

reconnecting town and gown

Samer Bagaeen, Georgia Wrighton and Mike Gibson explain how an ongoing University of Brighton project illustrates the potential for student-community projects to develop evidence for neighbourhood plans and enhance the resources available for effective community participation in neighbourhood planning



Photos: Samer Bagaeen

A view of the platforms at Hove station, lying within the Hove Station Neighbourhood Forum area

In November 2012, the University of Brighton Planning School (now part of the new School of Architecture, Design and Urbanism) began working with the Hove Station Neighbourhood Forum on an innovative project that brought together student planners and residents in a process of shared learning and co-creation of knowledge during the early stages of the neighbourhood planning process. This article tells the story of this university-community engagement project, commenting on the potential for such projects to contribute both to

the resources available to communities undertaking neighbourhood planning and to producing 'fit for purpose' planners through effective planning education.

Legislative framework – opportunities and constraints

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government elected in 2010 introduced the Localism Act 2011, followed shortly afterwards by the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012.

The legislation inaugurated a new power aimed at enabling neighbourhood visions to be enshrined in new Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs) as part of the statutory Local Plan. As statutory plans, NDPs must be in general conformity with the policies of both the Local Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). In particular, they cannot reduce the volume of development proposed in Local Plans (although communities can choose to opt for more development), but they can influence its distribution and quality to reflect local needs and priorities.

The 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' set out in the NPPF applies to Neighbourhood Plans. Thus 'objectively assessed needs' must be met subject to the caveats in the NPPF. In their application of the 'presumption', neighbourhoods should:

- *develop plans that support the strategic development needs set out in Local Plans, including policies for housing and economic development;*
- *plan positively to support local development, shaping and directing development in their area that is outside the strategic elements of the Local Plan...*¹

It is therefore clear that communities do not have a 'blank sheet', but at the same time this innovation arguably has introduced a significant potential power shift and a substantial responsibility for those communities who decide to bring a plan forward.

Some communities might consider that there is little point undertaking an NDP when they are powerless to prevent housing numbers they consider unsustainable, particularly if a valued countryside setting is under threat. That said, for those communities in broad agreement with the development targets set for their area, there is a new opportunity for them to establish neighbourhood policies and determine which sites are developed to meet the targets.

Moreover, Parish or Town Councils with adopted NDPs can decide how 25% of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds arising from development in the neighbourhood are spent, as opposed to 15% for areas without an adopted plan. In urban areas the NDP can have a meaningful influence over how that 25% is spent – although the extent of this influence is at the discretion of the local planning authority. There is thus a significant incentive for communities to go through the hoops of neighbourhood planning when they broadly accept levels of development planned for their area, and they have the opportunity to successfully articulate a vision which reflects community aspirations.

Some commentators argue that the introduction of the neighbourhood planning system is no more

than an attempt by the Government to sweeten what might otherwise be a bitter pill of development, designed to encourage acceptance of development that may not in itself be supported by residents. Gallent and Robinson observe in a critique of network-based collaborative planning² that:

'The process of governance may appear more interactive, but interaction remains heavily circumscribed by mechanisms designed to ensure strategic compliance, and one way of ensuring such compliance is to strictly ration the flow of real power from traditional policy actors to communities.'

Nonetheless, the challenge for communities is to understand the planning system sufficiently to exercise and maximise the power and influence now available to them. In the case of neighbourhood planning under localism, this means understanding and accepting strategic policy evidence for Local Plan making, as well as learning how to develop a robust evidence base for their own neighbourhood vision.

The Localism Act 2011 and the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 set out the degree to which local planning authorities are expected to support the neighbourhood planning process – in terms of:

- publicity over and determination of whether to designate a Neighbourhood Forum and neighbourhood area;
- receipt and publicity of the plan proposal; determination of the plan proposal and related publicity;
- the appointment of a person to conduct the independent examination of the NPD; and
- conducting the referendum process.³

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) provides additional, but limited central government financial support for taking on these responsibilities. Beyond that, the scope of technical support is at the local planning authority's discretion. Cuts to local planning authority departments and varying degrees of enthusiasm for engaging with communities conducting neighbourhood plans will naturally impact on the nature and degree of support available.

Since 2012 DCLG has provided an evolving system of financial and professional support for communities undertaking neighbourhood planning. This programme has been delivered in three phases by Locality and a variety of partners, including the RTP1 Planning Aid Service. Communities have been awarded small cash grants – typically £6,000-7,000 – for use in supporting community engagement activities, setting up a website, printing documents, and so on. But they could also use these grants to hire planners and/or community engagement

specialists, albeit only for a few days. The emphasis is on the role of planning and community engagement experts acting as 'enablers' in the key stages of the neighbourhood planning process – from formal neighbourhood designation to submitted draft plan stage.

In addition, communities could apply for direct support from Locality's specialist contractors. But in the current third phase of the support programme (2015-18), this direct support now comes in the form of pre-determined consultancy packages.^{4,5} Packages focusing on issues such as heritage and character assessment, urban design and masterplanning, environmental assessment and viability assessments are all delivered in a more conventional consultancy mode.

The Hove Station Neighbourhood Forum

Neighbourhood Forums are community groups that prepare a Neighbourhood Development Plan in areas without parishes. The local planning authority designates both the neighbourhood area and the Neighbourhood Forum responsible for preparing the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Localism Act 2011 sets out key conditions for the establishment of Neighbourhood Forums, which must be:

'established for the express purpose of promoting or improving the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of an area that consists of or includes the neighbourhood area concerned'.⁶

Forums are required to be open to all who live or work in the area or are ward councillors, to have a minimum of 21 members, and to adopt a written constitution. In some urban areas established community groups have adapted their activities and governance procedures to meet these requirements. There were no such groups in the Hove station area of Brighton and Hove – building community capacity for neighbourhood planning had to start from scratch, and the Brighton Planning School has been a partner from the outset.

An embryonic Hove Station Neighbourhood Forum (HSNF) emerged in winter 2012 in response to widely publicised informal proposals by a local landowner/developer for a large-scale, mixed-use redevelopment project on under-used land adjacent to Hove station. This comprised a cinema, new homes and employment/retail space, in a group of five-storey towers. The site was part of the Brighton and Hove's Development Area 6 (DA6), one of eight strategic Development Areas proposed in the emerging Brighton and Hove City Plan, Part One of which was about to be submitted to for examination.^{7,8}

In November 2012 a local councillor called a meeting in a community centre in DA6 which was attended

by some 20 residents. Brighton and Hove City Council's (BHCC's) Chief Planning Officer explained that officers were negotiating with the developer, whose proposals did not meet the city's emerging policies for DA6, but also raised the possibility of residents developing a Neighbourhood Plan.

The councillor, supported by a small group of residents, organised a second meeting in December 2013, at which both the developer's representatives and the Council's planning officers explained the evolving situation. Some hasty leafleting of a few streets adjacent to the proposed redevelopment prompted over 70 people to attend. Unexpectedly, the developer's agents announced that their negotiations with the Council had failed to reach agreement that afternoon and thus no planning application would be submitted in the near future. For some this was an anti-climax, but for many residents the redevelopment cat was out of the bag. Of those attending, over 30 residents signed up to establish a Neighbourhood Forum and prepare a Neighbourhood Plan, with another 20 wanting to be kept informed.

In January 2013 the embryonic HSNF had its first meeting and has met every month since as it evolved into a designated Neighbourhood Forum finally approved by Brighton and Hove City Council in December 2014. Initial discussions with planning officers secured an agreement that the Neighbourhood Plan would be the mechanism for the detailed planning of DA6. Over 100 residents and a sprinkling of local businesses attended the Forum's first 'Have Your Say Day' in February 2013. Forum representatives and City Council planners explained the neighbourhood planning process, prompting lively question-and-answer sessions. Together with an exhibition of the proposals for DA6, this generated support for the Forum and established that the local community was not opposed in principle to redevelopment but had real concerns about its potential impact on their neighbourhoods, which were adjacent to DA6.

On the strength of this broad agreement and the recruitment of another 40 or so new members, the informal forum adopted a formal constitution as an emerging Neighbourhood Forum in July 2013. The key task was then to move to define a neighbourhood area which the Council would designate alongside designating the Neighbourhood Forum. A second 'Have Your Say Day' in October 2013 consulted on optional boundaries, and a large majority of the 70-plus participants voted for the larger of two proposed neighbourhood areas.

A formal application for designation of the Hove Station Neighbourhood Area and Neighbourhood Forum was submitted in December 2013. In the event, a second application was made by the Hove Park Neighbourhood Forum in March 2014, substantially overlapping with the HSNF proposal.

This was instigated and led by councillors representing the leafy inter-war suburb to the north of the Victorian streets of the Hove station area and separated from them by Hove Park. The resolution of this situation within the framework of the regulations took until the end of 2014. It finally produced a boundary between the two areas which largely reflected determined action by Hove Park councillors to protect their patch – thus demonstrating the tension between the concept of long established, ward-based representative democracy and the concept of participatory democracy implicit in Neighbourhood Plans under localism.

months of 2013, which, combined with his ongoing voluntary contribution, was focused on enabling the Forum to secure formal designation. The Forum subsequently secured a £7,000 grant in autumn 2014, some of which paid for a few days of further professional consultancy time for analytical work which included integrating the outcomes of the student project into the developing evidence base.

The Forum also had support from the local authority. BHCC planners had agreed to work with the emerging Forum on the basis that the Neighbourhood Development Plan would be the



A view of the approach to Hove station

Resources for preparing the Hove Station Neighbourhood Plan

HSNF has tapped into the resources of the Government's neighbourhood planning support programme. The Neighbourhood Plan Co-ordinator is a local resident and a chartered planner with 40 years' experience of planning education, research and consultancy. As a lecturer at the Birmingham School of Planning in the 1970s he had managed several student-community 'live projects'. As an independent researcher and consultant since 2001, he was a member of Locality's panel of consultants from 2011 to 2014.

At the time the joint student-community project started he had been appointed by Locality to provide limited consultancy support for the early

basis of the detailed planning of DA6. The minutes of the Hove Station Neighbourhood Forum meeting of 18 September 2013 anticipated the offer of increased technical support from City Council officers, and recognised the possibility of further involvement by town planning students:

'The council will probably be able to provide increased technical support after the Examination in Public of the City Plan in October. This may take the form of a secondment of a planner for, say, a couple of days a week to work with the Forum's Working Groups and to undertake specific tasks such as a Sustainability Appraisal. BHCC would also support the Forum establishing a Neighbourhood Planning Internship, possibly in partnership with the University of Brighton

Planning School... BHCC would provide professional/technical support to produce documents, such as a Consultation Draft Neighbourhood Plan, to a high standard.'

The community engagement activities of 2013 enabled the Forum to establish a 'neighbourhood technical team' of residents with planning, architecture, urban design and property development experience that could be drawn on. But while this team had the skills, the members were all volunteers with limits on the time that they could give. The team is part of a core group of activists which also includes many other residents from the now 150-strong Forum membership who are contributing their detailed knowledge of the area. The Brighton Planning School secured funding from DCLG at the end of 2014, and a neighbourhood planning workshop, hosting the two Hove Neighbourhood Forums, was held in March 2015 in the centre of Brighton.

This is the resource mix within which the joint project was developed.

Project design – underpinning theory and assignment brief

The student-community project in Hove brought together students and the community in the social learning or social mobilisation tradition of planning defined by Friedmann.⁹ The project was designed to build the capacity of both the community and student-planners to participate in the new neighbourhood planning process. Student-planners from the Brighton Planning School worked with the community in an environment conducive to mutual learning and the co-creation of evidence for the Neighbourhood Plan.

Brownill and Downing¹⁰ conclude that building trust and confidence between the different players involved in the neighbourhood planning process is a critical factor in the successful completion of NDPs. By opening up a working relationship with student-planners, the project could help the local community build trust and confidence within a wider network of planning professionals, alongside the positive dialogue shared with BHCC planners and Government support programme professionals.

The project aimed to help students see the built environment through the lens of residents, providing valuable experiential knowledge. In this way, student-planners can start to understand community perspectives. Such projects can help to embed a contemporary interpretation of the advocacy culture¹¹ and deliberative democracy¹² in neighbourhood planning practice under localism.

The system of Neighbourhood Plans operating as part of the statutory planning hierarchy requires specialist planning knowledge. Holman¹³ argues that the ability of communities to make links with traditional policy actors is a key measure of success

in community participation. Communities that develop useful networks with external actors, including local authority professionals, strengthen their capacity to influence what Rydin identifies as the uneven impacts – producing 'winners and losers' – of planning's apparently technical pursuit: *'... planning becomes a public space in which democracy is defined in practice. It identifies which voices a society regards as having a right to be heard and beyond that, to have a significant influence on the decisions that are actually taken and the urban change that occurs...'*¹⁴

Such networks enable people with different knowledge, resources and perspectives to link together in a collaborative planning process. Research by Brownill and Downing¹⁰ led the authors to conclude that the resources available to communities undertaking neighbourhood planning has a significant impact on their potential to grasp the opportunities that localism has to offer, as part of an 'infrastructure of localism':

*'The differing pictures that emerged of how neighbourhood planning is evolving in different communities can, we would argue, be understood by a focus on what we have termed the 'infrastructure of localism'. This refers both to the raft of 'localist' policy tools (such as NDPs) and to local factors and resources which combine to create different potential and outcomes for localism in different places.'*¹⁰

The project assignment brief was developed by academic staff working jointly with the Hove Station Neighbourhood Forum Co-ordinator. Ideas were developed at a public meeting held in November 2012 and an informal café meeting held in December, and were taken forward by email exchange up to the issue of the first assignment brief to students in February 2013. The project was envisaged as a joint venture in the tradition of the 'community of practice' model used in university-community partnerships.

The Hove student-community assignment

The University of Brighton Planning School project tasked two cohorts of students over a two-year period to conduct visual surveys of the Hove station area. Students were asked to consider how the character, form and scale of the built environment impacted on the social use of the public realm, and how people from diverse backgrounds might experience the space. The survey was intended as a baseline work, incorporating social, economic and environmental evidence for plan-making, with some proposals for change. It did not restrict the students to statutory planning-related matters, but was intended to provide a general evidence base for the community to use either in the statutory plan or in



A view of the Clarendon Estate south of Hove station

non-statutory community plans of their choosing.

Students and academic staff explained the aims of the project at a first meeting of the Hove Station Neighbourhood Forum in February 2013. Students subsequently attended as observers a residents' 'Have Your Say' consultation event held in the heart of the neighbourhood. They were also encouraged to interview and talk to the community on the street and in public spaces. Students presented their initial survey findings to – and received feedback from – HSNF members, academic staff and peers. They presented their final reports to a HSNF meeting and received feedback from residents.

Through attending community meetings and seminars with Forum members, students could see for themselves how the group had grown up in a fairly ad hoc way, compared with rural Parish Councils that have a formal structure, often with planning sub-groups already in place. One of the first key tasks of the Forum was to draw up a boundary for the neighbourhood area. Students observed some of the challenges of making key decisions when members of the community hold differing views and emphases, and when a group has emerged in an informal way. After the project

had finished, one of the students stayed in touch with the Forum and contributed to its method for deciding on a draft neighbourhood boundary, using research from his dissertation. The HSNF Management Committee minutes of the meeting of 18 September 2013 reported the direct value of the student's work:

'After further discussion with [the student] it has been agreed to use the same method for identifying boundaries which [the student] had used such as a questionnaire accompanied by a map on which Have Your Say Day (HYS) participants will have the opportunity to draw the boundary of their neighbourhood as they see it.'

From the early stages of the work, the community has been developing a 'vision' for the area. The visual survey report both contributed to this process and enabled students to see the area from a community perspective. This quote from one of the final student reports illustrates how students learnt to see the 'insider's' perspective:

'The Hove station area is regarded by residents as being too grey. They feel there is not a need for a large open space as Hove Park is nearby and is a place they enjoy taking their children to play.'



The Brighton Planning School/DCLG workshop held in March 2015

However, for general enjoyment and aesthetic improvement to the Hove neighbourhood, they feel more greenery and small, well designed open meeting areas would contribute greatly to the area. People are very concerned that all development should be of a high quality, instead of high quantity...

'The main, and almost only, concern that residents have regarding development is the impact of more traffic on the area. With a diverse population, provision must be made for old, young, and mixed ability residents to confidently move around via their preferred mode of transport.'

Students observed that there appeared to be broad consensus for the level of development in the Hove station area. However, they gained an insight into neighbourhood priorities drawn from demographic information and the views of residents and businesses, such as this quote from a coffee shop employee:

'The area contains a higher proportion of 30 to 45 year olds than the rest of the city and a slightly smaller number of children. The area is not a typical location for student accommodation like some other parts of the city and appears to attract young professionals and commuters.'

'They should think about the young people that want to get on the housing ladder. People don't

earn the money round here do they, unless you work up in London? ... the houses are so expensive and 'normal' people can't afford to live here.'

HSNF residents accepted that a major strategic development site was to be located in their area, and recognised that they had an important opportunity to contribute significantly to the Council's guidance for development proposals on the site. An interview with the Forum's Co-ordinator gave an insight into residents' motivation for producing a Neighbourhood Plan: the area had been identified for some major development and the community wanted to harness the opportunity for sustainable development to be defined locally given the level of growth planned, and to ensure that CIL payments were used to help realise neighbourhood aspirations for sustainable development.

Students needed to understand the significance of the scale and form of development coming forward in the area through the emerging City Plan, and then pass on this understanding to residents through reports and presentations. The project opened up a valuable exchange of knowledge and perspective, beyond the direct experience of both student-planners and the community. This is illustrated well in the reports, with students recognising not only the opportunities arising from

the development of the DA6 strategic site, but also some of the challenges for the community:

'The redevelopment of the DA6 site presents the opportunity to create new landmarks in the area and to better reveal the significance of existing ones...'

And in another report:

'Overall, Goldstone Character Area appears to function well as a residential area. It has a good stock of family-sized houses that are not too expensive in a local context, and it has excellent access to transport. Its access to facilities is much less good, and the DA6 development has the potential to greatly improve the availability of shopping and leisure facilities for this area. The public realm in the area is currently poor, and it would greatly benefit from planting street trees and working with residents to improve the appearance of the streetscape.'

'Simple traffic measures such as introducing more zebra and island crossings and reducing the physical clutter around junctions would make the area easier to move [around in] as well as improving its appearance.'

Conclusion

The work presented here remains an ongoing partnership. The students' work provided a baseline survey with some recommendations, addressing wider social, economic and environmental challenges and opportunities for improvement. It recognised the ability of communities to go beyond the statutory Neighbourhood Plan to produce a broader 'community plan' that addresses some of the threats and opportunities associated with new development in the pipeline. The students' work provided the community with a useful starting point for their own ideas and group development.

In the event, the City Plan has required much post-Examination work,⁸ and as of September 2015 is still out for consultation. The BHCC planners' contribution to the NDP was necessarily focused on the challenging designation process, which also dominated the Forum's work in 2014 and most of 2015.

In this instance the university-community partnership continues, and the idea of a neighbourhood planning internship, possibly supported by the DCLG technical support package, may yet come to fruition as part of the next stage of the University-HSNF joint programme.

● **Samer Bagaee** leads the University of Brighton Planning School and is a member of the TCPA Policy Council and a TCPA Trustee; **Georgia Wrighton** is a Director of CPRE London and lectures at Kingston University; and **Mike Gibson** is Emeritus Professor of Planning at London South Bank University and Co-ordinator of the Hove Station Neighbourhood Forum. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

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