

“The implementation of ‘New Localism’ in the super-diverse metropolis: challenges and limits of Neighbourhood Planning in London”

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Note: this is an extended abstract of the full conference paper, which forms the basis for an article to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal very soon. Please do not quote at this stage.

In 2011 the UK government (a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) passed the Localism Act, which is currently leading to a fundamental transformation of the planning system in England and Wales. As part of the Act, a new tier of planning – Neighbourhood Planning - has been established, with a view to ‘empower local communities’ through a decentralization of (some) planning decision-making from local government to neighbourhood-based community groups. From a social equity perspective, the emergence of a new tier of planning raises two important sets of questions. First, at the local scale (that of neighbourhoods and local authorities), how is the option of setting up a process of neighbourhood planning mobilized by residents and businesses, and who gets involved, where, why and with what agenda? Who doesn’t? Three decades of research on public participation in planning tell us that participation in formal planning exercises tends to be mobilized and dominated by articulate, educated and wealthy individuals and social groups, often with a defensive, NIMBY attitude. It is therefore important to assess whether the composition of the groups involved in neighbourhood planning represents the socio-demographic diversity of their area and whether their agenda, claims and proposals cater for the interests of a large section of the local population or, on the contrary, of (a) narrow and powerful group(s). In a super-diverse city like London (in which 55% of the population is not white British), one may additionally hypothesize that neighbourhood planning may be (mis)used in the complex politics of difference and the conflicts which express themselves in very heterogeneous neighbourhoods where very different ethnic, religious or income groups coexist. A contrasting hypothesis would be to speculate that neighbourhood planning has the potential to bring together diverse groups and new coalitions which foster more inclusive or alternative forms of urban development in a particular area, in a city like London where very high land and house prices/rents and rapid gentrification now threatens not only low income groups, but middle income groups too.

Second, if one considers the aggregated effects of neighbourhood planning processes at the city-wide or regional scale, there are potentially strong tensions between the pro-development agenda of the UK government and the devolution of decision-making to ‘neighbourhoods’. Will ‘localism’ (which was accompanied by the abolition of the regional strategic level of planning) and the aggregated effect of neighbourhood plans limit the acceptance of new

development/housing? Will the incentive structure designed by the Government work, so that neighbourhood groups accept new development in their area? How will the relationship between local plans and neighbourhood plans be worked out? These are fundamental questions in the context of the acute housing shortage and affordability crisis which London suffers from. The city has a population 8.17 million (2011 census) and is predicted to grow up to 8.8 million in 2021, and 9-10 million in 2031. Given the existing housing shortage and changes in household size, the need for new housing units has been estimated to 1.25 million new homes needed over the next 25 years. So it is crucial to assess what position the emerging neighbourhood plans will have with regard to the pressures for socio-demographic change and for new development (e.g. housing) in their area, i.e. an defensive or accommodating approach to existing and potential new forms of development and diversity.

This paper will focus on the first of these two sets of questions and review the first developments of neighbourhood planning processes in London since 2011. In this paper I wish to ask whether such a form of planning has the potential to bring about more progressive, socially equitable forms of planning or on the contrary, to stir up inter-group conflicts and exclusionary forms of planning. The paper will briefly analyse cases of neighbourhood planning in two boroughs of North-East London, Haringey and Hackney. Based on a sociological perspective on public engagement in planning, I will argue that in the context of a metropolis like London, neighbourhood planning can often divide rather than unite 'communities'. This is especially the case in a super-diverse and highly unequal city like London, where micro-diversity within neighbourhoods is such that the concept of a homogenous or potentially articulate and cohesive community rarely makes sense. In some cases, a dominant 'local community' with common class, ethnic or religious characteristics can actually use neighbourhood planning to further its particular interests in ways that can be exclusionary to those of other groups. In rare cases, there may be alliances of highly diverse lower and middle income groups in the process of neighbourhood planning, although such alliances are more likely to form outside of that process, in the shape of new urban social movements fighting against urban redevelopment and gentrification.

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Key websites:

In Hackney:

- <http://www.hackney.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning.htm#.U4oi5SiJTfY>
- <http://hackneyplanningwatch.wordpress.com/>
- www.chatsworthroade5.co.uk/planning/neighbourhood-plan/

In Haringey:

- http://www.haringey.gov.uk/index/housing_and_planning/planning-mainpage/policy_and_projects/neighbourhood_planning.htm
- <http://www.highgateneighbourhoodforum.org.uk/>
- <http://ourtottenham.org.uk/>

Government or institutional websites on neighbourhood planning in England:

- <https://www.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/giving-communities-more-power-in-planning-local-development/supporting-pages/neighbourhood-planning>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/notes-on-neighbourhood-planning>

- <http://mycommunityrights.org.uk/neighbourhood-planning/> (Localities, DCLG, RTP1)
- <http://locality.org.uk/resources/neighbourhood-planning-roadmap-guide/>
- <http://locality.org.uk/resources/quick-guide-neighbourhood-planning/>
- <http://www.ourneighbourhoodplanning.org.uk/home> (Planning Aid England)