

Can Neighbourhood Plans be useful in Estate Regeneration?

Introduction

Planning and development consultants, O'Neill Homer, hosted a discussion in March 2018 seeking to answer this question. The event was arranged by Neighbourhood Planners London, the network of neighbourhood planners in the capital. Ten experienced planners, architects, academics and developers were invited to offer their views on this subject, with the possibility of a follow-up conference being arranged if the network considers this a good idea.

Background

There have been a number of reports published on estate regeneration in England the last five years. A common insight of them all is how important early and sustained engagement with the community is to the success of a project. The London Mayor's recent 'good practice guide to estate regeneration' also proposes that ballots are held to secure community support for projects as a condition of obtaining his financial support.

Yet, none identify neighbourhood plans, or the development planning system more generally, as a means of planning for change on housing estates, although neighbourhood plans already provide a statutory basis for community engagement and for balloting (via a referendum on the final plan), as a unique development planning feature.

It was noted that there are very few examples of neighbourhood plans seeking to tackle estate regeneration. There is one in London – The Carpenters Neighbourhood Plan, which is currently at its draft stage – two made Plans in Milton Keynes (at Woughton and The Lakes) and a small number of others in the West Midlands and Yorkshire. Of these, only The Carpenters and Woughton have sought to address major estate regeneration proposals in a comprehensive way. There is interest in other parts of London in the potential of neighbourhood plans in supporting estate regeneration or in supporting community-led infill development and provision of new homes.

The Discussion

A wide-ranging discussion was had on many aspects of regeneration projects. It included the realities of attitudes towards the term 'estate regeneration', particularly from communities. Calling it something different – 'estate renewal'? - may improve the attitude towards these proposals by acknowledging that redevelopment (with which 'regeneration' has become synonymous) may not be the only viable or necessary option. In addition, the term 'consultation' can be viewed negatively by estate communities, as it has been seen to come too late to make any meaningful difference.

There was an extensive discussion about the economics of estate renewal, both in London and elsewhere in urban England. The group discussed the increasingly difficult politics of such programmes, especially in London, in a post-Grenfell world and in the light of recent decisions to drop projects in Haringey and Hackney. It foresaw a shift away from comprehensive redevelopment schemes to a combination of refurbishment, infill, limited redevelopment and mixed-use proposals emerging, where viable. Some projects may simply be shelved or discarded.

It was also agreed that a focus solely on housing outcomes – divorced from access to local employment opportunities and from the health of local shops and services – would need to change to deliver stronger and better supported projects.

Neighbourhood Plans

The participants were all familiar with neighbourhood plans, to one extent or another, but only a few had practical experience of them. Nonetheless, there were a number of potential barriers to using neighbourhood plans identified:

- setting up a Neighbourhood Forum is a very difficult process from scratch, although existing resident or community groups may be a starting point
- agreeing the neighbourhood area can be problematic as communities define their areas in different ways and some estates are not one single area and may have other housing, retail or other uses in between
- support and encouragement from many local planning authorities is lacking, with some taking many months to make decisions and exerting a strong influence over the process
- neighbourhood planning is not well understood by local communities, with a perception among some that they are very expensive and take too long to make
- the complexities and technical nature of project options are seen as difficult for neighbourhood plans to handle, especially where communities have limited initial capacity to get up to speed and have limited access to their own professional help
- recent high-profile problems have led to a significant breakdown in trust between communities, their LPAs and their landlords, which will be difficult to overcome to the extent that would be necessary to make a successful plan
- the referendum at the very end of the plan process may be too late to secure community support and may require too many project details to be fixed and committed to, that may undermine successful project delivery
- in London, the failure of the Draft London Plan to mention neighbourhood planning may give an impression to communities and LPAs that they are not suited to tackling the capital's planning challenges.

However, if future estate renewal projects do become more focused on more incremental change – infill etc – then the complexity and high stakes features of redevelopment-led projects may make them more suited to neighbourhood plans. In addition, it was agreed that local authorities (with or without their planning functions) will have to be seen to be taking community engagement more seriously, with ballots likely to become the norm. It was also recognised that neighbourhood planning brings advantages in terms of:

- statutory weight in land use and development decision making
- an ability to identify small sites quickly and with community support
- a fresh approach to engaging communities

The particular opportunity of using neighbourhood planning in relation to industrial estates (e.g. Camley Street) was identified as potentially providing helpful experience and precedent.

Conclusions

The overall observation is that although in theory there is a good fit between neighbourhood planning and estate renewal, in practice there are likely to be many barriers.

A number of 'pre-conditions' were identified:

- a clear diagnosis that renewal or regeneration would bring public benefit
- a willing local planning authority and landowners(s)
- capability and resource within the community to establish a forum and define a neighbourhood areas
- practical means for delivering on the ambitions of a neighbourhood plan

In conclusion, given estate renewal is a high-profile issue in London, there may be value in Neighbourhood Planners.London arranging an event to promote the opportunity and to seek wider opinion on the subject from practitioners in its network.

Attendance

Chris Brown, igloo Regeneration

Nicholas Boys Smith, Create Streets

Glyn Tully, Levitt Bernstein

Dave Chetwyn, Urban Vision Enterprise

Professor Anne Power, London School of Economics

Andy Von Bradsky, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

Neil Homer, O'Neill Homer

Henry Peterson, Convener, Neighbourhood Planners.London

Tony Burton, Convener, Neighbourhood Planners.London (Chair)