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Governing Our Neighbours: **participation and conflict in neighbourhood planning**

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Abstract

This Paper examines English Neighbourhood Planning as a form of communicative practice and in particular it's potential to create spaces for agonistic debate about very-local place futures. The value of an agonistic approach is theoretically clear but the emotions associated with participating in, and moreover directing, planning work in one's own neighbourhood limits the likelihood of such an approach emerging. This can partly be addressed through attention to the resources, skills and attitudes required, particularly among process managers, suggesting a need to promulgate agonistic ideas in planning education and practice while requiring the state to adequately resource such processes.

Keywords: neighbourhood planning; citizen participation; agonism; deliberation; emotion.

1. Community-led Plan-Making at ‘very-local’, neighbourhood, scales

There is a long tradition of making plans at neighbourhood scale amid a localising governance trend (Davoudi and Madanipour 2015). Such plans are to varying degrees led by, or involving of, citizens within such neighbourhoods. In England, for example, there is a long tradition of ‘parish planning’ in rural areas which is community-led (see Gallent 2013, Ch.2; Parker and Moseley 2012). However there is a “*limited understanding of how the plans have been formulated and what gaps and limitations they may conceal*” (Parker 2008: 68; cf Owen et al 2007).

In England, plan-making at this scale was transformed in 2011 when Neighbourhood Plans were accorded legal status. Such Plans were designed to be community-led and they have proved popular and come to exert much greater authority over land use policy than initially thought (Agbonlahor 2015, Lock 2015). Such statutory authority is a significant departure from previous parish plans. Such power also potentially greatly incentivises citizens to get involved and increases the significance of their inputs. In addition as citizens are in control of the design and implementation of plan-making, rather than merely being involved, this can be seen as a significant departure from previous attempts at very-local planning.

This paper mobilises an in-depth case study of one Neighbourhood Plan, using it as a probe into the practicality of the demands of agonistic planning theory as the dominant contemporary planning paradigm (Backlund and Mantysalo 2010). We also use literature in the deliberative democratic tradition to fill in some of the voids in agonistic planning theory with regard to how agonistic space might emerge (Ploger 2015).

Our case study thus focuses on: the micro-dynamics of what it takes to conduct agonist planning work at the neighbourhood scale; how far such theory is realisable in everyday practice; and, whether community-led plans are more or less likely than state-led processes to meet the demands of an agonistic public sphere (Mouffe 2005). The paper thus provides an example of, “*theoretically insightful planning research that can tap into the legal-practical possibilities and difficulties of renewing existing institutional structures*

and codes of local planning, in the effort to make them more supportive to agonistic planning” (Backlund and Mantysalo 2010: 348; also Healey 2015a: 315-6).

Localism and Neighbourhood Planning

A Localism agenda became more apparent in UK governance in the early 1990, arising in response to concerns for subsidiarity, participation and citizen engagement. More recently it was seen as a response to the failures of centrist, big state practices and, very recently (since 2010) as a way of central government bypassing the local state (Parvin 2011). In the planning field this was demonstrated through: substantial reductions in finance to local authorities; a dismantling of some powers for local government such as changes to permitted development rights; and the creation of mechanisms such as Community Right to Buy, Community Right to Build and Neighbourhood Plans (NPs) which directly empowered communities. NPs were thus part of a vision *“to hand over power and responsibility so that local communities have real choices, and experience the real consequences of those choices.”* Greg Clark, Localism Minister, 3.12.10. In effect this marked a shift from localism defined by devolution from the centre to local government and communities in the 1990s and 2000s, to one which bypassed the local state and sought to empower citizens directly from 2010 onwards.

The legislative framework for NPs was set out in the Localism Act 2011. It permitted either a Parish or Town Council, or a Neighbourhood Forum (comprised of 21 or more self-selecting local ‘stakeholders’ where no parish or town council exists), to prepare a statutory plan for an area. Councils and fora propose themselves to local planning authorities (LPAs) who assess them for ‘representativeness’ and decide whether an NP can proceed. LPAs have a ‘duty to support’ NP preparation and the local government response varies from light touch – steering them through the regulatory elements – to a more active role in terms of process design, policy writing etc. Small grants from central government were available to support the process, given to the LPA, who might then reallocate them to the local body or retain them for the ‘support’ process. NPs are thus self-selecting, both in terms of areas that come forward and in terms of who participates. Over 1600 areas had begun the process of neighbourhood plan-making by the end of 2015, covering around 10% of the population of England (Smith 2016). By July 2016 200 plans had passed a referendum including the case study plan in this paper

(Planning Aid England 2016). The initiative has proved disproportionately popular in rural, wealthier areas (Vigar 2013).

NPs were thus intended to be citizen-initiated and community-led. This was not 'participation' in a state-led initiative (although as a programme they are of course central state-initiated and partly grant funded); rather the local state was assigned a supporting role. It was up to citizens to construct the process which may be more or less democratic than previous plans, despite central government claims that such devolution to citizens automatically makes "the planning system more democratic and more effective" (CLG, 2011: 3). The demotion of the local state's role in shaping local planning agendas and processes also renders much of the planning literature on collaboration and participation – with its assumption of a 'planner' at the heart of the process – only tangentially useful (c.f. Watson 2009). In practice many plans were initiated by established community groups, notably parish councils, and many did have significant input from planners-sometimes as local residents, sometimes local authority employed and often as consultants (Parker et al 2015).

Neighbourhood plans were framed by central government policy and specifically had to be 'permissive' with regard to development. That is they had to allocate at least as much development as in the local plan. With this framing central government effectively admitted that many communities would not, as a first position, opt for more development. For many decades the core concern for English planning at central government level was to deliver more housing in the greater South East of England where need was greatest and opposition fiercest. The hope was that given the opportunity to plan for themselves, 'empowered' local communities would opt for growth and see house-building as a positive choice. Financial incentives in the form of a New Homes Bonus and Community Infrastructure Levy payments were introduced to "encourage" communities to support development. In our case development pressure was not so much a feature. Rather, in common with rural areas beyond the greater south east of England, there existed a need to deliver affordable housing for low-wage households alongside the promotion of economic activity.

The next section considers neighbourhood planning's potential to provide agonistic arenas where place futures can be debated. We then mobilise evidence from a case study to explore how such issues play out in practice. Finally we conclude with reflections on the possibilities for very-local planning through a mechanism such as Neighbourhood Planning in the light of agonistic planning theory.

2. Neighbourhood plan-making as arenas for communicative practice

This Section explores whether NPs can be seen as acts of communicative practice, a term derived from a range of approaches within which we emphasise the two dominate schools of thought regarding planning and democracy at this time: a participatory-deliberative tradition and a radical-agonistic one (Gualini 2015). While there are significant philosophical differences between the two schools we argue that there are also many similarities. Work in the participatory-deliberative tradition has Habermasian roots to varying degrees. The radical-agonistic tradition is positioned somewhat in opposition to participatory-deliberative ideas and among other positions, emphasises much more the necessity of conflict to escape the framing of planning issues within existing institutions and power relations. This article does not therefore explore the literature on public participation in planning, or that on conflict resolution, which can be found extensively elsewhere. Rather, the focus herein is on how theory can illuminate some of the difficulties highlighted by those writing about citizen participation.

The participatory-deliberative tradition is underpinned by communicative rationality supported by Habermasian norms of equality and symmetry; that is, all potential stakeholders should have the same chance to initiate speech acts, to question, interrogate, and to debate the agenda, the issues at stake, and the rules governing the process (Benhabib 1996: 70). Participatory-deliberative theorists suggest that just, deliberative processes are possible, but only given certain conditions (Benhabib 1996, Healey 2007, Innes and Booher 2010). Critics maintain that real-life situations always fail to meet these conditions and this undermines the theory (e.g. Tewdwr Jones and Allmendinger 1998). This critique rests principally on deliberation being deemed

impossible in unequal societies; societies need to be more equal before an equitable deliberation can itself occur (Benhabib 1996). Consensus-oriented planning¹ centred on communicative rationality is thus held to conceal power differences and thus planning [continues to] act for the already powerful.

To counter such a tendency many planning theorists have developed agonistic planning theory using Chantal Mouffe's ideas of radical pluralism. For them agonist theory addresses the critique above through bringing voices from the margins to counteract existing power relations. Nevertheless the intractability of power is recognised, "*to acknowledge the existence of relations of power and the need to transform them, while renouncing the illusion that we could free ourselves completely from power, this is what is specific to the project of "radical and plural democracy"*" (Mouffe 2000: 22). Agonist theory thus posits the idea of 'respectful dissensus' to demonstrate how processes might proceed in an almost pragmatic way given the above tension. Dissensus and conflict are not of course ends in themselves (Pløger 2004). Rather, they allow for articulations of what a community might want to emerge from beyond a managerialist consensus of the 'usual suspects'.

While many highlight the fundamental distinctions that do exist between collaborative and agonistic traditions, not least in their philosophical underpinnings (Gualini 2015), there are similarities to be noted that are especially pertinent in relation to the concerns of this paper. For example, dissensus and argument are seen in both collaborative and agonist traditions as potentially useful to break free from path-dependencies and reframe planning issues (Innes and Booher 2010). Bond (2011) has sought to bring elements of the two traditions together and shows how conflict can sit within a participatory-deliberative process that is essentially communicative with talking, listening and learning all seen as central to the process.

However, planning theory in both traditions, but particularly agonistic planning theory, is mostly silent on the sorts of micro-dynamics that might facilitate such a process and on how conflict might even be promoted but might then subsequently move beyond and

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¹ It is highly debateable whether a consensus orientation is what is proposed by many such theorists despite subsequent interpretations (e.g. Healey 2006)

into consensus and decision (Pløger 2015). We mobilise a case study to explore such micro-dynamics focused on how citizens and planners engaged in one plan-making process to construct arenas for communication. In such arenas we look for who is engaged in plan-making, but also, the openness of the debate to a range of opinions and values (Dryzek 2011).

Thus we explore the workability of ideas of conflict and dissensus in practice and the potential for agonistic spaces to emerge as advocated by planning theorists (e.g. Bond 2011). In doing so we place one emphasis on moderators and process managers as they are central to institutional design and their behaviour and attitudes can radically shape how institutions and processes are designed and mobilised (Kadlec and Freeman 2011), allowing or preventing dissenting voices from emerging. We thus examine how those designing neighbourhood plan-making processes do so in ways that promote or deny opportunities for participation and potentially agonistic debate.

The European literature suggests that when planners are managing participatory processes they will often shy away from conflict (Abram 2004, Tewdwr Jones and Allmendinger 1998). More recent work in the UK by Curry (2012) is more optimistic and suggests a greater openness both to the value of citizen participation and to working with conflict. In our case below a planner was central to the process and we explore how his participation shaped institutional design. In relation to citizens, work in the deliberative tradition has shown that when citizens manage processes they try and seek consensus instinctively and that this can narrow both the field of inquiry and its participative range (e.g. Mendelberg 2002). The possibility of an ‘agonistic opening up’ is explored by Esterling *et al.* (2011) who note that small groups will explore areas of moderate disagreement, but will veer away from more contentious issues. In relation to participant diversity, empirical work suggests that highly homogeneous and highly heterogeneous groups work least well, “*indeed, they [participants] actually experience deliberation more positively under moderate diversity than when they are in like-minded groups*” (Esterling *et al.* 2011: ii, see also Dryzek and Hendriks 2012: 42). Thus we see how process designers and managers through both conscious and unconscious actions may instinctively narrow diversity and manage out conflict.

Experience of parish planning in the UK suggests this may be the case with neighbourhood plans (Moseley et al 1997, Parker 2008). Against this, neighbourhood plans are better resourced and their statutory nature might make process managers and otherwise silent citizens engage more thoroughly. We test these ideas in the case analysis that follows, focusing particularly on the actions and attitudes of process managers.

3. Designing a process for community-led planning: a Neighbourhood Planning case study

In this section we muster the literature cited above to examine a Neighbourhood Plan-making process. The approach we take is a broadly interpretive and ethnographic one (see Healey 2015b, Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2012 for what this might mean in the planning field). In Yin's (2009) terms we conceived our case as being 'typical' at the outset: with over 1600 neighbourhood plans having been initiated in England by the end of 2015 (<http://www.neighbourhoodplanner.co.uk/map>) there are likely to be similar ones! But over time we began to use the case in Yin's 'revelatory' way, seeing it as a probe into the theories outlined above.

Fourteen interviews were conducted with stakeholders toward the start of the process in Autumn 2011, and six of these were revisited after the Plan was adopted following a public referendum in Spring 2015. We also took extensive notes when attending consultation events and monthly Steering Group meetings for three years until the approval of the Plan by an independent examiner in December 2014. Much of the analysis that follows arises from observations made at these events and subsequent discussions among the three authors and Plan stakeholders. We have also taken data from being participant observers in an email list where information and feelings about the process have been shared among a Plan-Making Steering Group and occasionally more widely. This ethnographic approach has allowed us to witness events as they unfolded and question participants in real time, thus overcoming some of the shortcomings of planning research which is often centred on post-hoc interview data.

The Case Study

Our case lies in rural Northern England. It is a parish with a population estimated at around 2,000 in 2011 (ONS 2011). The Parish Council² agreed to develop a Neighbourhood Plan in Spring 2011. The idea for a Plan came from an interest group in the area motivated by some dissatisfaction with the Parish Council. Other motivations were to capitalise on an opportunity to bring a number of disparate initiatives together and in a small way to create a “*bit of mischief*” [Interviewee]. There was some reluctance to take on the Plan by the Parish Council, as the latterly emergent legislation required, but once a decision was taken to do so they did so diligently.

Data from the UK 2011 Census and the 2010 UK Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), (CLG 2012) reveals that the area is in aggregate neither rich nor poor compared to an England average [it is in the fifth decile of the IMD], but within it exist significant pockets of deprivation (ONS 2011). The unemployment rate in a wider area is consistently lower than the regional and national average, but there is low paid and transient work in primary industries and tourism. This is reflected in some areas beyond the main case study settlement of the Parish which lie in the lowest 10% of the IMD for ‘access to local services’ (in part reflecting their rurality) and ‘living environment’ (which relates to a high proportion of houses judged ‘indecent’ and / or without central heating, in what is a cold part of England). In housing terms the affordability ratio is higher than in the wider region of North East England but lower than England as a whole. There is a high level of private renting in the wider ward with 15.3% of households as opposed to 7.3% in the local authority area as a whole, which is partly explained by low levels of local authority rented housing.

Following reorganisation of local government in 2009 the area has, in common with many English rural areas beyond south east England, been formally governed by a local authority based at some distance, in this case in a market town over 70km away. The feelings of remoteness from seats of power that characterise much of rural England are

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² Parishes in England are governed by parish councils which have few formal powers but can be significant in shaping places through small-scale initiatives and maintenance of green spaces etc. What they actually do varies a great deal, in part dependent on the historic desire locally to take on certain roles. This is reflected in the variable funds available to them, which is obtained through a ‘precept’ on the local authority’s council tax.

compounded by this distance, with low satisfaction levels with service delivery in the Parish compared with the wider local authority area.

Census data (ONS 2011) reveals that in common with remoter rural England the number of children in the area has been steadily falling for a number of decades. Conversely the population includes a higher proportion of older adults than the national average. There is a lot of home working and self-employment alongside a relatively high proportion of agricultural workers. The area was traditionally more 'industrial' with a history of lead mining and associated processing. Indeed the area was described as 'industrial' by local residents in Plan meetings, even given its status as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

A dependence on solid fuel for heating implies a high level of fuel poverty and has prompted interest in various renewable energy sources in recent years. This is controversial, with the community divided over the suitability of various technologies. A fuel cooperative bulk buys oil to keep costs down also highlighting the large levels of community cooperation and volunteering in the area commensurate with many isolated rural areas (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Rosanova et al., 2008; Brooks 2012). As such there were 76 volunteer groups registered as operating with the Parish Council.

Out of these issues the provision of affordable housing for 'local' people was the key one that mobilised the attention of the Plan Steering Group and dominated the final Plan. Other issues were acknowledged but the limitations of neighbourhood plans in, for example, securing better local services or improved housing conditions largely framed them out of consideration.

Who participates? Designing the neighbourhood plan-making process

The Parish Council were the qualifying body for the preparation of the Neighbourhood Development Plan. This use of parish councils does provide for accountability and 'anchors' the process democratically (Torfing et al 2009). But it also favours an existing 'elite' and excludes other alternative groups and voices from emerging as leaders of a process. There are other reasons to question the democratic legitimacy of parish councils. In many instances councillors are not elected; most stand unopposed and are

‘co-opted’. Councillors are more likely to be older, male, and of white ethnic origin than the populations they serve: 66% of councillors are male; the average age is almost 60 with 88% over 45; and 96.3% are white (Kettlewell and Aston 2010). That said, our case is typical of rural England in that the population in general tends to be older and whiter than in English urban areas.

In our case the Parish Council granted delegated authority for plan-making to a ‘Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group’. The Steering Group comprised the political representative for the wider ‘Ward’ area which included the Parish, the Chair of the Parish Council, three additional members of the Parish Council; and one member of the advocacy group who had lobbied to develop a Plan in the first instance. Five of the six were present to the end of the process with one of the Parish Councillors replaced by another councillor around half way through the process. There was a relatively even mix of genders throughout. Participants were all of middle or older age, in work or retired, and all were white. While the potential to operate differently from the Parish Council, perhaps in ways more conducive to agonistic discussion, was possible; the reality in this case, was that, the group replicated the bureaucratic procedural processes of discussion and decision-making occurring in the Parish Council.

The Steering Group received a large amount of support from a planner employed by the local authority. He became the key figure in the development of the plan, despite the desire of central government for Neighbourhood Planning to be community-led. He took on overlapping roles as expert and facilitator, rather against prevailing wisdom (see Bishop 2015), although this facilitation was often through informal advice beyond the formal arenas of the process. Thus the process was typical of English parish plans in that it was primarily driven by councillors and a single local government employed professional planner, and quite bureaucratic in its enactment (Parker and Murray 2012).

Stakeholder involvement in Plan preparation was framed by the Plan Steering Group. An engagement strategy and scoping report were published in Autumn 2011. The engagement strategy was rather generic in that it used standard methods of displaying information for informal discussion in village halls, but it was a genuine attempt to

publicise the plan and garner views. The first outreach attempt were “issues and options consultation” fora held consecutively over the course of one afternoon and evening in two village halls.

This pair of consultation events was advertised to households via a leaflet through every letter box in the Parish. Event organisers felt that this comprehensive coverage was key to an inclusive engagement in terms of providing everyone with an equal chance to participate. Around 70-80 residents attended in total. The event followed a traditional format for a planning event with posters detailing sets of possible concerns such as the demand for new housing. Participants were invited to talk to members of the Steering Group and write down issues on cards representing one of four issues drawn from the existing Parish Plan. Interview data suggests that it did raise issue awareness among those that attended; but also, that others were discouraged from raising potentially contentious issues due to public exposure and possible critique from neighbours.

Following analysis of comments made at the consultation events, the decision was taken to develop short issue papers which were eventually amalgamated into three blocks: housing delivery and reuse of redundant buildings; environmental protection, conservation, renewable energy and energy efficiency; and local employment, enterprise and business. Twelve people had responded to an invitation to have further involvement in the process at the initial consultation events. These were all contacted to see if they would help, or indeed lead, some of this later work. Six people agreed to participate further, although there was discussion in the Steering Group about the legitimacy of inviting some of them who were seen to be allied to particular agendas or who had a history of challenging the prevailing orthodoxy. Thus a nervousness was revealed about opening up debates to a wide set of participants in line with the literature on closing down debates cited in Section Two and contrary to the aims of an alternative agonist approach. This was acknowledged as a general trend by a participant involved in several neighbourhood plans, *“a lot of groups like to talk to their friends, because that’s easy and you know they are going to have the same opinions as you, so you’re not going to get challenged”* [Interviewee].

Thus the decision was taken to develop the issue papers among relatively small, closed groupings and to go to the community with a set of well-defined issues for discussion. The groupings emerged organically from the process, such that discussion papers were debated by sub-groups comprised of the six community volunteers; members of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group; and five additional members of the Parish Council who were drafted into the process as issues began to emerge. Going into smaller groups was interesting in that it showed an intuitive sense that having opened up to a broader constituency, deliberation needed to occur within smaller groups if it was to be meaningful (e.g. Dryzek and Hendriks 2012).

In parallel to the issue paper development, work was done at a local school with pupils aged 9-13 to find out young people's views and this helped develop an infrastructure audit to feed into the Plan, developed primarily by final year planning students at a local University. Two teenagers from the local youth club, supported by a volunteer youth worker, were also included on the Steering Group for the final stages of plan preparation. They attended regularly but made few comments and disappointingly there is no evidence that any of this youth engagement work and participation made any difference to the final Plan.

A six week period of consultation took place in spring 2013 on a draft Neighbourhood Plan, consisting of twelve policies derived from the work of the three sub-groups. The draft Plan was publicised in the local media and leaflets advertising its existence were delivered to all properties in the Parish. Community drop-in events were held in Spring 2013 at two locations on the same day, mimicking the approach taken at the outset. There was broad agreement from a majority of approximately 30 attendees and a series of written responses, mostly from statutory agencies, that the policies were appropriate. It was then decided that some additional work was required to make sure that necessary legal requirements were being met and the evidence for the policies was clear, especially concerning housing and green space policies. Resident surveys were implemented with regard to both in the second half of 2013.

The Plan then largely disappeared from public view for about a year for three reasons. First a Strategic Environmental Assessment was carried out by the Local Authority,

somewhat giving the lie to the idea that Neighbourhood Plans could be 'light touch', Second, a Parish Council election, partly provoked by a revival in local political interest sparked by the Plan meant no progress could be made for several weeks before it. Third the draft policies were redrafted by planners within the local authority to make them less vulnerable to legal challenge, and to respond to the surveys cited above, and emerging planning strategy nationally and locally³. It was clear by this time that the Steering Group were worn out by the demands of the process and went through the motions of adopting what came back from the local authority planners, "*in the end, being completely frank, I think it was very much a case of just seeing it through to the end*" [Interviewee, confirmed in other interviews and meeting data]. A subsequent independent inspection process, required by the legislation, broadly confirmed the Plan with minor recommendations which were nearly all adopted at a meeting of the Steering Group. A referendum in Spring 2015 approved the Plan with nearly 80% voting in favour of adoption among a turnout of approximately 20% of the Parish.

Evaluating participation

We reflect first on the design of the decision spaces and how and why they were created as they were. In our case, the Steering Group adopted established ways of working from its parent Parish Council with formal meetings with minutes and an agenda constituting the main places where debate occurred. The formal trappings of a bureaucratic style allowed for overt transparency and legitimacy, and were justified as examples of good governance practice by Steering Group members (Multiple Interviews). However, this was at the expense of more open and creative modes of engagement, including more agonistic practices.

One explanatory factor for this approach lay in the intermediaries involved. In Section Two we noted that the "*traits that often lead individuals to promote themselves for the position...can be so counter-productive to the process of deliberation that they can have a lethal effect in its quality*" (Kadlec and Freeman 2007: 12/13). In our case, a Chair was appointed to the Steering Group who was an elected member for a wider Ward,

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³ Policy writing appears to be an area where the quasi-legal nature of UK planning requires specialist expertise from professional planners and which creates tensions as to plan ownership (see also Parker et al 2015).

including the case study parish. This appointment was useful in many ways. It helped to democratically anchor the process and it helped convey information between the local authority and the Neighbourhood. But there were also limitations in the practices this Chair brought to the process. First, this individual was instilled with the same bureaucratic style evident throughout the Steering Group, championing alongside others, its legitimacy rather than challenging its usefulness. Second, the individual was very experienced in planning matters which brought useful knowledge and know-how, but also led to an adherence to a 'tried and tested' approach, in terms of community participation in particular. Third, this approach was allied to a general paternalism that pervades governance in the region and is common to rural England (Ward and Lowe, 2003; Curry 2012: 356).

Moving on to think about who was included and how, in terms of recruiting voices from beyond the Steering Group, there was some openness and citizens were recruited to lead the development of policy. A particular innovation here was the way the Steering Group engaged with young people following events at the local School. The teenage Steering Group attendees did speak up occasionally in meetings but the bureaucratic format discouraged their participation, requiring as it did a lot of argumentative confidence.

So, as Young (2000) among others suggests, some form of 'outreach' was recognised as necessary to generate voices and opinions from beyond the core group. However, there were missed participatory opportunities. One route not taken was to glean stakeholder views from sources outside formal participatory processes (Beebeejaun and Vanderhoven 2010). That is, using information from sources other than those designed to directly inform the process such as comments on social media and 'data' gathered as part of other planning and non-planning processes. In neighbourhood planning such lay knowledge is less significant than in other forms of plan-making as it is already present to some degree. But it is likely that a wider set of opinions and values might be determined from such an exercise. In addition, the existence of many volunteer groups in the area presented an opportunity for engagement on the 'home turf' of such groups, thus putting them at ease and allowing for good deliberation to potentially occur. This

was not taken, in part as it was a method used previously by a local interest group in conducting an informal parish survey and partly due to the time resource required.

This failure to reach out to specific groups partly reflected an ‘ignorance of the potential’ of a more agonistic approach (Pløger 2004). There was little discussion as to how involving the unemployed or older residents for example might open up the issues for debate and the perspectives on ‘known’ issues generally. The Steering Group was nervous that in doing so they might be seen to show bias to some groups and not others. Again, a laudable aim, but by allowing in participants who had attended the initial consultation events this inevitably biased the process in the direction of the ‘usual suspects’ given the nature of those type of events and the people who turn up at them. There were many organised groups in the area whose regular meetings could have been taken over by the NP process for a short while to inform and consult. The process managers took the view that a fair approach was one that would give equal opportunity of access to all regardless of their ability to participate. Too much opening up would have created logistical problems given the capacity of the Steering Group:

Q. “Is there any other organisation that you think it would be good to have included?”

A. “...I would say at this stage, no. ... when you start getting involved with too many people and too many organisations you start to get bogged down and you start to make compromises.” [Interviewee]

Further reasons for this cautiousness relate to the fundamental nature of a very local plan such as this. The Steering Group are local residents in a small, stable community, they are each other’s neighbours, and there is a lot of social capital to lose from encouraging debate. For a ‘distant’ planning officer to potentially upset a group of people is one thing; to lead and shape a process like this and take on board the inevitable critique as a neighbour is another, “*we meet these people at the post office, at the shop wherever*” [Steering Group Interviewee]. An interviewee not on the Parish Council understood this and empathised with the issue:

“... the Parish Council members who are on the Steering Group you know, they very openly say, ‘we’re the people when we’re doing our shopping in the Co-op, who get stopped by members of the community asking us why we’ve allowed this planning

application to go ahead or why we haven't done that'... So therefore, they are impacted continuously by their position within the community" [Interviewee]

There is also something particular to planning, and the nature of development and land use change especially, which is significant here. Such issues provoke conflict about deeply held opinions and values rather too easily for many people to feel comfortable to debate, and some were acutely aware that to oppose something might be to upset, or even jeopardise the livelihood of, a friend and neighbour. It was thus not surprising that Steering Group members explained a desire not to open up the process with emotive concerns about past experience, *"the most awful meetings I have ever had to chair have been related to new development"* [Interviewee]. This was confirmed in relation to the Plan itself, *"I know she had some difficulties after doing that [a local TV interview about the Plan], literally at the school gate... [she] had some difficulties from fellow residents"*⁴, [Interviewee]. Perhaps as a result, the lack of open deliberation was criticised for being *"typical of the 'plan and consult' model that has been prevalent in local leadership for some time"* [Email communication, 29-3-12]. The deliberate distancing of one's social and business life in rural communities is understood (Cowie 2014). We might extend this understanding to political life also.

So, to conclude the case study evaluation, the intentions of those in control of the process with regard to the process were honest, but the Steering Group did not create opportunities for more open debate. In addition, subtle strategies of process manipulation came into play in a way not often discussed in the literature (cf Mendleberg 2002). Process managers tried to steer the Plan through calm waters for a variety of conscious and unconscious personal and well-intentioned reasons. This had the effect of excluding certain voices, mostly unintentionally, but less frequently with a degree of intention. Where intention was involved, a history of neighbourhood conflict was often cited as a reason. The approach was more open, more participative, more bottom-up than for most plans of its type and certainly more so than in typical English local plans (see Sturzaker and Shaw 2015 for a similar conclusion regarding

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⁴ This was confirmed by the person concerned as an assault and in time they withdrew from all community activities.

Neighbourhood Plans). But, while there was some explicit co-option of marginal voices, overall levels of diversity were weak. At times the Steering Group engaged in a dance or a flirtation of openness, a selective opening-up, due to being a little scared of what might happen in terms of community mobilisation, of opening the door to groups who might capture the process and to lengthening a process that was already taking much of their free time. This was reflective of the capacity, both mentally and in terms of time resource, required to truly reach out to hard to reach groups which reflects findings regarding UK parish plans (Parker 2008). It also reflected a desire to avoid potential conflict and also betrayed an understandable lack of knowledge and confidence with regard to conflict and ambiguity as having generative potential (Forester 1999, Pløger 2004).

One could label this as ‘self-interest’ in that process managers, planners and others are perhaps unconsciously (perhaps not unreasonably, see Abram 2004) opting for an easier path⁵, but particularly when the process managers are unpaid community members then such positioning is more readily understandable. Emotion is critical then in determining how a plan emerges in these contexts, more so than in traditional planner-led processes, but this emotional investment undermines theorists calls to create a local “durable democracy of distrust” (Rosanvallon, 2008, 8).

4. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the particular difficulties of conducting inclusive, very local, community-led plan-making. While Neighbourhood Plans have much in common with previous attempts within English parish planning (e.g. Parker 2008), as well as similar work in other national contexts (e.g. Sirianni 2007), there are differences. The rhetoric and ideology of such plans is relatively unique, both in relation to citizens being in charge of a plan with statutory force, but also in the parallel dismantling of power and resources for the local state.

The case thus contributes to emerging research on the demands planning places on citizen-subjects, a theme neglected in the literature (Inch 2014). Agonist theory also

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⁵ It is worth emphasising here the huge amounts of unpaid time that went into the development of the neighbourhood plan.

suffers from failing to attend to such demands. Nevertheless it is useful as an analytical tool which proposes principles to be considered, rather than in providing a normative ideal for plans to be evaluated against. In mobilising it in this way we note three particular problems in empowering citizens to lead a statutory plan-making process for their place.

The first of these problems concerns the intensity of people's feelings about their 'place'. The neighbourhood scale offers participatory opportunities in that it offers possibilities to capitalise on community identity (Bradley 2015, Sorenson and Sagaris 2010). But there is contrasting evidence in the literature about whether this can be a resource for consensus-building as Mouffe suggests, or whether it is intrinsically hard to deliberate at this scale due to the passion that debates over place futures engender (cf Sorensen and Sagaris 2010 and Nieuwenhuis et al 2013, van Leeuwen 2015). Our findings suggest that promoting agonistic debate over the future of citizens' immediate lived environments is problematic as process managers, intermediaries and citizen participants shy away from such debate for the sake of preserving community capital. Many people in our case withdrew from the process and denied it their views, opinions and knowledge, and in this silence was as significant in the analysis as participation; others in charge of the process narrowed its design to prevent such agonistic debate from occurring.

Thus while the emotive element in performing communicative work is central to agonist theory and has been recognised by communicative and deliberative theorists too (e.g. Thompson and Hoggett 2001), for planning it is an important rejoinder to recognise the strength of people's affective ties to neighbourhood and community in planning at this scale, especially when processes are community-led. Communicative planning theory suggests that the challenge for planning processes is to reason as to how to 'live together but differently' (Healey 2006), and here there is more common ground than usually recognised across various theoretical positions. While much focus is correctly placed in such conceptions on tolerance and diversity, our research suggests that the reasoning element itself is likely to be problematic in terms of reaching the levels of deliberative openness required to set the parameters for such a debate. We also note that individual communities and cultures (e.g. paternalistic rural English) will

have variously institutionalised practices to deal with such issues (Lutz and White 1986) and this will affect the potential for agonistic spaces to emerge. We might also need to consider both the community development maxim of 'do no harm' when approaching neighbourhood planning while also giving thought as to how to repair the damage done by any conflict generated through community planning.

The second issue concerns the knowledge required to do genuine participatory planning work and an 'ignorance of the potential' of a more agonistic approach (Pløger 2004). The emergence of an inner core of 'usual suspects' involved in making plans, who have a store of traditions derived from shared practices determined through pre-existing networks, is very common, as other examples of parish and neighbourhood plan-making suggest (e.g. Moseley 1997; Sturzaker and Shaw 2015). In the case of Neighbourhood Planning this seems especially likely in areas that are parished as it is the Parish Council that already deals with planning issues in a village and it is the Parish Council that must play the central role. Such experience can be helpful but existing institutions and traditions are an important variable in determining how inclusive the resultant processes are likely to be.

Thus we concur with theorists such as Mansbridge (2002) who note how small groups seek consensus instinctively and narrow the field of inquiry, and if they are in control of the process, narrow its participative range (see also Mendelberg 2002). Thus community-led plans are prone to the same tendencies as planner-led ones in that plans are highly likely to be produced through 'cosmetic conflict suspension' (Brand & Gaffikin 2007), where terms set from an 'elite' outwards remain uncontested. The absence of conflict in neighbourhood plans can then be seen as a further "manifestation of a post-political trend in public policy" (Gualini 2015: 61) reflective in English planning of a tendency arising at other spatial scales (Allmendinger and Haughton 2012).

Finally we should note the demands that even doing the most minimal of participatory processes requires when such processes are effectively provided through volunteer labour. Both the levels of resource and the capacities present in often very small communities that take on neighbourhood planning suggest that a central government

vision of devolution that bypasses the local state will not be one that meets the demands of a genuinely participatory democratic form of planning. Neighbourhood planning responsabilises citizens to govern their neighbourhoods and uphold democratic values in place of experts and politicians (Rose 1999). But the state has a responsibility to ensure that citizens have the resources necessary to at best 'do no harm' in their communities and more positively to allow them to affect genuine change that reflects local needs and desires. Our findings also give further credence to the calls of others to ask what the motives and rewards are for participants in very-local planning processes (Parker and Murray 2012) but to also question what the risks to social and community capital of participating might be also.

What then is the future for Neighbourhood Plans in England and for other jurisdictions looking to develop community-led, very-local planning? Such plans do facilitate greater control over planning, provide useful local nuance to policy that reflects the particular conditions and desires that exist in a locality, and they are at least as democratically inclusive as planning at other scales in England (Sturzaker and Shaw 2015). But this is not yet the participatory democratic model as asserted in English central government rhetoric, nor are neighbourhood plans likely to meet the demands of agonistic planning theory. For such political and theoretical demands to be progressed three areas in particular require attention. First, greater attention to institutional design is required wherein process managers are required to reflect on how the participatory mechanisms they propose will reach further into the community, taking into account the expected varying capacities of certain sections of it. Second, the finegrain work done within such processes needs to be structured in through much more open-ended forms of inquiry wherein a range of digital, traditional and experimental techniques can be deployed, targeted at different population segments such that 'more than the loons show up' (Forester 2012). Third, the process design, and particularly the facilitation capacities, present within the core group of plan-makers needs to be examined from the outset and resources devoted to filling in the gaps. Key skills may need to be bought in, but where they exist there are examples that show how the difficulties of debating the future of one's immediate lived-in environment can be overcome (e.g. Bishop 2015).

Neighbourhood plans have, contrary to initial expectations, been shown to exert real power in decisions over land use. When coupled with greater attention to institutional design, a more progressive and participatory localism with genuine power over decision-making might emerge, but this will need careful nurturing and analytical attention to the specific contexts in which it is exercised, alongside much greater resource allocation, if it is to succeed.

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