



Northumberland
County Council

White Paper: Planning for the Future

***Response from the Neighbourhood Planning & Infrastructure Team,
Northumberland County Council***

Proposal 9: Neighbourhood Plans should be retained as an important means of community input, and we will support communities to make better use of digital tools

13(a). Do you agree that Neighbourhood Plans should be retained in the reformed planning system? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]

Yes

It is clear from the take-up of neighbourhood planning both nationally and specifically in Northumberland, that communities are buying into the concept of neighbourhood planning and that there is enthusiasm and passion at a local level in terms of having a say over how communities continue to develop. The communities which have taken up neighbourhood planning in Northumberland have a clear sense of what is important to their area and their communities and what they wish to protect, as well as what development they feel that they need. Northumberland County Council is therefore very supportive of any measures to retain neighbourhood plans in the reformed planning system.

However, it is disappointing that the consultation document has been devoid of any real detail about how neighbourhood plans themselves would change in terms of their remit and what they can/can't include. From the proposed changes to Local Plans, it is assumed that the scope of what neighbourhood plans can do may be significantly reduced. If development management policies are to be determined at a national rather than Local Level, while Local Plans are to categorise land into growth, renewal or protected areas, the obvious question is what will the role of Neighbourhood Plans be? They may no longer provide *'a powerful set of tools for local people to plan for the types of development to meet their community's needs and where the ambition of the neighbourhood is aligned with the strategic needs and priorities of the wider local area'*.

Other than where improving design is a neighbourhood planning group's main objective (which has not been our experience) there seems to be limited scope for Neighbourhood Plans to address community needs.

The Council has great admiration for its communities who have and continue to choose to commit their personal time to help shape their local areas. The consultation is likely to significantly hamper the progress of Neighbourhood Plans until more detail is known. Since the consultation on the White Paper was announced, the County Council has been approached by many neighbourhood planning groups seeking clarification of what the proposals could mean for them. Some groups are very keen to prepare a Plan but are now understandably reluctant. Whilst the Council acknowledges the proposals are at early stages it considers, given the status of Neighbourhood Plans as part of the statutory development plan, more detail should have been offered.

Within proposal 9, the White Paper sets out the intention to allow neighbourhood plans to cover very small areas, even individual streets. Northumberland is entirely parished. It is not clear whether such small neighbourhood areas would be utilised in parished areas, or whether the use of multiple neighbourhood areas at this scale would be considered acceptable in a parish, given that the Parish Council would, at least under the current system, need to be the qualifying body for any neighbourhood area within their parish. In our extensive experience we have found that parishes are an appropriate geographic area for neighbourhood planning and, contrary to what may be a more urban-centric or city-based opinion from government regarding the creation of small neighbourhood areas, several of our parishes have worked together successfully by joining together to create larger multiple-parish neighbourhood areas where there are evidently similar landuse planning matters to address.

13(b). How can the neighbourhood planning process be developed to meet our objectives, such as in the use of digital tools and reflecting community preferences about design?

While the references in the consultation document to the increased use of digital technology to increase engagement and also aid in the design of documents themselves should be seen as a positive step to increasing opportunities for engagement, there is a very real concern that the ability to utilise such technology will be out of reach for many neighbourhood planning groups in Northumberland and elsewhere. There are a number of reasons for this: Northumberland is very rural in nature, with some groups still not having access to superfast broadband.

While the roll-out of this technology has been very good across the county, it can still be a barrier to some.

Additionally, many of these groups are not well-versed in using technology at this level. The COVID-19 situation in 2020 has highlighted a gap in use of technology in neighbourhood planning groups, even in terms of some groups not having the capability to meet virtually to be able to continue their hard work on preparing plans during lockdown.

The level of use of technology envisaged in the White Paper will almost certainly be out of the reach of many of our neighbourhood planning groups, whether due to expertise, technology available, or even the available time of the volunteers who prepare neighbourhood plans. Similarly, the level of use of technology envisaged highlights a gap in the County Council's ability to support such technology. It is likely that specialist IT staff would be required to ensure that such technology can be developed and utilised; the County Council already provides a high level of support to neighbourhood planning groups, but such technical requirements will present further challenges and create new costs.

Consideration should be given to the development of digital engagement systems at a national level that can then be accessed by neighbourhood planning groups. This would allow groups to utilise the technology for their own consultations, but would also need to be accessible by Local Planning Authorities so that they could utilise the same technology and contacts as neighbourhood planning groups to avoid using different communication and consultation methods at the Regulation 16 publicity stage. Critical to the success of introducing new tools is that the government commits to fully funding investment in the provision of appropriate hardware, software and training resources for Local Planning Authorities and for local communities.

The Council supports the development of innovative ways of communicating, engaging and presenting information as a means of expressing and discussing community aspirations through the neighbourhood planning process. However, we do have some concern that the government's fixation about the use of digital technology and its dominance in the agenda being set by government somewhat misses the point about the purpose of planning which is essentially about meeting needs through place shaping in the interests of communities and the local and wider environment. Digital tools may be helpful in some circumstances, but they should be recognised as a tool rather than an end in themselves. Consideration needs to be given to the methods of engagement and skills development to ensure any inequalities are not exacerbated.