Can community empowerment reduce opposition to housing? Evidence from rural England

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential benefits of giving local communities a greater role in planning for housing – an approach being pioneered by the new Government in the United Kingdom. That new Government has embarked on an ambitious programme of reform, including dismantling the 'top-down' system of planning for housing and replacing it with a 'bottom-up', community-driven approach. This paper explores the implications of this new approach to ask whether it can be effective in reducing opposition to new housing. It draws upon evidence taken from a study into opposition to small scale housing schemes in rural England, and broader literature related to opposition to development.

Introduction

In May 2010 a new centre-right coalition Government came to power in the UK. One of its first acts was to initiate a programme of radical change to the English planning system. The strategic 'half' of the statutory development plan in England was revoked. The justification for this put forward by the Government was that these plans 'were a national disaster that robbed local people of their democratic voice, alienating them and entrenching opposition against new development' (DCLG, 2010a). At the same time the new Government has pledged to devolve power to local communities, introducing the 'community right to build', which will give 'groups of local people the power to deliver the development that their local community wants, with minimal red tape' (DCLG, 2010b) if more than half of the community supports that development.

Whilst the UK Government's rhetoric is perhaps unnecessarily strong, there is some evidence that what they describe as 'failed Soviet tractor style top-down planning targets' (DCLG, 2010a) were not totally successful in matching the supply of new housing with the need and demand for it, particularly in rural areas. Whilst there are a complex range of both supply and demand related issues for the shortfall of affordable homes in the countryside (see Gallent el al., 2010 for a comprehensive review of these issues), for 30 years or more researchers (such as Shucksmith, 1981) have noted the failure of the planning system to address the needs of rural communities in this regard. The net result of this is that homes in the most rural parts of England can be twice as unaffordable as those in the most urban parts of the country (CRC, 2010). There has been no shortage of attempts to explore this apparent failure of planning policy and its implementation, whether in the form of government-sponsored enquiries (ARHC, 2006; Gallent et al., 2010; Taylor, 2008), explorations by the third sector (Best & Shucksmith, 2006) or through academic enquiry (for example Richards & Satsangi, 2004). As I have noted elsewhere (Sturzaker, 2010), the 'technical' solutions proposed by many of these enquiries have not been successful, pointing towards deeper rooted issues of attitudes, politics and power relations.

It now seems clear that a large part of the problem in England is due to the unusual, if not unique, attitude towards rural development in the UK as a whole (Gallent et al., 2002). As noted many years ago by Professor Sir Peter Hall, the English planning system was set up with rural protectionism, and hence urban containment, at its heart (Hall et al., 1973). A desire to protect the stereotypical English 'rural idyll' has maintained this rural protectionism (Woods, 2005), with the planning system today still dominated by a notion that housing development in the countryside is inherently 'unsustainable' (Hoggart & Henderson, 2005; Sturzaker & Shucksmith, 2011), despite the ongoing trend of counterurbanisation which increases the demand for what housing stock exists (Gallent et al., 2010).

As will be discussed below, there is also a great deal of literature exploring issues around opposition to new development, and its derivation from these ideas about rural protectionism. As can be seen from the quotes above, the Government clearly believes that empowering local communities to deliver new housing will reduce the opposition which they link with a top-down approach to planning. They believe that 'almost every local community' (DBIS, 2010) would like to see additional housing development, and that the community right to build will hence be successful.

It is fair to say there has been some scepticism expressed about whether this approach will succeed – some have described it as, potentially at least, a 'NIMBY's charter' (Healey, 2010; O'Connor, 2010; Walker, 2010). Key to whether the policy will have the intended effect is the question of what motivates opposition to housing at the neighbourhood/community level. This paper will seek to answer this question by examining the literature around opposition to development, before presenting empirical data from a recent study carried out for the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), which explored opposition to new housing development in practice.

Why do people oppose new development?

'Development has long been contested, as can be seen with canals and railways in 18th- and 19th-century Britain' (Clifford & Warren, 2005, p. 356). The immediate reaction when faced with such opposition is often to categorise it as 'NIMBY' – Not In My Back Yard. Bell et al (2005) sum up the concept of NIMBYism as the gap between 'attitude motivated by concern for the common good and behaviour motivated by self-interest' (Bell et al., 2005, p. 460).

Hubbard (2005) looked at proposals for a land use which he considered to be necessary for 'the common good' – centres for asylum seekers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was substantial local objection to the proposals. Hubbard noted that these objections used 'planning language' about the centre being incongruous and inappropriate in the open countryside, but he believed that these comments were obscuring more complex anxieties about asylum seekers themselves. Hubbard went on to advance the proposition that objections to asylum centres were in fact a form of xenophobia, a fear of outsiders. He believed that residents opposed to asylum seekers had set out to exclude 'Otherness', so that they could maintain a particular way of life.

Dear (1992) examined responses to proposals for sites for "human services" (homes for people with disabilities, HIV, etc) in the USA. He noted that there were normally three specific concerns of NIMBYs: a perceived threat to property values; personal security; and neighbourhood amenity. He also pointed out that more sophisticated opponents might make the point that the host neighbourhood is unsuitable for the proposed use (Dear, 1992). That understanding perhaps provides a context for the following quote from Ken Clarke, local MP for one of the proposed asylum centres in Hubbard's 2005 study (and now Lord Chancellor in the UK Government):

> This is not about racism, it is about right thinking. I think there should be a large camp, but not be built on green belt land miles from any facilities. What we need is some way of helping asylum seekers by providing them with the facilities they need, not housing them in the middle of nowhere.
>
> (cited in Hubbard, 2005)

This type of response to development may be genuine, or it may be perceived as tactical, because 'a self-interest argument is unlikely to win a public debate' (Bell et al., 2005, p. 464). There is some evidence that opponents to development do behave in such a tactical way – 'developer C felt that objectors to development "will just try to use whatever they think will have most impact"' (Clifford & Warren, 2005, p. 372).

An important question here is what distinguishes a perceived "NIMBY" response from a legitimate comment on development? Kraft and Clary (1991) identified the five broad characteristics of NIMBY responses from the literature of the time:

1) Parochial and localised attitudes towards the problem, which exclude broader implications.
2) Distrust of project sponsors.
3) Limited information about project siting, risks and benefits.
4) High concern about project risks.
5) Highly emotional responses to the conflict.

(Kraft & Clary, 1991)

However, they found this a problematic description, particularly as their review of empirical research into supposed NIMBYism found that only characteristics 2 and 4 occurred with any regularity. They found that those objecting to development proposals were often capable of seeing the bigger picture, understood the proposals and could not be generalised as being 'highly emotional'.

There is a growing body of work which takes issue with the whole idea of NIMBYism. Wolsink (2006), in a critique of the work done by Hubbard, summarised much of this literature and complained that NIMBY is not a well-defined concept, but 'is more often used as a pejorative to imply selfish behaviour on the part of opponents' (Wolsink, 2006, p. 87). Rather than assuming that most opposition to development arises from this type of selfishness, Wolsink draws on other literature which identifies various other interpretations of such opposition. One argument is that much opposition results from 'value trade-off rather than technical issues', which suggests that 'officials' views on these matters should not take precedence' (both quotes from McAvoy, 1998, p. 274). Others take a perhaps more radical structural view, arguing that NIMBYism can be viewed as opposition by communities to the power of big business, and hence it 'reflects the role of place in the mobilization and empowerment of community resistance against the interests of capital' (Lake, 1993). The role that power relations play in the planning system is another strand of literature, which space does not allow a detailed exploration of, but in recent years some have challenged a Marxist view of capital vs. labour within planning decision-making, identifying a more complex pattern of interests and power relations (Sturzaker, 2010; Vigar et al., 2000).

Ellis (2004) added to the debate with an empirically informed investigation into third party rights of appeal in Ireland. He concluded that those who appeal against planning decisions are not all simply self-interested and parochial. He identified five "discourses of objection", or reasons why people appealed:

1) The critical green.
2) The public interest guardian.
3) The predevelopment conservative.
4) The individual proceduralist.
5) The antidevelopment process sheriff.

(Ellis, 2004)

The third of these is the nearest to the conventional "NIMBY" perception, but Ellis felt it was clear that there was a significant complexity of motivations for objection/appeal, with some (e.g. category 5) not only claiming their *right* to challenge under the planning system but also exercising a perceived *duty* to challenge what they see as unsustainable development.

Similarly, Bell et al (2005) identified a range of motivations for opposition, specifying two 'gaps' in attitudes which they felt were more useful than the supposed NIMBY gap between attitude and behaviour:

- The social gap – the gap between the high public support for X (wind power in their article, housing development in our case) and low success rates in planning applications.
- The individual gap – the gap between an individual's positive attitude to a concept in general but active opposition to a particular development.

They went on to propose three reasons for the 'social gap' (only the third of which relies on the 'individual gap' to explain opposition to development):

1) The 'democratic deficit' explanation: a majority are in favour of X, but particular development decisions are controlled by the minority who oppose X. Bell et al argue that this may be because of the planning system's 'decide-announce-defend' model of decision making, i.e. people are involved only after an initial decision or recommendation has been made. Their role is therefore to provide criticism rather than support, so more people object to than support an application – 'People generally do not come forward with positive responses to planners' agendas' (Wolsink, 2000).

2) The 'qualified support' explanation: X is a good idea, but with limits on its development; for example the impact on the environment. If many people adopt this qualified principle of support, the social gap may develop. So people objecting to a specific scheme may not be making an exception to their general support but may be following their general principle of qualified support.

3) The 'self-interest' explanation: people support X in general but oppose any schemes in their area for self-interested reasons. This is the NIMBY explanation and depends on an individual gap between attitudes to X in general and attitudes to a particular scheme. It seems that despite criticisms of the pejorative NIMBY, some opposition does arise for reasons of self-interest, if not explicitly – 'Myerson & Rydin (1994, p. 445) found that the vast majority of appeal letters deal with the environment in terms of concern over visual amenity, which "can readily shade into a concern with property values"' (cited in Clifford & Warren, 2005, p. 357).

Bell et al believed that a combination of these three explanations probably contributes to local opposition to development 'in the public interest'. Whilst it is clear that the boundaries between the three explanations are not clear-cut, this three-fold categorisation of opposition remains a powerful one, and will form the basis for the analytical framework adopted in the next section.

Trust appears to be a key issue, particularly in terms of the 'qualified support' explanation for opposition outlined above – 'It is widely recognised that the public do not trust politicians,

developers or even experts' (Bell et al., 2005, p. 470). Others, though, have argued that perhaps the trust issue works in reverse – people decide that they are opposed to a proposal and thus distrust anyone who supports it – so distrust is caused *by* opposition to a development, rather than being a cause *of* it (Margolis, 1996).

Smith and Marquez (2000) explored the issue of trust in more depth, looking at the particular example of proposed oil drilling off the Californian coast. They found that opponents to the oil drilling confirmed that they did not trust the oil companies involved. But, critically, they also found that the pro-development lobby distrusted environmentalists and other objectors. They concluded that it is necessary to 'look at the complete dynamics of disputes, rather than just at one side' (Smith & Marquez, 2000, p. 279).

Similarly, Clifford and Warren in their study of opposition to developments around St Andrews in Scotland questioned the cause/effect relationship between (dis)trust and opposition:

> The strength of opinion in this case would seem in accordance with Ribe (2002), who suggests that people evaluate development and environmental controversies with predisposed attitudes, and therefore people choose to believe that the development will have negative economic and social impacts because they already oppose it for other reasons
>
> (Clifford & Warren, 2005, p. 371).

Disentangling the web of distrust of project sponsors and opposition to development is clearly not straightforward – for example, when does legitimate scepticism regarding the motives of a profit-seeking developer turn into illegitimate pre-judgement of a specific development?

This review of literature on opposition to development has highlighted a number of issues regarding the reasons for opposition, some of which may derive from the adversarial nature of the planning system. But what evidence is there that devolving decision making might address problems with the planning system and communication identified by, amongst others, Bell et al, and consequently reduce opposition to development? For the community right to build to be successful in turning opposition to new housing development in rural areas into support for it, the majority of opposition would need to arise for reasons other than self-interest, i.e. NIMBYism.

A research project funded by the Commission for Rural Communities in 2008 investigated opposition to affordable housing in rural England. Data from this study is now analysed to explore this issue and seek to answer the question: why do people object to small scale housing developments in their village?

Methodology

Four villages were chosen, in three different regions of England, to represent a cross-section of types and locations of rural communities. These villages vary in their proximity to larger urban areas and whether they are located in protected landscape areas. They have one thing in common – in all four villages, one or more affordable housing developments had been proposed, and opposed by at least some of the community. In some cases the opposition came from a (perhaps vocal) minority, in others opposition appeared to be a majority view. Set out below is a summary of the context of the villages and the affordable housing schemes which were the subject of the study.

Definitions

- Rural housing enablers (RHEs): these individuals, usually at least quasi-independent, are employed, often by rural community councils, to promote rural (affordable) housing schemes.
- 'Section 106 (s106) sites': affordable houses built as a requirement of a section 106 legal agreement attached to a planning permission for a market housing development – so-called 'planning gain'.
- 'Rural exception sites': developments of 100% affordable housing built on land within or adjacent to rural communities of less than 3,000 population, and which would not otherwise receive planning permission for market housing. Hence, the release of the land for affordable housing is an exception from planning policy. Occupancy of homes on these sites is usually restricted to those who can demonstrate a local connection of some form.
- Parish council: parish councils are the 'lowest' form of elected government in rural England, operating at the smallest scale, that of individual villages (or small groups thereof), and an important source of influence in many towns and villages.

Long Compton is located within Stratford-on-Avon District Council in Warwickshire. It has a population of approximately 750, and was described by one of the interviewees as having a 'mixed demographic with both affluent incomers and an indigenous community'. Two rural exception schemes were proposed, approved and built in Long Compton, following a 'parish plan' process which identified a need for affordable housing. There was evidently very little opposition to the schemes in Long Compton.

Rainton is a village in Harrogate Borough Council, North Yorkshire. It has a population of about 300, which can perhaps best be described as being of a mixed social background – some of the residents are retired, some commute to the nearby larger settlements and some work within the village on the five farms, two transport companies and a plant service which are based there. Two affordable housing developments (a section 106 site and a rural exception site) had been proposed in Rainton, again following a 'parish plan' process. Both sites were supported by the parish council and received approval from the local authority. The only opposition which appears to have been expressed in Rainton was from those living in the immediate vicinity of the sites.

Baslow is one of two villages studied which are located in the Derbyshire Dales District Council and the Peak District national park area. Baslow has a population of about 1,100, and was described by an interviewer as being 'a retirement village'. Baslow had two rural exception schemes approved by the planning authority (one for six homes and one for eight to 10 homes), both of which were opposed by the parish council. The second site was the subject of several previous planning applications by the owner, each of which was refused on the basis of a high level of local opposition (according to the interviewees, the majority of the village was opposed to the proposal).

Thorpe is similarly located within the Derbyshire Dales District Council and the Peak District national park area. It is the smallest village studied, with a population of around 200, and was described as being 'a very quiet village' and composed largely of retired incomers with 'not much in terms of local population'. It is the only one of the case study villages where opposition to an affordable housing scheme meant that it was not built (the opposition was described as being 'general' and from 'the majority' of the village). One site in particular has been the subject of

several planning applications for a rural exception site, all of which have been opposed by the parish council and subsequently refused planning permission by the local authority.

Across the four villages, 19 interviews were carried out in April and November 2008 with representatives of organisations which are central to the provision of affordable housing in rural communities, and individuals with an interest in particular schemes. The following were interviewed:

- Local authority planning representatives (Baslow and Thorpe);
- Local authority housing representatives (Long Compton, Baslow and Thorpe);
- The rural housing enabler (RHE) operating in the area (all four villages)
- The housing association (HA) involved in promoting the scheme(s) (Baslow and Thorpe);
- Parish council representatives (all four villages);
- Local residents who supported (Long Compton) and/or opposed (Rainton and Baslow) the developments.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, and set out to explore the nature and scale of community opposition to the specific schemes promoted in the villages, and whether this was typical of that area. The interviewees were asked about how community views on the housing schemes were established, and when any such consultation/engagement took place, as it was felt that this might play a role in the extent of opposition to development. The interviews were designed by the author and the CRC, and carried out by a consultant employed by the CRC, with detailed notes from the interviews then analysed by the author. Full interview transcriptions were not available, but some direct quotes were recorded, and these are included where appropriate below – they have been anonymised to protect their sources.

Analysis of data

Different Perspectives on Opposition

As identified above, there is an increasing consensus that motivations for opposition are complicated and multi-faceted; for example, opposition that is perceived by some as NIMBYism can be a result of a complex interaction of different factors. The interview data supports this view; as noted above, in all four villages studied there was some degree of opposition to the housing schemes proposed, with a range of site-specific concerns identified across the four villages and the schemes within them. These concerns included issues regarding the proposed site layout, the design of the individual houses and the scheme overall, vehicular access and traffic implications, the biodiversity loss from the site (ranging from concerns about 'heritage hedgerows' to wildlife), and potential drainage problems. Those who had opposed the schemes reiterated these concerns to the interviewer.

However, analysis of the interview data emphasises a deep complexity in understanding causes of opposition, centring on a difference between these expressed reasons for opposition and perceptions held by almost all the other interviewees that something else was hidden behind these apparently legitimate concerns. These stakeholders were often of the view that what lied behind opposition to the schemes discussed was NIMBYism.

Given the contested nature of terms such as NIMBYism discussed above, rather than falling back on a dualism between these different perspectives on opposition I instead examine the interview

data through the lens of the 'social gap' understanding coined by Bell et al. The next three subsections therefore assess whether the interview evidence supports their threefold categorisation of opposition – only one, remember, being contingent on self-interest (NIMBYism).

The Democratic Deficit

In simple terms, evidence for a democratic deficit as defined by Bell et al would be that a vocal minority in opposition to housing proposals had succeeded in overcoming widespread support for those proposals. The evidence from the four villages studied does not appear to support that argument; in Rainton, Long Compton and Baslow the proposals were approved, and whilst there was not 100% opposition to the schemes which were refused in Thorpe, all the interviewees in that village observed that the majority of the population were opposed to the proposals.

Interpreting the notion of a democratic deficit more broadly, it is possible to see resentment at the approach taken to the development of rural housing schemes as being behind much of the opposition across the case studies – with local residents and parish councils unhappy with the 'decide-announce-defend' approach taken by some local authorities and RSLs. In three of the four case study villages, the process for selecting a preferred site for an affordable housing development was done either by the planning/housing authority with no community involvement, or involving only the parish council in confidence, thereby minimising the extent to which other community members could get involved. Whilst this might be legitimate in terms of representative democracy, it is offers support for the UK Government's view that top-down planning alienates people. In those three villages there was support from some community members for alternative sites, with some resentment/confusion expressed to our interviewer and identified by other stakeholders that the feasibility of developing on these other sites had not been fully explored, and/or that there was an element of predetermination in identifying the sites eventually chosen. Bearing out the findings of McAvoy (1998) discussed above, i.e. differences of opinion over value judgements, the choice of sites seemed to reflect different views on the importance of maintaining the 'settlement boundary'[1]. The local authorities tended to prefer sites which were within the 'official' boundary of the settlement, whilst local people favoured other factors such as whether the site 'fitted in' with the village, or was close to services. One parish council representative noted that he 'would have liked the Planning Authority to consider the other site, considered too far out of the village but close to the pub, some work units and other housing'.

Explicit distrust of the local authority as decision maker was an issue in at least two of the villages. One rural housing enabler observed that opposition was greater on rural exception sites (featuring 100% affordable housing for local people) than on section 106 sites (with market housing cross-subsidising a minority proportion of affordable housing). This runs contrary to much perceived wisdom about affordable housing development, the understanding of many writers in this field (for example ARHC, 2006; Taylor, 2008) being that affordable housing aimed at meeting the needs of the local community is more likely to have the support of that community than housing available on the open market to anyone who can afford it. There may be a number of reasons for this apparently unusual situation, but two in particular were suggested by the RHE in question: firstly, they believed that distrust of the local authority, usually seen to be the driver behind rural exception sites in that area, was at least a contributory factor here; secondly, they noted that 'exception sites involve more objections probably because of the nature of community involvement – in general terms, exception site projects involve public consultation providing much more opportunities for people to comment'. These two points of view offer differing perspectives

on the UK Government's reforms – distrust of the local authority suggests resentment at top-down planning; but, conversely, if more opposition occurs when public consultation is more effective, i.e. when more people know about a proposal, this might suggest that self-interest is more of an issue.

It does, however, appear that distrust may be a recurring theme – a parish council in another village identified an 'anti-[local authority] attitude amongst some parish councillors', and reported ongoing disputes with the local authority. As noted above, a key issue was that parish council opinion about development often differed from that of the local authority, leading to resentment at a perceived lack of influence (echoing the findings of Yarwood, 2002).

Qualified Support

All of the site-specific objections to the affordable housing schemes cited above (design, drainage, etc) could be examples of qualified support for the schemes – if the 'problems' identified were not present or could be overcome, then it may be the case that those objecting would support the developments. However, others involved in the development process (including RSL and local authority representatives) were firmly of the view that these objections were often used regardless of the details of schemes, and concealed more 'sinister' objections, i.e. self-interest – one of the RHEs felt that 'people have changed from the simplistic and open objection to affordable housing pure and simple, to more sophisticated arguments around sustainability of services, traffic pressure, environmental impact'.

As identified by Margolis (1996) and others, it can be hard to disentangle distrust and opposition, and hence identify a chain of causality. What is clear is that some of those opposing development were distrustful of the motives of those promoting schemes, which could be interpreted as a form of qualified support – if the schemes were promoted by the community itself, this opposition may have been reduced. One RHE reported responses to consultation which were 'angry…challenging both professionally and personally. There were accusations of social engineering on the part of planners/developers and myself'. Distrust of landowners was something which featured in several villages – in one there seemed to be particular issues with the landowner being perceived as being greedy, a local resident in opposition noting that the 'site belongs to a local businessman (no longer resident in village). He tried to get it developed before; all previous applications were turned down'.

A strong factor influencing levels of support for the housing schemes proposed in all four villages was the extent to which the houses to be built were perceived as being for local people – and/or whether there was sufficient local need for homes to be built. A local resident who had opposed a scheme told the interviewer that they had no problem with providing housing for local people, but they didn't 'want any Tom, Dick or Harry coming into the village'. This was a theme across the case studies – support for new (affordable) housing development in rural areas was often contingent on that housing being legally restricted to local people only. A local authority representative in a different village stated that there was 'much opposition to the suggestion that a close neighbouring village might have housing need which could be met in [the village]... [they said we] "Don't want people from [neighbouring village]"'.

Government advice on rural exception schemes is that they should be restricted in this way to people with a 'local connection', an approach endorsed by several commentators (including Taylor, 2008), and one popular with local communities and parish councils (Yarwood, 2002). Some

have raised concerns that emphasising localness could have exclusionary implications (Sturzaker, 2010), but it remains a near-universal policy across rural England and in fact one advocated by the last British Prime Minister for urban areas as well (Brown, 2009). Some opposition in Rainton, Baslow and Thorpe originated in concerns about the strength of this type of local occupancy restriction, with objectors citing evidence from previous schemes which were now occupied by 'non-locals'. Others were concerned that there was insufficient local need to justify the schemes, hence they feared an inevitable pressure to house people from outside the village(s) – one noted that 'expression of need is not always borne out by facts; I don't believe it will be only local people or those with local connections who will live there'.

(Perceived) Self-interest

Opposition was reported by various stakeholders, including local authority and parish council representatives, which was perceived as deriving from self-interest in all the villages.

A parish council representative in one village identified a gap between support for affordable housing in principle from a number of local people, and opposition when a specific site was chosen – this site being adjacent to their homes: 'I believe it (the cause of the opposition) was the risk to the value of their own properties and the idea of the kind of resident who might occupy an affordable housing unit (fear of undesirables!). This was never expressed openly'. This statement perhaps sums up the problems with pejorative descriptions of opposition such as NIMBYism – whilst the change in opinion by those objecting when a site next to them was chosen for development can easily be viewed as an example of self-interest, we are reliant on the opinion of those who observed the process. Is this opposition self-interest (or NIMBYism), or is it an example of qualified support? We cannot be sure either way.

Other arguments which appear more explicitly to be self-interested include concern that the housing proposed would have a negative impact on the residential amenity of existing residents, and fears about the impact of development on house prices. One local authority representative identified concerns that the council tax banding would be lowered in the village[2].

In at least two of the villages, local authority, HA, parish council and RHE representatives identified opposition to the principle of building social rented housing. Concerns were reported on the part of those opposing schemes that social rented housing would 'result in undesirable people coming to the village'. One HA identified 'a clear preference for shared ownership housing', as this was perceived to be occupied by a 'better class' of household. It is unclear whether this preference was actually expressed, but it appears to have been at least implied, as the HA reported higher levels of opposition to social rented than shared ownership proposals. An RHE felt that some opposition was ideological, with 'some very bad attitudes towards the likely inhabitants of houses… [a] very right wing mentality'. It is hard to see this as anything other than self-interest, perhaps ideologically derived.

Differences Between the Villages

A distinction was drawn by a number of the stakeholders between villages which retained a more 'traditional' community, with land-based industries (Rainton and Long Compton), and villages which had become dominated by in-comers, both retirees and commuters (Baslow and Thorpe). The interviewees felt that the former tended to be more supportive of small housing developments than the latter. One RHE identified 'a very articulate group of people within the

village looking for reasons to say no to development', with a local authority representative noting that 'many of the objectors are retired, professional, middle class… there were digs about poor people and "undesirables"'.

This evidence supports the conclusions of Murdoch et al (2003) who identified different "types" of the countryside, the differentiation of which was partly caused by the presence or otherwise of middle class in-migrants. Of relevance here are two of their four types – *preserved countryside* and *contested countryside*. Murdoch et al found that the preserved countryside was usually the most accessible, in which decision making processes are dominated by pastoral and preservationist attitudes. These attitudes mainly come from 'middle-class social groups living in the countryside, employed primarily in the service sector, and often working in nearby urban centres' (Murdoch et al., 2003, p. 12) – Baslow and Thorpe appear to fit into this category. Murdoch et al contrasted this with the contested countryside, lying outside the main commuter zones, where incomers are less dominant but are increasingly in conflict with local agricultural, commercial and development interests who will tend to favour development for local needs – Rainton and Long Compton being perhaps examples of this category.

Even in these latter communities, there seemed to be a high degree of community involvement with the planning system, seemingly more on the part of objectors than supporters (perhaps providing weight for the view of Bell et al that the 'decide-announce-defend' approach to planning will naturally encourage opposition). This was perceived by one RHE as being increasingly sophisticated – 'people have more understanding of planning policy. Objectors will employ planning consultants very early in developments to help overcome the proposals. Some will go so far as to buy the site to prevent development'.

Conclusion

The chief assumption behind the introduction of the 'community right to build' to the English planning system is that much opposition to new housing derives from resentment at a top-down approach to planning. This paper has examined opposition to housing schemes in four English villages, to assess how much of that opposition can be categorised in this way – specifically in terms of a 'democratic deficit', drawing on the work of Bell et al (2005).

The evidence from the research on which this paper draws is that deep(er) community engagement has correlated with lower levels of opposition to rural affordable housing schemes, and in some cases appears to have been central to the success rather than failure of those schemes. Proposals which genuinely derive from a community-based plan or a broad based community drive for development appear to stand more chance of receiving the support of that community.

In both Rainton and Long Compton the affordable housing schemes which were successful followed a 'parish plan' process, which had, amongst other things, identified a need for affordable housing. The holistic process of parish plan preparation was cited by parish council representatives in both villages as an inclusive way of involving the community which can help engender support for affordable housing schemes. This bottom-up approach appears to correlate with the lower levels of opposition for affordable housing developments in Rainton and Long Compton (*correlation* is emphasised here rather than *causality* – these case studies provide insufficient evidence to prove the latter).

In Baslow and Thorpe, and the local authorities in which they are based, the approach used by the RHE and the local authorities could be categorised as more top-down – strategic housing needs research informed a priority list of settlements where high levels of housing need had been identified. Only at this stage were the communities involved. This approach doubtless has its merits, and allows a more strategic approach to funding and resource targeting, but the evidence suggests that communities and their parish councils can feel aggrieved at having affordable housing proposals imposed on them from above.

The implication of this is that the community right to build may be an appropriate way of addressing the democratic deficit explanation and (at least partly) the qualified support explanation for the social gap. The communities featured in our research demonstrate both resentment at top-down planning and distrust of project sponsors, which devolving decision making to community level may ameliorate. The mechanism by which this decision making will operate is of course critical. In urban parts of England this will require the development of new forms of governance – so-called 'neighbourhood forums'. In rural areas, however, the parish councils will take this role. This in itself is not without controversy, with questions raised over many years about the feasibility and desirability of giving parish councils more influence over their communities (Tewdwr-Jones, 1998; Yarwood, 2002). Some of those interviewed for this study also felt the parish councils played a not wholly positive role, one local authority representative stating that 'historically the parish council had successfully prevented development for many years and so felt they could do so again'.

Those designing the community right to build, and other similar proposals, will need to bear this in mind, and reflect on some of the powerful literature on community planning (such as Heywood, 2011) and neighbourhood governance (for example Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008). It is also necessary to think about how potential conflict be handled – for example, is there a way of overcoming self-interest, which this research shows, appears to be behind some opposition (whether it is labelled NIMBYism or not).

One approach might be to move towards the deliberative/communicative/collaborative model of planning advocated by theorists such as Patsy Healey (2006) and John Forester (1999), amongst many others. Whilst this approach has been criticised for 'its idealism and utopianism' (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998, p. 1988), it remains a powerful alternative to adversarial approaches, but there is no doubt that simply introducing the community right to build cannot by any means be described as a fully collaborative approach. Questions therefore remain, but this paper both adds to the ongoing debates around opposition and provides some evidence that devolving responsibility for taking decisions to a lower level can help reduce opposition to development.

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[1] Settlement boundaries, also known as, *inter alia,* village envelopes, are used in English planning to define the growth limits of settlements – they are usually lines drawn on plans around the existing built form, intended to prevent sprawl.

[2] Council tax is levied by local authorities in England on households within their boundaries. The more expensive a property, the higher the council tax 'band' – so lowering the band would reduce council tax bills, something which these opponents would not apparently welcome, perhaps perversely.

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