

PROBLEMS WITH PROPOSED MEASURES IN 'PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE'

Without further measures, members of communities who are not currently well-represented in development and planning policy decision-making are **more likely to be excluded** by the proposals for streamlining the placemaking process. This includes people with protected characteristics and other sections of the community who are disadvantaged.

A shorter timetable will impact on communities who are time- and resource-poor and do not have the capacity to engage because of other needs

In addition, although online and web based consultations may give better access to some sections of the community who do not currently engage; for instance, younger people, or people with small children and no child-caring back-up, it will further disadvantage people without access to or with poor access to the internet, lack of skills or issues with being able to interact on-screen.

These tend to be the elderly, people with disabilities or who live in areas of social deprivation who already struggle to be heard when their community is affected by development proposals.

WE HAVE EXPERIENCE IN HELPING COMMUNITIES ENGAGE

In Bristol, the Neighbourhood Planning Network was set up in 2006 and is coordinated by volunteers to help communities across the city engage with planning decisions both at policy drafting stage and at planning application (and pre-application) stage.

The network supports resident (and business) planning groups to help them get involved effectively when development proposals are made which affect their community and area.

The Network has been working with the local planning authority in Bristol for 14 years as the conduit for community views on planning proposals and also works with developers to help them engage with relevant communities at the early stage of design before planning applications are submitted.

Community engagement in planning requires there to be a local ability and willingness within the area to work over a prolonged period to identify community priorities. This cannot be done as part of a 30-month planning policy programme. The groups need to be in place already and have an understanding of what the community needs (or doesn't need) and how development can help with supplying those needs. It is also most effective when the developer is engaged throughout to ensure that what is planned is deliverable.

In Bristol, a number of community groups have become highly effective in communities that historically were not involved in planning decisions in their area. In Southmead, Bristol, the local community has brought forward, with the Bristol City Council housing department, a development proposal to support their retail centre by densifying the housing provision to increase retail viability and to tackle local site issues of ASB on underused greenspace.

This was achieved by a long-term investment of time and resources in community engagement in drawing up a community (not spatial) plan. The development proposal was then brought forward as a specific project which tackled some of the planning issues in the community plan.

In contrast, where plans are brought forward that are not deliverable, it increases community feeling of exclusion as is currently a threat in Hengrove where the local community worked on a

Neighbourhood (Development) Plan (through the Localism Act provisions) which was 'made' but the developer (the local authority) is finding to be difficult to deliver.

BRISTOL NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING NETWORK MODEL

The Bristol NPN model is to support local communities to engage in planning long-term, by identifying local people who are interested in being part of the planning process and helping them set up local planning groups. Local councillors are encouraged to work with those groups. These groups are not Neighbourhood Planning Forums with a 'task and finish' model; they are a long-term solution to linking communities to planning authorities and developers.

In some communities, this will require a support structure to initially help eg with the administration, setting up and hosting meetings, technical assistance eg how to read plans, how to access information online, The Bristol NPN model is to help those groups become independent of the paid support by working through the network to share skills and experience.

This then provides a consultation base for early engagement across the whole city area, which has a differing capacity and engagement requirement according to location. Agreeing a local consultation framework based on the characteristics of each individual community is important. Different communities work and engage in different ways. Locally based community groups understand how their communities engage and what are the best methods to contact them.

Areas in Bristol that are most likely to fall into the renewal /growth category will tend to be around historic council estates where there is a higher level of social deprivation, poor access to internet, history of consultation fatigue and lower levels of engagement. These communities also have tended to get involved when they can see that development proposals will directly affect them, not when policy is being written. This will lead to the less-experienced communities being expected to engage with planning policy drafting at the earliest stage- when they are least likely to see any reason to or find it easy to get involved. A local planning group can help avoid this trap.

In Bristol, consultation at pre-planning application stage has been expected for major applications ie 10 residential units or more, 1,000 sq m of commercial space or a combination of the two, since 2008. Bristol NPN has been part of the administration of the consultation process and directs the developers to contacts in the local community.

We have therefore seen the introduction of web-based consultation, as part of the pre-app community involvement (pre-app CI) process, and had an opportunity to assess its effectiveness.

ENGAGEMENT PLATFORMS

We find that, like exhibitions which are specifically identified as unacceptable as pre-app CI in the Bristol Guidelines for Community Involvement, online and web-based consultation has a limited value in taking forward the design involvement process because it is not responsive. It is a good way of identifying issues and eliciting comments but does not allow for mutual understanding to evolve and for a better design solution to come out of a quasi-negotiation process.

We therefore feel that a web-based planning process cannot solely be relied on to increase democratic involvement but can help bring the attention of the wider public to the opportunity to engage. It must be supplemented by live discussions with community groups where points can be worked out together to benefit both the community being consulted and the developer and planning authority doing the consulting. The opportunities for sharing information in a more

accessible form such as 3D modelling and flythroughs will help the wider public (as well as the applicant and local planning authority) understand better the proposals which impact on them.

Marketing techniques need to be utilised to bring engagement opportunities to the attention of communities who usually do not engage. Current notifications on lampposts do alert people to potential changes but the notifications are not currently presented in a form which invites attention. The advertising of planning applications has long been a subject for criticism. The way in which plans are advertised to the public are using printed words when a picture would engage the attention better. All successful Marketing and Advertising campaigns use pictures. If the aim is to involve more people in spatial planning, use of attention-grabbing pictures, illustrations of what could be the form of development, erected on or near the sites in question, will attract a far wider involvement than the current formal notices put on lampposts and in local newspapers.

Engagement needs to be truly sought by the developer/ local authority, not a tick-box exercise.

A WAY FORWARD

1. We therefore suggest that, in order to support the speedier programme proposals, and along with local chief officers for design and place making, **local planning authorities should help to set up networks of planning groups across their areas**, who will be the initial points of contact to help design planning consultation opportunities for their communities. Bristol Neighbourhood Planning Network should be taken as an example of this type of organisation, which works particularly well in cities where there are no parish councils. Resources need to be found to start these organisations up and this needs to be done well before they are asked to get involved in helping shape planning policy for their area.
2. This could be an alternative to the Neighbourhood Plan process as set out in the Localism Act and would be more appropriate for areas which would fall into the renewal / growth categories than bringing forward Neighbourhood (Development) Plans . Local groups could be engaged in doing preparatory work such as **local distinctiveness studies/ character appraisals and community plans** which would then feed into planning policy consultation and drafting process. Local groups will also be able to **help shape appropriate public consultation** depending on the character of their community.
3. Better engagement should be sought by redesigning the requirement for policy and development notification for both LPAs and developers which **includes visual information on proposals to be advertised on site** at the earliest stage of design, with a number of different options, not just online, for people to be engaged in discussions.
4. **Education in good design** could also contribute to a long-term aspiration to increase wider community involvement in better placemaking. School students need to learn to value and identify good architecture and successful places. Teaching children skills can also transfer understanding to their parents. Engagement in development proposals could be undertaken in and through local schools.

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