

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Reading		
Unit of Assessment: UoA13 Architecture, Built Environment and Planning		
Title of case study: Changing Policy and Practice to Facilitate Neighbourhood Planning in England		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014–20		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Gavin Parker Matthew Wargent	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Planning Studies Senior Lecturer; Professor Post-Doctoral Research Fellow	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: whole REF period 2000 - present 2018 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–20		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The process of neighbourhood planning, conducted by voluntary groups, has been overly complex to navigate, lengthy, and with uneven institutional support. Under the Localism Act 2011, Neighbourhood Plans provide opportunities for local communities to create a statutory Plan and influence decisions which shape the future of their area. Yet, for the reasons described, the opportunity for citizens to shape their neighbourhoods has been put at risk. Research at the University of Reading has aimed to address this and has been critical to informing and changing practice. With a focus on the evidence and support required by volunteers, local planning authorities and national government, it has demonstrated how to improve the efficacy and transparency in the various stages of Plan production. This has underpinned a series of changes in policy and practice intended to increase the rate of uptake of neighbourhood planning, as well as the quality and number of successfully completed Plans.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Reading's contribution to the evidence base on neighbourhood planning is significant and sustained, with a body of research informing all the actors directly involved. These include the designated Neighbourhood Planning Groups (NPGs), support organisations, independent neighbourhood planning examiners, and local and national government. Reading's research has demonstrated how the lack of clear or consistent support for NPGs has stifled neighbourhood planning, and hindered the shaping of a neighbourhood by the citizens who reside there.</p> <p>Previous research at Reading on community-led planning started in 2006; it was initially funded locally in Berkshire (by West Berkshire Local Strategic Partnership), and then nationally by the Homes and Communities Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in 2009–10. Formal provisions for neighbourhood planning were then set out in the Localism Act in 2011. There were around 1,000 NPGs actively involved in neighbourhood planning by 2014, when Parker was commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government to conduct the User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning research project [Section 3, ref 1]. The aim was to explore how the NPGs had navigated neighbourhood planning, and what improvements might be made. It was the first detailed empirical study, and primary qualitative data were collected through 120 structured interviews representing the spread of eligible designated NPGs involved for at least six months (n=737 groups). Six focus groups were convened, with NPGs representing different operational contexts (such as weak/strong market urban/rural areas). The findings showed that the involvement of local authorities and support from them for NPGs had been variable, and available guidance was confusing or absent. The report recommended that better</p>		

information, guidance and templates relating to particular stages and tasks involved in the process be made available to NPGs.

In order to track progress on the research recommendations for supporting NPGs, the sample of 120 NPGs was revisited in 2016. The findings showed that the experience of the entire process for NPGs had become even more burdensome, and that more focused advice and support from local authorities and support organisations was still lacking. As a result, the research confirmed the observed phenomenon of many NPGs enlisting the support of private consultants to assist in the development of their Plan [refs 3 and 6].

Further research investigated the process and outcomes of independent examination of Neighbourhood Plans [ref 2]. The examination stage takes place following the submission of a draft Neighbourhood Plan to the relevant local authority (and prior to the neighbourhood referendum); the aim of this stage is to check that the Plan conforms to the legally defined “basic conditions”. Interviews were conducted with a majority of the experienced neighbourhood planning examiners (n=22); it was found that that the process was not clear, that examiners were not consistent, and that some local authorities caused delays at this stage. The findings showed that, although most Plans passed the examinations stage, many were modified, either by the examiners or the local authority; the research also demonstrated variance in terms of the approach and expertise of the examiners, as well as a lack of transparency regarding how the outcomes of the examinations were dealt with [ref 2].

Such issues were discussed further in an innovative neighbourhood planning “Hive” event, led by Parker and hosted by the University of Reading in June 2018. The event was specifically co-designed with and for NPGs, to enable them to share their experiences, and to gather a large amount of qualitative data. Collectively, Parker’s long-term research, with a specific focus on the needs of the NPGs themselves, has provided compelling evidence that the system remains difficult to navigate and fragmented in terms of governance [refs 3, 4 and 6]; it follows therefore that the research has shown take-up of neighbourhood planning to be greater in affluent areas, where there is more capacity to address such challenges. Overall, the body of work has informed Parker et al.’s 2019 book, *Neighbourhood Planning in Practice* book [ref 5], specifically designed for NPGs, which won the Royal Town Planning Institute’s Sir Peter Hall Award for Research Excellence in 2019.

Reading’s research focus on user needs and experiences led to a request by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) that Reading undertake the Impact of Neighbourhood Planning in England study in September 2019, with Parker as Principal Investigator. This superseded the 2014 study as the largest and most in-depth research on neighbourhood planning, involving a comprehensive desk review, surveys of Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and NPGs, case studies and focus groups [ref 7].

Collectively, the body of research has demonstrated areas of complexity and a lack of clarity in navigating the neighbourhood planning system. It has therefore underpinned policy and practice designed to support the shaping of communities by their residents.

3. References to the research

The research outputs underpinning this case study are a combination of funded research reports and academic publications in high-quality refereed journals. This body of work is the leading academic source on neighbourhood planning and makes a significant contribution to knowledge in this area. The research includes primary research and new data, and is the first and most detailed empirical work on neighbourhood planning using qualitative techniques in the form of case studies and interviews. We believe the research not only meets but exceeds the 2* criteria of research.

1. Parker, G., Lynn, T. and Wargent, M. (2014) *User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning in England*. Report. Locality, London.

Impact case study (REF3)

2. Parker, G., Salter, K. and Hickman, H. (2016) 'Caution: Examinations in progress – the operation of neighbourhood plan examinations in England'. *Town and Country Planning*, 85 (12). pp. 516–522.
3. Parker, G., Lynn, T. and Wargent, M. (2015) 'Sticking to the script? The co-production of Neighbourhood Planning in England'. *Town Planning Review*, 86 (5). pp. 519–536. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2015.31>
4. Wargent, M. and Parker, G. (2018) 'Re-imagining neighbourhood governance: The future of neighbourhood planning in England'. *Town Planning Review*, 89 (4). pp. 379–402. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2018.23>
5. Parker, G., Salter, K. and Wargent, M. (2019) *Neighbourhood Planning in Practice*. Lund Humphries, London.
6. Parker, G., Lynn, T. and Wargent, M. (2017) 'Contestation and conservatism in neighbourhood planning in England. Reconciling agonism and collaboration?' *Planning Theory and Practice*, 18 (3). pp. 446–465. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2017.1316514>
7. Parker, G., Wargent, M., Salter, K., Dobson, M., Lynn, T. and Yuille, A. (2020) Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England Final Report to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government May 2020.

4. Details of the impact

The uptake of neighbourhood planning has been mixed, with more uptake seen in affluent areas. This means that some local communities have missed the opportunity to shape their neighbourhood. The research has demonstrated that an overriding cause of this was the lack of support for NPGs, who depend on volunteers, who navigate a complex and lengthy system [refs 1, 3 and 7]. Parker's work has challenged and underpinned new government policy and practice in order to increase both uptake and the support required to enable communities to successfully shape their neighbourhoods through Neighbourhood Plans. As a result, the research has informed legislative and national support package reform.

Legislative reform and improved support programme for neighbourhood planning

By September 2019, over 850 Neighbourhood Plans had reached the neighbourhood referendum stage, where Plans have successfully completed the examination stage, and communities vote on the Plan. If successful at the referendum stage, the Plan will be adopted by the local authority, and policies within it should add value to those in the existing Local Plan. The 2014 User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning research [ref 1] was crucial in elucidating the reasons for the low uptake and completion rates of Neighbourhood Plans, highlighting several issues and means to improve. A bias towards affluent areas was revealed, meaning that the benefits of neighbourhood planning were not being realised by urban and disadvantaged areas. [Text removed for publication].

[Text removed for publication]. In August 2020, the Housing Secretary announced that funding to help communities in urban and deprived areas plan their local neighbourhoods will almost double [source 5].

Improving transparency and consistency through new guidelines for examiners

Further research [Section 3, ref 2] identified the examination stage as lacking transparency for NPGs navigating the system. It showed that a draft Neighbourhood Plan going to the examination stage needed to be robust, as well as highlighting the lack of consistency between examiners, which appeared to be due to the fact that no standardised training was offered to examiners. This research was summarised by Reading in a briefing paper (April 2017) submitted directly to policymakers in the MHCLG, and which featured in the House of Lords debate during the passage of the Bill and formed the basis of a subsequent publication [ref 2]. [Text removed for publication]. The subsequent Neighbourhood Planning Act (2017) provided measures ensuring that local authorities have due regard for Plans which have been independently examined.

Parker's research has informed new guidance for independent examiners acting on behalf of the Neighbourhood Planning Independent Examiner Referral Service (NPIERs). Described as "vanguard research" by one of the primary providers of examination services [source 7], the "research work was critical in its role in instigating and informing the production of the now published sector led advice to neighbourhood plan examiners and others involved in the examination process". The source also stated: "Within the examiner community, I believe there is an ongoing expectation that the learning from continuing research undertaken by Professor Parker will be both integral and critical to establishing greater efficacy in delivering neighbourhood planning" and affirmed that this "was a key driver of the NPIERS panel's work" [source 3]. [Text removed for publication]. This means that "clearer and comprehensive guidance about examination" was produced for all parties, which "included not only the examination process, but also ... common issues that occur at examination" and ensures that NPGs now have an "increased awareness and knowledge of what happens 'post-examination'" [source 3]. As a result, NPGs can now have confidence that the examination stage will be more consistent and communities can have more confidence that their Plans will be respected by decision-makers (the local planning authorities).

Increasing the quality of debate on planning and Neighbourhood Plans

Parker's work is also informing the quality of debate on planning policy more generally. He was invited by the Head of Policy at the Town and Country Planning Association to contribute to the Raynsford Review of Planning in England (p.46) specifically on neighbourhood planning. In citing Reading's research on neighbourhood planning exclusively, the report again highlighted the role of the local authority and examiners, and their potential impact on a successful outcome in terms of implementation of the plan by decision-makers (including local authorities and developers) or not; the concern therefore being that neighbourhood plans can fail, through no fault of their own, but because of the interplay of other factors, including the National Planning Policy Framework. The recommendations of the Raynsford Review have been widely cited and endorsed, including by the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). Parker was also called to give evidence for the House of Lords review of the rural economy to discuss the role of neighbourhood planning in November 2018.

In addition to engaging with NPGs across England, Parker has extensively engaged with practitioner groups, delivering keynotes for the Neighbourhood Planning Conference in London (March 2017), Young Planners Conferences, and the RTPI's north-west (2015) and south-east (2017) conferences. Parker was also an invited speaker to the CPRE (2017) and the Planning Officers Society (September 2018). In 2018, the National Association of Local Councils released a report called *Where Next for Neighbourhood Plans? Can They Withstand the External Pressures?* This extensively cites the work at Reading between 2015 and 2018, including the outcome of the Hive Event in June 2018; it urged the government "to realise the full potential that effective neighbourhood planning offers". The resultant book informed by the Hive event was specifically designed by the Reading authors as a guide for NPGs. Indeed, a leading neighbourhood planning forum consultancy describe the book as being able to "refresh perspective of what NP can achieve" [source 8]. More recently Parker has been invited to speak at the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Civic Societies on "Public participation in planning" (March 2019) and the APPG for Housing and Planning on "Are Neighbourhood Plans working for communities?" (June 2019)

While the planning system provides opportunities for communities to get involved in development decisions that affect them, in practice they have often found it difficult to have a meaningful say in a complex system. The influence of the research in underpinning national policy [sources 1,2,4,6] and practitioner guidance [sources 3,7,8] has therefore directly impacted NPGs and the ability to involve citizens in effective planning. It is enabling them to navigate a complex system to achieve the aspirations of the wider community – the very intentions of the neighbourhood planning policy in the first place. The significance of the new support measures for neighbourhood planning in England is that they aimed to provide the means for an increase in, and more equitable distribution of, neighbourhood planning uptake,

reaching those communities which are less affluent, through a clearer, more consistent and more accessible approach.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Evidence for impact on support programmes and legislative reform

- [S1] Testimonial from Head of Plan-making Policy (MHCLG).
- [S2] Neighbourhood Planning Bill (2016/17: pp. 4–5).
- [S3] Testimonial from Royal Town Planning Institute.
- [S4] Neighbourhood Planning Toolkits and Guidance
- [S5] MHCLG announcement (August 2020) on funding increase for urban and deprived areas

Evidence for impact on the role of NP examiners and examiner guidance

- [S6] Neighbourhood Planning Bill (2016/17: pp. 4–5) – see source 2 above.
- [S7] Testimonial from Director of Intelligent Plans and Examinations (co-author of NPIERs guidance).

Evidence for impact on individual NPGs from the research and NPIP book

- [S8] Testimonials from Director of Navigus Planning (NP consultant) on overall influence of the research and outputs.