

Neighbourhood Planning Bill 2016-17: Second Reading Briefing

This briefing has been produced by ResPublica as part of its *Backing Beauty* Commission ahead of the Second Reading of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill 2016-17 on Monday 10th October 2016. The Commission's work is also supported by the National Trust and the Woodland Trust.¹

Overview:

- We welcome many of the Bill's provisions on neighbourhood planning, most notably the requirement for local planning authorities to have regard for an emerging neighbourhood plan which has reached post-examination stage but prior to its confirmation in a local referendum; and the requirement for local authorities to set out their policy on providing advice and assistance to groups seeking to undertake a neighbourhood plan. These changes will help to give communities a stronger voice in the planning system.
- However, we feel that the Bill represents a missed opportunity to harness the potential of neighbourhood planning to promote beauty in the public realm. We are also concerned that the Bill contains no provisions with the specific aim of helping communities in more deprived areas of the country to participate in neighbourhood planning.

The importance of beauty in the planning system

Beauty plays a central role in enabling people and communities to flourish. Beauty has intrinsic value as a quality which people naturally seek out and appreciate. Yet it is also a driver of numerous public policy outcomes: ResPublica's July 2015 report *A Community Right to Beauty* highlighted the health, economic, social and civic benefits of living near beautiful surroundings.² For example, in polling conducted by Ipsos Mori as part of that research, 75% of people who felt they lived in a beautiful area were satisfied with their mental health, as opposed to only 57% of people who rated the beauty of their area as 'poor'.

Among the paper's other findings was the disparity of access to beauty across different household income levels and geographic areas: people from poorer households or living in more urban locations were less likely to consider their area to be beautiful. The value of beauty as highlighted above means that this should be considered an issue of social justice, and appropriate measures taken to help close this gap.

Finally, giving greater priority to beauty may even help in raising housing supply: research has previously found that 73% of people would support the building of more homes if well-designed and in keeping with their local area.³ Beauty cannot be imposed from the top down however. We believe beauty should be democratically discerned at a local level, and so we believe powers should be devolved to the community in order to allow them to shape their locale in line with their own desires and aspirations for their area.

¹ The Commission is supported by a Steering Group: Clive Betts MP; Tom Bloxham MBE (Chairman, Urban Splash); Tony Burton CBE (Founder, Civic Voice); Bev Churchill (Creative Director, Capco); Councillor Julie Dore (Leader, Sheffield Council); Sir Malcolm Grant (Chairman, NHS England); Wayne Hemingway MBE (Trustee, Design Council); Nick Herbert MP; Simon Murray (Senior Director, National Trust); Dame Fiona Reynolds (former Director General, National Trust); Beccy Speight (CEO, Woodland Trust)

² C. Julian & A. Harvey (ResPublica) (2015), *A Community Right to Beauty: Giving communities the power to shape, enhance and create beautiful places, buildings and spaces*. Available online at: <http://www.respublica.org.uk/our-work/publications/a-community-right-to-beauty-giving-communities-the-power-to-shape-enhance-and-create-beautiful-places-developments-and-spaces/>

³ National Housing and Planning Advice Unit (2010) Public Attitudes to Housing

The link between beauty and neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood planning is one of the most readily available tools to help communities influence the future of their area in this way. For example, it gives communities the power to set out design policies which can help to ensure new development is sympathetic to existing local character, or to protect cherished green spaces which might otherwise be allocated for housing development. We believe that, by giving communities this opportunity, the neighbourhood planning process intrinsically encourages local people to consider how to make their neighbourhood more beautiful.

Case study: Inner East Preston Neighbourhood Plan

- The area covered by the plan (the Fishwick and St Matthew's wards in Preston) has a number of neighbourhoods among the 10% most deprived areas of the country.
- Pre-planning consultation with residents found a particular concern with the preservation of existing local green spaces, which were highly valued by residents given the density of development in the surrounding area.
- The plan successfully passed local referendum in February 2015 with a 92% 'yes' vote. Its policies included a prohibition of any development which "results in the loss of Local Greenspace ... or that results in any harm to the character, setting, accessibility, appearance, general quality or amenity value of that Local Greenspace".
- In March 2015, a land swap was agreed between Preston Council and a local developer, Community Gateway Association, to prevent development on a site of open space and allow the community to go forward with plans to convert the brownfield land into an area of green space.

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The opportunity to set guidelines for what constitutes 'appropriate' development within a specific place through the neighbourhood planning process, has taken on a particular significance in the context of budget cuts to local planning departments since 2010. The Institute for Fiscal Studies for example has found that spending on local planning and development services fell to less than half its 2009/10 level by the end of 2014/15.⁵

However, neighbourhood planning's potential in helping local people to promote a community-led vision for their area is not yet being used to its fullest extent. In particular, there exists a significant disparity between the number of neighbourhood plan areas designated in more and less affluent parts of the country. Research by ResPublica has found that, on average, the number of confirmed neighbourhood plan areas is **three times lower** in local authorities with the highest proportion of neighbourhoods among the 10% most deprived in England than in local authorities without any such highly deprived neighbourhoods.⁶

⁴ For further information on the Inner East Preston Neighbourhood Plan, see the plan document (available at: <http://www.preston.gov.uk/GetAsset.aspx?id=fAAyADEAMQA0ADkAfAB8AFQAcgB1AGUAFAB8ADAAfAA1>). For details of the land swap, see <http://www.lep.co.uk/news/preston-council-and-community-gateway-agree-to-a-land-swap-1-7154679>

⁵ D. Innes & G. Tetlow (Institute for Fiscal Studies) (2015), *Central Cuts, Local Decision-Making: Changes in Local Government Spending and Revenues in England, 2009-10 to 2014-15*. Available online at: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/BN166.pdf>

⁶ Deprivation measured according to English Indices of Deprivation 2015. Neighbourhood Planning data taken from *Neighbourhood Planning areas in England*, available online at: <https://data.gov.uk/dataset/neighbourhood-planning-areas-in-england>

Recommendations

Neighbourhood planning has the potential to facilitate the creation of a more beautiful public realm and built environment. Moreover, the fact that it can be picked up by any community anywhere in England makes it especially useful as a response to the social injustice of poorer access to beauty in less affluent parts of the country. We believe that, in order to capitalise on these opportunities, this Bill needs to focus more on how neighbourhood planning can be used to promote beauty, and how neighbourhood planning can be taken up in more deprived areas.

We recommend that Government think further about how neighbourhood planning can be used as a vehicle to promote beauty in the public realm. Research from ResPublica and other organisations has clearly outlined the value of beauty, both in terms of its usefulness as a means to achieving desired public policy outcomes, but also as a factor in promoting human flourishing more generally. In particular, given the new Government's expressed desire to heal the societal rifts which the vote to leave the European Union has highlighted, we must acknowledge the importance of the divide in access to beautiful places and spaces alongside other social and economic divisions.

We recommend that Government give further consideration to how to encourage neighbourhood planning to be taken up in more deprived parts of the country. Reforms to financial incentives already in place, such as the £5000 local authorities are able to claim when various stages of the neighbourhood planning process are completed, or the proportion of Community Infrastructure Levy revenue to which parish councils and neighbourhood forums are entitled where a neighbourhood plan is in place, should be considered. Priority should also be given to developing existing community infrastructure and supporting community groups which can go on to do neighbourhood planning.

Suggested questions for the Government

- The Government has stated that one of its principal aims for this Bill is to speed up the process of housebuilding. Would the Minister agree that, as important as this goal is, communities should not be asked to compromise on the beauty of that development in its pursuit?
- What measures is the Government taking to help more groups in less affluent areas of the country engage in neighbourhood planning, and how will this Bill help to achieve that aim?
- Will the Minister look at calls from ResPublica and other organisations to introduce top-ups for local authorities in deprived areas on the financial incentives which they can claim when a neighbourhood plan area is designated, a neighbourhood forum established, or a draft neighbourhood plan submitted within their boundaries, in order to encourage them to help more community groups in their area engage with neighbourhood planning?

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