood Planning represents a victory for local democracy - whether
179 representative, through elected Parish and Town Councils in rural areas, participatory,
180 through Neighbourhood Fora in urban areas, or direct, through referendums in both cases.

181 The conservative thinkers whose work has influenced the policy (Blond, 2009) describe it as

182 Red Toryism and point to its origins in Burke’s “Little Platoons” (see Lowndes and Pratchett,
183 2012 or Tait and Inch, 2016 for a fuller discussion of localist ideology). For its architects on
184 the political Right these ideological associations may seem to explain the policy’s emergence
185 but they are only part of the explanation. It must also be noted that radically redistributing
186 planning power from a professional cadre in local government to neighbourhoods and their
187 residents speaks very closely to the backlash against rational-comprehensive planning
188 among the popular Left, as indicated by the opening line of *The Planners Dream Goes*
189 *Wrong*, and the progressive planning theories of the post-positivist variety.

190 The popularity of localism with factions on both the political right and left has been noted
191 by others. For example, Hickson (2013) points out that there is support not only among Red
192 Tories but also among their counterparts in the Labour party, ‘Blue Labour’ - or, rather,
193 there is support for a specific form of “communitarian” localism with the emphasis on civic
194 responsibility. Hickson contrasts this with “liberal” localism where the individual is seen as
195 being the prime recipient of any decentring of power. The latter, although associated with
196 Thatcherism, is also supported by some in the Labour party, chiefly among the “Purple
197 Labour” group. As we will go on to discuss, the political rhetoric around Neighbourhood
198 Planning is supportive of both civic and individual empowerment, the key unifying concept
199 being the shift in power downwards from a central state criticised for being overly
200 controlling, bureaucratic and insufficiently “democratic”. As observed by Rodriguez-Pose
201 and Sandall (2008), the ‘democratic discourse’ of localism is almost impossible to counter;
202 after all, who would be in favour of a system being *less* democratic? The rhetorical power of
203 “BS localism” (Catney et al, 2014) has led to its application to other arenas of what in the UK
204 were traditionally state-led activity – including renewable energy provision (ibid.); public

205 libraries (Goulding, 2013); social housing (Manzi, 2015) and education (Leeder and Mabbett,
206 2011). In all these cases, to a greater or lesser extent, communitarian thinkers have
207 historically argued for greater community involvement in service provision.

208 This odd convergence of views that sees classical conservative thinking updated to support
209 'double devolution' to local communities combined with some academics' desire to see
210 planning and other traditionally state- orchestrated activities become citizen-centred has
211 resulted in a powerful case for root-and-branch reform. But not without contention. For
212 the political Centre-Right a cadre of civically-minded residents, the modern day equivalents
213 to Burke's Little Platoons, will (have to) come forward to fill the breach. The alternative will
214 be a local free-for-all where residents, businesses and the remnants of local statutory
215 planning authorities compete for the realisation of their own ends.

216 So, for political progressives the test of localism in general and Neighbourhood Planning
217 specifically is a strong one. Simply having Neighbourhood Fora emerge, or local groups
218 constitute to run libraries or schools or promote their own community energy schemes will
219 not be sufficient for academic proponents. Instead those that do result will have to be
220 inclusive and constituted in such a way that participatory and deliberative practice can
221 become established – and will need to demonstrate that they are equally viable in poorer as
222 well as wealthier areas. In short, the faith placed in the 'victory of the best argument' by
223 some planning theorists will be tried against the charge that it represents "planning theory
224 for the naive" (Bengs, 2005). The key question, perhaps, is whether, as Bengs put it, the
225 change in decision making from directly elected bodies to other 'stakeholders', including
226 Neighbourhood Fora, will, as it is portrayed, work "as an extension and not as a reduction of

227 democracy” (Bengs, 2005: 2). So, what does the early evidence tell us has emerged from
228 Neighbourhood Planning?

229 ***Je revais d’un autre monde. Neighbourhood Planning: the evidence so far***

230 No comprehensive research has yet been undertaken on the breadth of involvement in
231 Neighbourhood Planning at a community level. Instead there exists a patchwork of case
232 study research and specialist journalism that can be drawn together to give a composite
233 account of the policy’s development. To this secondary data we can add our own case-
234 based research conducted between November 2011 and March 2012 thanks to a small
235 grant awarded under the University of Liverpool’s ‘Changing Cultures’ theme. One of the
236 aims of this funding is to engage with the real world policy context offered by our
237 institution’s geographic setting. For this reason, in conducting this research we sought to
238 focus our attention wholly on the North West of England. In selecting case studies we chose
239 to focus on urban contexts in which there was long standing evidence of interventions to
240 raise community consciousness as part of the process of arresting/reversing urban decline.
241 Our three chosen case studies are all ranked within the twenty per cent most deprived areas
242 of the UK but, following programmes such as New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood
243 Renewal Fund and the work of institutions such as urban regeneration companies, have
244 well-established evidence of community activism. The logic behind case study selection
245 was, therefore, to look at deprived neighbourhoods where there was evidence of
246 community activism in relation to planning issues as these areas might be legitimately
247 expected to engage with neighbourhood planning.

248 Our three case studies comprise, firstly, Devonshire Park on the Wirral – a small area of
249 substantial Victorian houses in the deprived Tranmere area of the borough which has seen
250 changing demographics and conversions of family housing to houses of multiple occupation
251 (HMO); secondly, ‘New’ East Manchester - the neighbourhoods that surround the football
252 stadium originally built for the 2002 Commonwealth Games (now occupied by Manchester
253 City Football Club); and, thirdly, Queens’ Park in Blackpool, an area where residents had
254 organised themselves in opposition to demolition and redevelopment proposals. Data
255 gathering comprised semi-structured interviews (with questions tailored to the specific
256 circumstances of the case, but targeted at the broad theme of citizen empowerment and
257 planning/regeneration), walk-about, observations at meetings and documentary review.
258 The interviews/walk-about undertaken are enumerated in Table 1. Interviews and the walk-
259 about were recorded using a voice recorder and subsequently transcribed.

260

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

261 In adding the results of our own case-based research from the North West to a literature
262 review of similar work conducted elsewhere in England, we can begin to arrive at a better
263 understanding of the ways in which neighbourhood planning is unfolding. Among other
264 things, when seen in the light of a review of the secondary literature we have been able to
265 identify some early emerging themes and compare the situation in different parts of the
266 country. The capacity to identify lines of convergence and divergence in take-up of
267 neighbourhood planning powers across otherwise dissimilar areas is particularly important
268 because neighbourhood planning was projected to assume different forms across different
269 social, economic and geographical settings – as noted above we are also interested in
270 interrogating the hypothesis that localism may work better in more affluent communities,

271 which tend to have greater capacity to self-organise, but less well in poorer communities (cf.
272 Catney et al., 2014; Goulding, 2013).

273 We have specifically drawn upon the following sources of secondary data on neighbourhood
274 planning, along with various other publications which discuss one or more neighbourhood
275 plans in detail:

276 1. A survey undertaken by the trade Journal *Planning* in March 2013, which involved
277 Freedom of Information requests to all local authorities in England to explore the
278 correlation between levels of deprivation and the extent of Neighbourhood Planning
279 activity (reported in Geoghegan, 2013).

280 2. A more in-depth study carried out by the planning consultants Turley of the 75
281 Neighbourhood Plans published (most in draft form) by February 2014 (see Turley,
282 2014).

283 3. A 2016 study reviewing the take-up and distribution of Neighbourhood Planning five
284 years since its inception (Parker and Salter, 2016).

285 Perhaps the principal objection made by opponents of neighbourhood planning was that, in
286 demanding specialist skills, it would be overwhelmingly adopted in affluent areas of modest
287 population with disproportionately high numbers of (probably retired) professionals. The
288 *Planning* survey found that of the 433 applications from local groups to take on
289 Neighbourhood Planning powers only one-tenth were in the 20 per cent most deprived local
290 authorities. Looking at the political control of the local authorities, on the basis that
291 Conservative-controlled local authorities are on average likely to be less deprived than their
292 Labour-controlled equivalents, Geoghegan found a very strong correlation with

293 Conservative-controlled local authorities having 1.85 Neighbourhood Planning power
294 applications per authority compared to 0.70 per authority for Labour-controlled local
295 authorities.

296 The Turley study found a similarly disproportionate relationship between deprivation and
297 Neighbourhood Planning: 39% of the plans surveyed related to the least deprived quartile of
298 local authorities in England whilst 12% were from the most deprived quartile; and 73% of
299 plans had been produced in Conservative-controlled local authorities compared to 9% in
300 Labour-controlled areas. The later Parker & Salter study (2016) noted that only 7.5% of
301 places designated as neighbourhood areas (the first step to producing a neighbourhood
302 plan) were in the twenty per cent most deprived areas of England.

303 These findings appear to support concerns expressed when the Neighbourhood Planning
304 reforms were being proposed and enacted that, in the words of Sir Peter Hall, “The Big
305 Society tent is going to be occupied largely by well-meaning, well educated people living in
306 nice places – mostly rural – with time on their hands” (2011, p. 60).

307 This issue of whether there are drivers of/barriers to the adoption of neighbourhood
308 planning that have rural/metropolitan dynamics or potentially more straightforward party
309 political aspects requires much greater research over the full extent of the national territory
310 to which the policy applies. Whilst there are democratic safeguards in place in the sense
311 that neighbourhood plans are voluntary and optional, and every local authority must still
312 produce its own local plan so those areas without neighbourhood plans will not be ‘plan-
313 less’, there remains potential for a two-tier system to become established. A second,
314 related issue, pertains to the content of and the extent of participation in the plans that

315 have been, and are being, produced. Secondary evidence on this issue is harder to obtain
316 but it is possible to point to examples that appear to support two further concerns
317 expressed by those who have been critical of the roll-out of Neighbourhood Planning
318 powers. Firstly, that the Neighbourhood Planning process may be open to domination by
319 élite, or at least more vocal, individuals and groups within communities and, secondly, that
320 the focus of the plans that are emerging may be short-sighted, focussed on single issues or
321 at least not covering the breadth of topics that might be expected of a local plan (Gallent
322 and Robinson, 2012, p. 113).

323 To explore the extent to which Neighbourhood Planning can be considered a truly
324 democratic exercise requires analysis of the processes in play in specific localities. In this
325 respect reference can be made to the research of Davoudi & Cowan (2013) on the North
326 Shields Fish Quay Neighbourhood Plan in the North East of England, in which it was found
327 that the preparation of the plan saw business voices dominate at the expense of residents
328 and tourists - despite the latter group's identification as "important for the future
329 development of the neighbourhood" (p. 564).

330 Thame in Oxfordshire is a similar case, a town which was one of the first Neighbourhood
331 Plans to pass a local referendum, a feature designed to ensure majority approval and a
332 unique example of direct democracy in the English planning system. Although the Thame
333 Neighbourhood Plan was approved by 76% of voters in that referendum the preparation
334 process was criticised by one local resident (Earley, 2013) because the participatory work
335 focussed on residents associations, the coverage of which was not complete. For this
336 reason, there is real danger in taking headline "yes" figures at face value: the turnout in the
337 Thame referendum was 40%, so the proportion of the eligible population who voted in

338 favour of the plan being adopted was only 30% of those eligible to vote. Whilst this may be
339 no lower than the proportion of the population voting in, say, elections for the European
340 Parliament, in the case of Thame, questioning the democratic legitimacy of the referendum
341 is relevant insofar as it ties into questions about the outcome of the process: the plan
342 situated new housing, “on the outside of two industrial estates to the south east of the
343 town, where few existing residents would be directly affected”. This result may be
344 advantageous to the residents associations which pushed for this outcome but may be
345 understood as significantly less so to the potential occupants of these new homes. Given
346 this apparent flaw in the participation process it is perhaps unsurprising that by August 2014
347 an opposition campaign against one of the housing sites included in the Thame
348 Neighbourhood Plan had emerged (Geoghegan, 2014): the “Save the Elms” group criticises
349 both the planning process behind the development of this site, and, most pertinently for us,
350 complains that the site “was quietly slipped into the Thame Neighbourhood Development
351 Plan under questionable circumstances” (Save The Elms, 2014). They are (at the time of
352 writing), therefore, campaigning for a second referendum on the Neighbourhood Plan to
353 remove the site in question.

354 This controversy illustrates the continuation under the Neighbourhood Planning system of a
355 trend identified under the previous planning regime of communities resorting to methods
356 outside the conventional planning system “as a way of ‘being heard’, often in frustration
357 that they had not been listened to within the planning process” (Allmendinger & Haughton,
358 2012: 98). More fundamentally it serves to call into question the Government’s belief that
359 opposition to development is caused by top-down planning. At least one Neighbourhood
360 Plan has been abandoned due to a “lack of public involvement” (New Romney Town

361 Council, 2014) and the “low number of responses received to questionnaires (the vast
362 majority of which were completed by residents aged 61+ stating they did not want any
363 change to the Parish)” (ibid.).

364 On these issues of citizen participation and representation our research chimes with those
365 existing studies that point to a highly uneven geography of de-professionalisation. Evidence
366 from Blackpool illustrates a divergence in views between the local authority and a
367 community activist in terms of localism and the attitude of the local authority to community
368 representation. Our interview with the former, represented by a senior officer in the
369 planning/regeneration directorate, suggested that the Localism Act (at the time still a Bill)
370 would have little impact, as the Council were effectively acting in a ‘localist’ way already –
371 “We only do stuff the way we do it because there’s a local demand to do it, members want
372 us to do it... we do that whether there’s a localism bill or not”; the Council used community
373 forums, and had recently moved from those being led by elected Councillors to a pattern of
374 forums being led by “community representatives... [because] if you’re going to get proper
375 community engagement then you need the community in the chair... it’s nothing to do with
376 localism saying ‘you’re not doing this’ and suddenly the veil’s been lifted”. He then
377 specifically referred to the Queens Park area, which at the time comprised the only ‘tower
378 block’ style homes in Blackpool. The Council, working with Blackpool Coastal Housing¹, had
379 proposed demolishing these and replacing them with lower density housing. Our
380 interviewee explained that “in the end, we got the residents’ association speaking at the

¹ BCH is the housing association which manages the homes formerly owned by the Council

381 executive meeting saying 'we're happy to support the demolition of this estate', which is
382 really unusual. And that's because of the engagement work we did with them beforehand".

383 This was in contrast to the views of the person who for ten years had chaired the Queens
384 Park Resident's Association (QPRA). Firstly, she disagreed with the contention that the
385 majority of the residents voted in favour of demolition, but had seemingly adopted a
386 pragmatic view that demolition was inevitable and had focussed her energies on the QPRA
387 becoming a broad-ranging support organisation for the people who lived on the estate. The
388 QPRA, unlike other residents' associations, was not funded by the Council or housing
389 association – rather it was a charity and limited company. "So they've got no control over us
390 and they really don't like that [the council]... we have a decent relationship with them".
391 When asked about the likely impact of the Localism Act, she felt this would be limited
392 "because we do everything ourselves". She argued that the Act would only be of use to local
393 communities if they were aware of their rights, and lobbied the local authority: "if they
394 don't know what their rights are, they're stuck a bit – and it's the will of the local council to
395 implement that, if there's no will to implement that you're back to square one again".

396 So, in Blackpool local empowerment was led by and possibly initiated by, one or two key
397 activists who perceived a significant transfer of power and change in working practices.
398 Similar observations could be made regarding East Manchester where a prominent
399 community interviewee spoke of his work with Eastlands Homes (EH), the housing
400 association which owned and managed the (redeveloped) housing within which he lived. He
401 felt EH did all they could – "it's recognised how important the tenants are – all the way from
402 the very small up to, erm, well, to the day you die, you can always get involved. But it's a
403 choice". However, this choice was evidently one that many tenants did not to exercise: our

404 interviewee was on “nine or ten” of the tenants panels used to consult on issues such as
405 rent, investment, etc. Most of these comprised five or six people of the 3,000 who lived in
406 the area. Our interviewee appeared to be at the centre of his community – during our
407 interview, which at his request was undertaken in his home, he received several visitors,
408 including the local *Neighbourhood Services Manager* for EH, who felt that the activity in the
409 area reflected the spirit of the Localism Act: “people are genuinely involved with each other,
410 and looking after each other, and doing things together rather than expecting things to be
411 done for them”. In turn, our interview with an elected councillor for Manchester City
412 Council suggested that this was in large part due to local authority budget cuts –
413 “Regeneration has closed down; it’s finished. Apart from the money coming from
414 Manchester City (Football Club), that’s it”. The latter is a clear instantiation of the concern
415 identified above – that localism, accompanied by cuts in state funding, would leave private
416 sector action (in this case funded by the ruling family of Abu Dhabi, the owners of
417 Manchester City FC) as, to use our interviewee’s own words “the only game in town”.

418 Moving on to consider the content of (emerging) Neighbourhood Plans, the study by Turley
419 referred to earlier examined the ‘content and policies’ of the 75 plans published up to
420 February 2014. It should be noted here that this study, as might be expected given the
421 authorship is fairly explicit in its focus on the extent to which Neighbourhood Plans “might
422 curtail economic growth” (Turley, 2014, p. 4) – an example of the “hegemony of growth”
423 (Inch, 2014, p. 9) whereby all planning processes are assessed on the basis of how well they
424 facilitate economic development. We return to this issue below. Notwithstanding the
425 framing of their investigation, the report by Turley found that “a key theme of 55% of all
426 neighbourhood plans is the preservation and protection of that which currently exists” (p.

427 15), not the promotion of further development; this despite the clear statement from the
428 Government that “communities cannot use neighbourhood planning to block the building of
429 new homes and businesses” (DCLG, 2011a, p. 3).

430 Some of the plans Turley studied were only in draft form, so had not yet been examined by
431 the independent assessors whose role is to gauge the extent to which they meet this
432 requirement. However, even when a Neighbourhood Plan has been assessed in this way,
433 found to be pro-development, passed a referendum and been adopted, controversies can
434 still occur due to communities’ apparent misconception about the weight to be attached to
435 Neighbourhood Plans. In Exeter St James, another ‘early adopter’ of a Neighbourhood Plan,
436 the Neighbourhood Forum had threatened to take the local authority, Exeter City Council, to
437 judicial review as the Forum felt the Council had not taken sufficient account of the
438 Neighbourhood Plan in determining a development proposal on a key site within its area.
439 This application for judicial review was ultimately dropped by the Forum after they
440 successfully negotiated design improvements with the developer – a pathway that would be
441 open to them even without a Neighbourhood Plan. The Forum concluded that “new powers
442 giving local communities a stronger influence in planning in their areas ... [were] as it turns
443 out, not as strong as promoted” (Exeter St James Forum, 2014). More accurately, perhaps,
444 the new powers are only as strong as promoted if the communities in question are
445 avowedly pro-growth, something which it seems even early adopters may not be.

446 Our own work in England’s North West finds a similar gap between the pro-growth rhetoric
447 of the policy and the way in which it is actually being used by communities. For example the
448 Devonshire Park Neighbourhood Plan (DPNP) from Birkenhead, a town in Wirral Borough
449 Council in Merseyside, bears out the suggestion that the emphasis will be placed on

450 maintaining the *status quo* by communities. It is, in the words of the draft Neighbourhood
451 Plan, “a peaceful enclave, typified by broad streets with well-spaced houses set back from
452 the road, enhanced by attractive gardens” (Wirral Council & DPRA, 2013, p.2). And the
453 residents apparently wish to keep it that way. We attended a meeting of the Devonshire
454 Park Residents Association (DPRA), along with a pre-meeting held in advance. At that pre-
455 meeting, participants claimed that “people know nearly everyone who lives on their street”,
456 but that this idyll was under threat due to increasing conversions of large houses into flats
457 and bedsits, or HMOs (Houses in Multiple Occupation). This issue is the focus of the draft
458 plan, which contains fully just two policies – the first encourages “The provision of new
459 single occupancy family housing” (p. 15); the second states that “new development or
460 conversion of existing properties into multiple flats, apartments or HMO’s” (p. 16) will not
461 be supported. It is clear that the draft DPNP is restricted to just one single issue and
462 attempts to ensure that only one form of residential development is allowed within the
463 area.

464 **Don’t dream it’s over: issues on which further research is needed**

465 On the basis of the collected evidence presented it would appear that there is significant
466 geographic variation in the implementation of neighbourhood planning. Further research is
467 needed to investigate both the character and form of the neighbourhood planning fora that
468 have emerged and the plans they have produced. De-professionalisation of planning has
469 potentially created significant variation in the degree to which contextually different areas
470 have been able to respond to the specific challenges of the policy. However, at the time of
471 writing there is little to suggest that this dual approach to how planning is enacted in
472 England represents a major political concern for any of the main political parties. Yet it

473 clearly could have profound implications for the consistent governance of urban and
474 environmental management.

475 Alongside such analysis deeper reflection is needed on the professional status of planners.
476 There is little doubt that the planning profession has seen its role change hugely over the
477 course of the last 30 years. Yet institutions have long memories and cultural practices can be
478 slow to adjust. Very little is known regarding the extent to which local authority planners are
479 adapting to their new facilitative role under neighbourhood planning and any potential
480 resentment that may exist in planning departments regarding this recasting of their role -
481 particularly those in metropolitan areas that once wielded great power and presided over
482 hugely significant interventions in the built environment.

483 Building on this point it may also be a propitious moment to have a frank debate over the
484 justification and feasibility of encouraging greater participation in planning in the first place.
485 As Inch (2014) has noted within the considerable planning literature focusing on this topic
486 there is a great deal which addresses the perceived failings of the average professional
487 planner, and/or specifies their deficiencies with respect to the skills and approaches that
488 would be needed if such a practitioner was to focus on facilitating full and genuine
489 community participation. However, in England, in the wake of the 2011 Localism Act these
490 questions have been superseded by the issue of what skills will be required of the
491 participants themselves: the citizens who are now not simply expected to embrace good
492 deliberative or agonistic practice but to spontaneously form a Neighbourhood Planning
493 forum and author their own plan. On this subject, Inch (2014) notes that effective plan
494 production “would require the cultivation of specific civic virtues, including particular
495 conceptions of how the common good should be understood and what constitutes

496 legitimate political behaviour” (p. 6). This is almost certainly true and represents a welcome
497 corrective to what has been called the “idealism and utopianism” common to much post-
498 positivist planning thought (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger 1998, p. 1988).

499 From this perspective there will be a host of requirements relating to the skills and implicit
500 code of semi-professional practice that will be made of private individuals in order to
501 transform them into citizen-planners. The extent to which the DIY (‘do it yourself’) approach
502 to planning has been accompanied by or stimulated the emergence of a citizenry engaged
503 with planning (or indeed energy or housing) issues is unknown. On this subject there is an
504 urgent requirement for systematic research. Moreover, from our own work we would also
505 point to the fact that the new de-professionalised Neighbourhood Planning polity makes
506 additional demands on the stamina of individuals who must combine their existing life-
507 commitments with the task of authoring and maintaining a neighbourhood plan. The
508 magnitude of this burden should not be underestimated and speaks to the need to be
509 cognisant of the complexities of citizen participation that are routinely identified by
510 research (for example, Michels and De Graaf, 2010) but, seemingly, equally routinely
511 ignored by policy makers. For example, we found that in each area we studied a key
512 individual was leading the Neighbourhood Planning work or community activism and that
513 this work was more demanding than they expected (this echoes emerging findings from the
514 literature, for example Sturzaker and Shaw 2015). Several areas reported ‘false starts’ as
515 they had begun work on writing their plan only to have to start again to comply with the
516 detailed regulations that followed the 2011 Localism Act – not what might be expected from
517 a purportedly “light touch” regime (DCLG, 2011b.) This is supported by Inch’s (2014, p. 11)
518 description of interviewees who “spoke of the emotional impacts involved in sustaining

519 protracted campaigns” and acknowledged the “unreasonable demands on citizens” (ibid., p.
520 18) of long-term engagement in planning. When advocating participatory planning we need
521 to reflect upon whether the benefit to the average citizen from getting involved is likely to
522 exceed the costs in terms of time and (emotional and physical) energy.

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