

The use of direct democracy to decide housing site allocations in English neighbourhoods

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of local referendums to make decisions on housing site allocations in the policy of neighbourhood planning in England. It adopts a constructivist approach to consider housing as an object of contention imbued with political agency. The demonstration of housing allocations as a matter of concern constituted neighbourhood planning as democratic practice and enacted competing publics in the selection of sites for new homes. Housing allocations became an object to be mediated, deliberated over, challenged, mobilised against, and voted on by referendum in an arena of contestation opened up by the neighbourhood plan. Despite the intentions of policy makers, and contrary to the concerns of scholars, decisions about housing allocations remained politically contentious in neighbourhood planning. The paper points to the productive effect of material attachments and the expansive character of direct democracy in generating ongoing political conflict.

Keywords

House building, referendums, neighbourhood planning, democracy, participation

Introduction

This paper discusses the use of direct democracy to help decide the location of new housing in England. It reports on a suite of participatory practices known as neighbourhood planning that devolved decisions on housing allocations to local popular referendum. An investigation into the democratic practices of neighbourhood planning addresses persistent concerns that the extension of public participation and non-elected governance diminish the scope for political contention at local as well as international scales. Particular disquiet has attached to the tendency for individual attachments to circumvent democratic decision making in questions of housing supply.

Normative accounts of public participation in neighbourhood planning have focused on procedural standards and democratic principles. Scholars have been concerned to identify good practice in planning participation (Croft, Loveday, Johnson & Reeves, 2016; Parker, Lynn & Wargent, 2015; Sturzaker & Shaw, 2015), and have evaluated the legitimacy of representative practices (Bishop, 2011; Brookfield, 2017; Davoudi & Cowie, 2013) or the contribution to 'better' planning (Brown & Weichin, 2013; Parker, Lynn & Wargent, 2017; Sturzaker & Gordon, 2017; Vigar, Gunn & Brooks, 2017). Rather than focus on pre-given models of what constitutes democratic practice this paper is concerned with the situated performance of participation and its productive effects. It adopts a constructivist approach to explore the enactment of democracy in neighbourhood planning as it emerges in the identification of collectives and collective problems (Chilvers & Longhurst, 2016).

The paper understands the democratic practices of neighbourhood planning as emergent phenomena through which issues, publics and participatory procedures are actively constructed (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016b). It draws from material perspectives on participation to consider house-building and housing site allocations as objects of contention that are imbued with moral and political values (Latour, 2005a; Marres, 2007; Marres & Lezaun, 2011). The demonstration of housing allocations as a public problem constituted much of the democratic content of

neighbourhood planning (Barry, 2001). The issue of house building was opened up to political scrutiny as something intrinsic to the constitution of the social. Questions of affordability, delivery and local need vied for popular attention with the assertion of private interests as matters of public concern. Housing allocations became an object to be mediated, deliberated over, challenged, mobilised against, and voted on by referendum in an arena of contestation opened up by the neighbourhood plan. The paper analyses these themes through case studies drawn from a national programme of research with neighbourhood planning groups carried out by the author between 2012 and 2017. It concludes that, despite the intentions of the policy, and contrary to the concerns of planning scholarship, neighbourhood decisions about housing allocations have remained politically contentious. In rendering house building an issue of democratic debate, neighbourhood planning expanded the space of public scrutiny, evoking new political identities and a heightened sense of political efficacy.

The paper begins with a discussion of the political context for participation and public engagement in planning and introduces a new framework to analyse the democratic practices of neighbourhood plans. In the next section it reviews the literature on housing allocations in neighbourhood planning and then introduces the research questions and methodology. In the three sections that follow the paper explores the trajectory of democratic practice in the allocation of housing sites, analysing the mediation of housing as a public problem, the technologies adopted to assemble publics around housing allocations, and the transformation of interests and the mobilisation of new preferences in the referendum campaigns. The paper concludes with an assessment of the impact of direct democracy on deepening political contestation over the location of new housing.

Democratic legitimacy and public participation

The assiduous adoption of methodologies of participation by governments and international institutions of governance has been widely perceived as a response to

a crisis of legitimacy in representative democracies. Formal processes of delegation and electoral accountability are seen as insufficient for the construction of a democratic society. The increasing popularity of direct democracy and the expansion of referendums beyond their traditional national boundaries appear to evidence growing dissatisfaction with parliamentary representation (della Porta et al 2017). Participatory theory envisions the maximum participation of citizens in their own governance, especially in sectors of society beyond those that are traditionally understood to be political (della Porta 2013; Pateman 1970). By taking part in decisions directly, people are expected to acquire political competencies and experience a heightened sense of political efficacy and empowerment (Held 2006; Hilmer 2010). This is a theory of democratisation; of the extension of democracy into civil society, into the economy and into the neighbourhood.

Participatory theory is associated with the pursuit of political equality as a 'process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions' (Pateman 1970: 71). In practice, the resource inequality intrinsic to the operation of market societies presents an almost insurmountable obstacle to attempts to achieve political justice through the direct popular representation of interests (Dahl, 1998; Freeman, 1970; Mansbridge, 1973). The political ubiquity of public participation has transposed the legitimacy concerns of representative democracies onto the new publics convened by engagement strategies and empowered by the political rhetoric of localism. The absence of traditional procedures of authorisation and accountability has provoked criticism that participatory initiatives are open to capture by private interests, and that participants are drawn inequitably from those with existing attachments and the means to influence decision making. Lacking any basis in formal representation, and replete with illegitimate attachments to material interests, the rise of public participation and the spread of referendums are cited as evidence of the shrinkage of the space of democratic contention (Davoudi & Mandanipour, 2015). This is a critique directed specifically at state strategies of localism that, like neighbourhood planning in England, are understood to conjure the 'community' as a territory of

innate consensus, characterised by the belief that political issues are amenable to 'common sense' solutions (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013; Featherstone *et al*, 2012).

Planning has a long association with public participation and an equally long established concern with the political legitimacy of the views expressed in its decision making processes. The search for an 'innocent public' (Irwin, 2006: 315), one that is not attuned to matters of political contention, or prone to capture by material interests, provides the rationale for the continuing dominance of planning professionals in orchestrating the mechanisms of participation. The notion that a public exists out there 'in a natural state waiting to be discovered' (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016a: 4), justifies a preoccupation with methodologies of engagement that have improvements in plan-making as their required outcome. The aim of participation is not necessarily to democratise planning decisions but to increase the range of public information that can be harvested by the planners (Fainstein, 2000; Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002).

The assumption widely shared in the planning profession is that citizens, particularly those objecting to new housing supply, act as self-interested individuals. They lack legitimacy because they express their own attachments and not wider social concerns. A quasi-scientific and derogatory nomenclature that arose in the US planning literature has popularised acronyms, such as NIMBY (not in my back yard) to condemn the participation of citizens as selfish and materialistic (Dear & Taylor, 1982; Dear, 1992; DeVerteuil, 2013). The protection of existing property values from erosion by unwelcome development appears in this literature as the prime motive for public engagement in planning decisions, and finds its exemplar in resident opposition to housing growth. Set against the evidence of societal need for increased housing supply, resident objections to the allocation of sites for new homes in their community can be readily decried as the intrusion of private interests into public decision making (Sturzaker & Shucksmith, 2011; Taylor, Cook & Hurley, 2016; Taylor, 2013). Other studies of public opposition to new house building have argued that objectors often position their challenge to housing in the context of democratic

rights to be included in decisions over neighbourhood change (Cook, Taylor & Hurley, 2013; Matthews, Bramley & Hastings, 2015; Wolsink, 2006). Their objections are framed on environmental, ecological and heritage grounds and they claim to speak for a manifestation of the public and to articulate public interests as 'protectors of the collective good' (Ruming, Houston & Amati, 2012: 427). These studies cast housing objectors as representatives, speaking for, and acting for the wishes of communities (Pitkin, 1967). They suggest the presence of a stable referent; a community with political and social aspirations that can be represented (Lezaun & Soneryd, 2007), and they significantly underplay the importance of individual attachments in democratic practice. Participation cannot be isolated from the issues at stake (Marres, 2005).

In her influential work *'Can the subaltern speak?'*, the post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988: 276) pointed to the distinction between representation as proxy, and representation as an act of signification. A definition of political representation as 'acting for' or 'standing for' ignores 'the constitutive dimension of representation' (Saward, 2010: 9). The idea of a constituency that can be spoken for, and a set of interests that can be represented, is a performative enactment of a specific public that accords it voice, needs and preferences. With a reference to the science laboratory, Bruno Latour (2005a: 16) describes the act of representation as a demonstration of 'an object of concern to the eyes and ears of those who have been assembled around it'. A demonstration can be a political protest or, in its scientific and technical definition, the exposition of an object and a display of its possibilities; a demonstration of what can or might be done (Barry, 2001). Participatory democracy theorist John Dewey's (1927) contention that issues call publics into being is helpful here. The individual attachments, preferences and interests that instigate controversy mobilise publics and propagate public participation (Marres, 2005). Publics are performed through the act of representation, which is better understood as the demonstration of an issue and what might be done about it. It is the issues, and particularly the material attachments of citizens to those issues, that drive democratic practice. Divisive issues – matters of concern, as Latour (2005a: 23)

called them – are at the root of democracy; they call out for debate and contestation.

This performative perspective on participation in planning directs attention to the issues of house building as constitutive of publics and democratic practices (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016b). The next section begins to explore this idea of the performative as it applies to the housing policies of neighbourhood planning.

Neighbourhood planning, democracy and housing

The principal government objective for the policy of neighbourhood planning was to increase the rate of house-building. It was anticipated that allowing residents to formulate a spatial strategy for their neighbourhood would render them more likely to accept new housing (DCLG, 2011; Stanier, 2014). The policy incentives were reinforced by a strong regulatory framework that promoted housing growth. Neighbourhood plans were introduced as part of a new National Planning Policy Framework that made local authorities responsible for providing five years' worth of specific, developable housing sites and identifying broad locations for new housing up to nine years ahead. Neighbourhood plans had to be in general conformity with these strategic policies and 'plan positively to support local development' especially housing development (DCLG, 2012, Paragraphs 15-16). They could not promote less development than stipulated in the Local Plan or undermine its strategic policies.

The legislation established in 2011 allowed existing Town or Parish Councils to make a neighbourhood plan and for community groups in urban areas to establish a Neighbourhood Forum with statutory plan-making powers (Bradley 2015; Wills, 2016). To win community support, the neighbourhood plan must be approved in a local referendum and receive more than 50 per cent of the vote of those registered and taking part in the ballot. Once approved in referendum, the neighbourhood plan became part of statutory development policy and was used to help determine

planning applications in the locality. The political rhetoric that accompanied the launch of neighbourhood planning stressed its democratic credentials. The aim was to engage citizens not only in decisions over land-use planning but in renewed participation in the democratic process (DCLG, 2011). The policy of neighbourhood planning was described as a fundamental change in the architecture of planning signalling a return to notions of citizen control popularised by Sherry Arnstein (1969) in her emblematic ladder of participation (Bradley & Brownill 2017; Brownill & Downing 2013).

The regulatory framework for neighbourhood planning made no explicit reference to participatory democracy, and it asked nothing more from neighbourhood groups than the production of a community engagement strategy and a response to two periods of statutory consultation (Sturzaker & Gordon, 2017). It was the requirement for the neighbourhood plan to secure majority support from those taking part in a local referendum that provided an endpoint in direct democracy and introduced a form of 'anticipatory representation' (Mansbridge 2003). Those leading the neighbourhood plan needed to anticipate and address the preferences voters might express in the referendum and seek to assemble consensus or at least majority consent through participatory strategies (Wendling 1997). This was especially true when considering neighbourhood planning policies that might prove contentious, such as the allocation of sites for new housing. Referendums on neighbourhood plans consistently registered very high levels of support among those taking part with an average voter turnout of approximately 33 per cent (Parker & Wargent, 2017). Research on referendums suggests that the presence of direct democracy makes policy more responsive to public opinion (Lupia & Matsusaka 2004), and it points to the importance of the referendum campaign in mobilising support for arguments and breaking with pre-existing alignments. Referendum campaigns are often influenced by contingent events and issues; they can be moments of opinion formation and the creation of new allegiances (della Porta et al 2017). Accounts of referendums on national or regional independence questions contend that the impending ballot triggers deliberation and an expansion of political engagement

(Qvortrup 2015). In deliberation, it is expected that individual preferences will be transformed by exposure to the point of view of others (Dryzek 2000). During the Scottish referendum campaign in 2014, Tierney (2015: 226) claimed that people 'engaged vociferously with one another at home, in the workplace, in public spaces and...on social media'. This was a form of deliberation that was 'more rowdy, disorderly and decentred' than the consensual communication more usually imagined (Young 2001: 688), and it points to debate and argumentation as formative of divergent preferences and social conflicts (Mansbridge 1996).

By the end of 2017, five years after the launch of the policy, 2,183 neighbourhood plans were under production, while 337 had been successful at referendum and become part of the statutory planning framework covering 15 per cent of England (Parker & Salter, 2016). Over half of all neighbourhood plans allocated specific sites for house building and all set out particular policies regulating the affordability, size, mix and design of new housing (Bailey 2017). Neighbourhood planning was lauded by government for increasing the amount of land allocated for new homes, although the research base for this claim was limited (Mountain, 2015). The plans published by neighbourhoods, and successful at referendum, represent a particular approach to the problem of housing supply. In their support for housing growth, they are concerned to deliver affordable homes to meet local housing need and often promote community land trusts that lock-in affordability for the future. They favour resident-led approaches to housing supply such as custom-build and are often explicitly opposed to the speculative model of volume house-building that dominates the UK development industry. In the selection of specific sites for housing, neighbourhood plans have prioritised brownfield, or previously developed, land; they require developers to respect the character and distinctiveness of the neighbourhood, and promote sites that appear tailored to the preferences of small and medium sized building companies rather than the volume builders (Bradley & Sparling 2016). These housing plans are rationalised in assertions of local democracy and place identity and referenced to characterisations of the neighbourhood expressed in community engagement (Bradley 2017; Field & Layard 2017).

The democratic practices of neighbourhood planning can be understood as a demonstration of housing supply as an object of public concern, and as the practical demonstration of possible resolutions to that concern (Barry 2001). The development pressures on land mediated by strategic planning policies and articulated by the house building industry, combine to invest the question of new housing with considerable political capacity. The production of a neighbourhood plan for housing site allocations can be conceived as an attempt to resolve the housing question through a specific mobilisation of a democratic public. The intention of the plan is to render the object of housing an expression of public cohesion rather than dissension. Latour (2005a: 14) explains: 'We might be more connected to each other by our worries, our matters of concern, the issues we care for, than by any other set of values, opinions, attitudes or principles.' In demonstrating a potential resolution to the issue of housing allocations the plan aims to bring a public into being around housing as an object of debate, by the participatory practices of that debate (Marres, 2007). The next section establishes a research framework to explore this argument through an analysis of housing site allocations in neighbourhood plans.

Researching democratic practice in neighbourhood planning

The democratic practices of neighbourhood planning involve the articulation of housing supply as a political object and of the neighbourhood as a political public. These participatory processes can be analysed across two fields of research: the association and the assembly (della Porta, 2013). The association is the neighbourhood planning group itself, usually a committee made up of volunteers and appointees, which devolves tasks to working groups, and might appoint a consultant or editorial team to write planning policy. The objects of investigation in the democratic practices of the association are the construction of claims of meaning around the issue of housing allocations, the public and its attachments; the demonstration of potential resolutions to the issues of concern; and the articulation

of a cohesive identity that combines neighbourhood and housing in one stable referent (Lezaun & Soneryd, 2007). The assembly denotes the wider participative field and includes all those who engage in consultative events, surveys and other opportunities to comment on the neighbourhood plan, anyone who communicates their opinions of the plan, and everyone who takes part in the final referendum. The assembly is the imagined constituency, the subject of representative claims and a space of counter-identities. Assembling a public demands action from its constituents; they are convened in consultation and actively conjured as individuals and collectives with interests and preferences. This is a work of cohesion that is just as likely to generate social difference. The objects of investigation here are the interests and attachments that are expressed, negotiated and transformed in a referendum campaign (Benhabib, 1996; Young, 2001). Neighbourhood plans that identify sites for housing risk generating new preferences that assume collective form through the mobilising effect of the referendum (Qvortrup, 2005). The requirement for a plan to secure a majority vote through direct democracy introduces uncertainty and suggests the potential for neighbourhood planning to become an expansive democratic practice (Garcia-Espin *et al*, 2017; Pateman, 1970).

The research framework for this paper is structured around three questions distilled from the argument outlined in the preceding section:

- How are housing allocations produced as an object of public concern in neighbourhood plans? This question addresses the demonstration of housing supply as a public issue, and the mediation or representation of a public through the neighbourhood plan. It provides the context for research into the association, or neighbourhood planning group, and its construction of the neighbourhood as a sphere of democratic practice.
- How is a public constituted around its concern for housing site allocations in the neighbourhood plan? This question addresses the relationship between the association and the assembly and the demonstration in the neighbourhood plan of potential resolutions to issues of housing supply. It investigates the practices

used to stabilise the problem of housing and convene a collective identity around which the problem of housing can be resolved.

- To what extent does the resolution of housing allocations as an issue of concern generate new articulations of public interest, resistance and difference? This question examines public responses to the demonstration of housing solutions in the neighbourhood plan. Its focus is on the assembly, and how publics responded to identity formations, and it seeks to identify the mobilisation of new interests in the referendum campaign.

The data for this paper comes from a programme of field research carried out with 300 participants in 40 neighbourhood planning groups through focus groups and interviews between 2012 and 2016 (Author, 2018). In addition, a desk top analysis was undertaken of 181 neighbourhood plans that were successful at referendum between May 2016 and May 2017. This analysis entailed the scrutiny of statutory statements of community engagement, draft neighbourhood plans, reports from independent examiners, the referendum version of the neighbourhood plan, and details of referendum results compiled by the local authorities. Media and social media reports of the referendums were also studied for these plans. The findings from this research were coded according to the three questions above and contextualised with reference to the peer reviewed literature on the decision-making practices of neighbourhood planning. Specific case studies are presented from this sample to provide situated examples of the range of democratic practices evident among neighbourhood planning groups. The plans selected for analysis are those that allocated sites for new housing and were approved at referendum. Case studies include plans whose housing allocations were challenged in legal action, and were subsequently written into case law, and those that received significantly above average, and below average participation in referendums. This selection enables the mechanisms of collective sense-making and popular mobilisation to be analysed and vividly presented. It provides a study of the democratisation of planning for housing supply that evidences its situated practice, the political constructions that were articulated and the oppositions and contentions that emerged.

The demonstration of housing as a matter of public concern

‘We realised that there were quite a number of land sites that had been put forward for housing in our village. Nearly every resident within the village was going to be affected by one or more of these sites and if all the sites were developed, it would double the size of the village, so there was great concern about this. People were collectively emotive about not wanting this development’. The speaker is the chair of a neighbourhood planning group in Linton, a small village of 270 houses in West Yorkshire. In her narrative it was the proximity and potential impact of housing sites on each resident that assembled a public as an ‘emotive collective’, displaying ‘great concern’ about a threat to village identity.

In his introduction to actor-network theory, Bruno Latour (2005b: 63) suggests that objects have agency. They can authorise, allow, afford and encourage. This is what Judith Butler called a performative agency. It works through others to bring into being certain kinds of realities (Butler, 2010). In neighbourhood planning, house building always has a specific agency. It is conceived of as a hostile force; it acts for the speculative building companies (Bradley & Sparling, 2017). The direction of housing agency is towards green fields. Its assumed form is as large uniform estates that render places indistinguishable and faceless. The decision to assemble a public around a neighbourhood plan, rather than around a campaign of resistance to house building signals that it is feasible to conceive that the agency of housing supply can be changed or redirected. Housing can be separated from its figuration as ‘uniform estates’ and translated into an object that can contribute more beneficially to the village.

The demonstration of house building as a matter of concern also assembles a strong-willed public with its own views on the agency of new housing and its location. The

neighbourhood plan for the parish of Tattenhall, a village of around 1000 homes in rural Cheshire, demonstrated the threat of housing supply in 'the addition of characterless estates on the rural fringes of the village' and asserted that 'future growth based on large scale inappropriate development will not be supported by the community' (Tattenhall & District, 2013: p.10). The Tattenhall neighbourhood plan reminded its public that 'the community of Tattenhall has a strong history of taking local decision-making into its own hands' (Tattenhall & District, 2013: p.6), and it set out policies on housing supply that would allow 'a vibrant and distinctive village to evolve and expand whilst retaining its unique character' (Tattenhall & District, 2013: p.8). The plan was successful at referendum in September 2013 on a convincing 52 per cent turnout.

House building in the form of second homes and holiday homes exercised particular agency in the neighbourhood plan of St. Ives, a globally recognised holiday destination in Cornwall, with a population of 11,000 and tens of thousands of visitors every year. With external demand driving average house prices up 17 times the average local salary, the agency of house building enacted an insider / outsider divide in the St Ives neighbourhood plan to establish a public with local rights and responsibilities. In its introduction to the plan the town council explained that it held 'a great responsibility to protect an internationally renowned asset' (St Ives Town Council, 2015: p.12). St Ives 'needed to be nurtured, protected and guided into the future' and 'the best people to do this are those who live here' (St Ives Town Council, 2015: p.3). This task of stewardship provided the rationale for housing policy interventions that introduced restrictions on all new-build to ensure homes could only be used as the owner's primary residence. The agency of housing manifested a residential public with a duty of care for St. Ives. Their housing policies were approved at referendum and subsequently upheld in the High Court where a challenge from local property agents was unsuccessful.

In these case studies, the neighbourhood plan made housing a participant in the construction of a neighbourhood identity. Housing was rendered a public issue and

in turn it rendered a public with the potential to act collectively. This act of publicity was an inauguration of a neighbourhood as an 'object-oriented democracy' (Latour 2005a: 16). The neighbourhood was conceived as a polity where the divisive matter of housing could be debated and resolved. Its public was attributed a tradition of self-governance and responsibilities to provide sound guidance and stewardship. Neighbourhood planning offered a social performance of house building in which an issue of concern could be significantly reshaped, and through which housing as an object could actively participate in the production of the social, or in democracy itself.

This argument can be explored further through an interview with the secretary of a neighbourhood planning group in the former mining village of Kippax, a settlement of 21,000 people near Leeds. He reflected: 'I think the impetus was not that we were concerned about housing development but that we could put ourselves in a position where we could have some control over housing development.' The neighbourhood plan carried a charge of efficacy, or an enhanced capacity for decision-taking. The demonstration of housing as a matter of public concern was a demonstration of a collective ability to resolve it. Resolution of the concern would allow the neighbourhood to take 'control of their own destiny' (East Bergholt Parish Council, 2016: 7) through 'grass-roots democracy in action' (Sherborne St. John Parish Council, 2017: 2). The occurrence of a combative 'democracy talk' was common in the pages of neighbourhood plans and their consultation statements, as a public was manifested around its newly discovered efficacy. The neighbourhood was conceived in its housing concern as a democratic public, and becoming a public meant being able to make decisions; 'to assert a voice' (quoted in Parker, Lynn, Wargent & Locality, 2014: 91).

A neighbourhood collective that exhibited the efficacy of self-governance was brought into being by the demonstration of housing as an issue of concern. Acceptance of the neighbourhood plan would be through direct voting at a referendum, and the democratic practices of neighbourhood plan-making can be

distinguished by the extent to which alternative collectives emerge and a degree of unpredictability enters the process. The identity work done to establish a stable public is the topic of the following section.

Housing allocations and stable publics

A neighbourhood plan presented potential resolutions to the problem of housing by first defining a neighbourhood or community identity in which housing, in a particular location, or in a specific form, would find acceptance (Bradley, 2017). The collective identity set out in the neighbourhood plan was assembled by task groups, and scripted often by planning consultants, but its components were collected from a range of public engagement and participation practices. Detailed accounts of the processes of plan-making in steering groups have been provided (Brookfield, 2017; McGuinness & Ludwig, 2017; Sturzacker & Shaw, 2015; Vigar, Gunn & Brooks, 2017) and methods of engagement, some of them innovations in planning participation, have been itemised (Croft et al, 2016). These engagement methods required the assemblage of a collective subjectivity that could deliberate on and accede to housing solutions. The housing question would be settled through the allocation of specific sites and not others for the location of new build, by setting boundaries to limit the scope of development, and by regulating the design, mix, and affordability of homes to be supplied. Housing, it was to be demonstrated, could be modified so that it was no longer a threat but a solution: an integral component in the evolution of a community identity and an attribute to the assemblage of a neighbourhood. Individuals were expected to consider more than their own interests, and to follow normative principles to agree what was best for the neighbourhood. Three technologies of enrolment were used by neighbourhood planning steering groups to displace individual interests and translate preferences into a collective identity that would suture conflicts and resolve contentions.

The first was a technology of elicitation framed to extract opinion that supported the goal of plan-making while maintaining the stability of a known public. The aim was to reduce opportunities for dissension on the issue of housing supply by narrowing engagement to selected groups and limiting the occasions of public assembly. This approach was enacted most often in neighbourhood plans conducted by formal institutions of governance, the town and parish councils whose claim to local knowledge born of residence deeded them a portrait of the neighbourhood as a knowable public with knowable concerns (Houtzager & Lavallo, 2010). Maintaining stability meant eliciting the views of that public while preventing it from 'rising to the status of a "collective"' (Lezaun, 2007:130), whose unpredictability might overspill into new preferences over housing supply (Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe, 2011).

The steering group leading the neighbourhood plan for Uttoxeter, a town of 9000 in East Staffordshire, was made up of '15 local people who have volunteered their time and experience... Many of the steering group have lived in the town for many years. They include members of the Town Council, members of local groups and organisations and local residents.' (Uttoxeter Town Council, 2016: 2). Community engagement in the neighbourhood plan was conducted through meetings with selected local groups. Only two public exhibition events were held, attended by a total of 42 people and 18 feedback forms were returned. In comparison a petition started by a campaign group dedicated to the protection of Uttoxeter green spaces from housing development received over 3000 signatures from residents. The technology of elicitation served to refresh a claim to knowledge and the right to govern, but its failure to excite a public around housing allocations resulted in a lack of public interest in the referendum. The turnout in the referendum for the Uttoxeter Neighbourhood Plan was a low 18 per cent.

Where the claim to democratic representation by a neighbourhood planning group was founded on proximity or 'nearness' (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001), conflict over housing that overspilled the process of decision making could contaminate the daily encounters and routines of everyday life (Vigar, Gunn and Brooks, 2017). The second

technology, one of deliberative consensus, was applied in smaller neighbourhoods to reduce the likelihood of this outcome. This translated individual interests through a number of 'obligatory passage points' to ensure their agreement with the solution offered (Callon, 1986: 196). In the neighbourhood plan for St Minver, a parish in Cornwall of 2,400 residents, the results of data collection and analysis from community engagement were re-presented to public deliberation as a progression of events to build consensus around the allocation of two new housing sites. An initial series of public consultation meetings was attended by over 100 people and findings from these events were reported to a second public assembly. A questionnaire received 782 responses, and this was followed by a third consultation event to present the results. Another survey set out the proposals for housing development sites and a fourth public assembly attended by 200 people 'facilitated a good debate' leading to changes to the number and size of the housing site allocations in the neighbourhood plan (St. Minver Parishes, 2017: 6). The St. Minver referendum registered a voter turnout of 51 per cent, and the result, with 82 per cent in favour of the neighbourhood plan and its housing sites, and 19 per cent against, demonstrated both the pursuit of consensus and the continuing articulation of dissent.

The third, a majoritarian technology of enrolment deployed a narrative of democratic legitimacy that displaced the interests of participants through the promise of fairness in decision-making process, if not in outcome. It obliged participants to accept majority decisions, having already conducted them into the pre-conditions of a collective identity. In the neighbourhood plan for Chelveston-cum-Caldecott, a parish of only 566 people in East Northamptonshire, a 2-day exhibition of housing site proposals, attended by 94 out of a total of 225 households in the parish, was followed by six consultation events held to review each of the housing sites in depth. Residents were then asked to vote for the housing sites they supported in a poll; the clerk of the Parish Council acting as returning officer and 82 per cent of households participating. Seven propositions secured majority support in this way and were incorporated as housing sites into the neighbourhood plan

(Chelveston-cum-Caldecott Parish Council, 2016). The referendum in 2017 registered a turnout of 55 per cent of electors, with an 88 per cent vote in favour of the final plan.

In these three technologies of enrolment, a settlement of the problem of housing allocations was intended to enact a unitary constituency, the public as stable referent. These democratic practices brought housing into the collective identity they constructed; they made it a member of the neighbourhood. In other words the resolution of the problem of housing is to make housing neighbourly, and as a new neighbour housing makes its own associations that cannot be cocooned in a collective settlement. The potential for alternative publics, new attachments and preferences to arise from the direct democracy of neighbourhood planning is the subject of the next section.

Plural publics and their housing issues

The democratic processes enlisted to resolve housing allocations in neighbourhood plans are 'multiply productive' (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016b: 40). The deliberation, mediation and aggregation that enact a stable referent also provide opportunities for participants to rescript the terms of the settlement, and to demonstrate in their turn new attachments to housing as an object of concern (Marres, 2007). With its promise of individual choice the referendum overshadows attempts to mediate the acceptance of housing allocations, and offers a deliberative alternative to the managed participation strategies of neighbourhood plan steering groups. It is the effect of deliberation to reveal conflicts obscured by the claim of common cause (Young, 2000: 118). Interests cannot always be reconciled and the referendum exposes the contention that escapes agreement and prepares the ground for contest (Mansbridge, 1996; Young, 2001). The referendum campaign gives legitimacy to individual attachments and offers technologies of enrolment to all, potentially enabling different publics to assemble and articulate their preferences (Qvortrup, 2005).

The emergence of conflict over housing site allocations in neighbourhood plan referendums has been identified in the literature and presented in normative terms as a failure of the democratisation of planning (Lord, Mair, Sturzaker & Jones, 2017; Sturzaker & Gordon, 2017). In one of the first referendums to take place in neighbourhood planning, in Thame, a town of 11,000 people in South Oxfordshire, a campaign emerged in opposition to the allocation of housing sites. 'Objections were made at the hearing, letters were written to the local press and calls were also made to reopen the referendum in attempts to overturn these allocations' (Brownill, 2017: 157). In the most recent neighbourhood plan referendum at time of writing, in Holbeck, Leeds, an inner city community of 5000 people, a local nationalist group campaigned vociferously for a 'no' vote (Leeds City Council, 2018). The expansive character of direct democratic practices in neighbourhood planning is ably illustrated in the following case study.

The neighbourhood plan for the village of Overton, with a population of 4,315, near Basingstoke in Hampshire, was launched in 2014 with a series of public assemblies attracting over 300 people, and 600 returned questionnaires. Two exhibitions were held to demonstrate proposals for housing site allocations to accommodate the minimum 150 homes required by planning policy. Nearly 250 people attended and were asked by the organisers to choose the criteria for the selection of final housing sites. This selection 'confirmed that residents placed the highest value on small sites phased over the plan period and choosing sites with the least possible adverse impact on the landscape' (Overton Parish Council, 2015: 9). The allocation of housing sites also had to meet legal requirements for viability and sustainability to ensure the selection would withstand external examination and challenge by developers (Bradley 2018; Parker, Lynn & Wargent, 2017). In this screening process, 'it was not possible to satisfy the public preference for small sites entirely' (Overton Parish Council, 2015: 9). A further Site Selection Open Day in early 2015 was attended by over 400 residents who were asked to review three combinations, or 'scenarios' of housing sites, and rank them in order of preference. Scenario A with four housing

sites was put forward in the draft plan which was then presented for statutory pre-submission consultation.

Housing policies in the Overton plan prioritised local need, a mix of dwelling types and affordability, and attempted to influence the quality, scale and phasing of development. They were, therefore, typical of the particular approach to housing supply taken by neighbourhood plans. The statutory consultation on the pre-submission plan received 263 written responses from residents with 205 in full support. Acting on feedback the steering group made 14 changes to the wording of policies and removed two small sites from the plan following objections from people living nearby, but complaints about two large sites in Scenario A were not upheld since they were judged to be expressions of individual material interest (Overton Parish Council, 2015).

During the referendum campaign in 2016, a *Vote No to Overton Neighbourhood Plan* group emerged in protest against the inclusion of housing sites that would make the village 'a Basingstoke suburb' (comment in Yes4Overton, 2016). The campaign group argued that there had been no opportunity to raise objections to the housing sites and suggested the plan would lead to unwanted housing growth. Further concerns were raised in a leaflet titled *Overton Neighbourhood Plan Reality Check*, prompting written corrections by Basingstoke and Deane planning authority. A *Yes for Overton* campaign issued a counter leaflet and this also drew a formal response. Specifically the local authority pointed out that a petition against the inclusion of one housing site signed by 249 residents had not been included in the count of written objections to the neighbourhood plan, and had not resulted in any revisions to the allocated sites (Basingstoke and Dean Borough Council, 2015). The turnout for Overton neighbourhood plan referendum, which coincided with the vote on the UK leaving the European Union, was the highest in the country with 71 per cent of the electorate, over 2000 people, voting; the narrow majority in favour of the plan was 53 per cent (Geoghegan, 2016). A local councillor commented: 'The whole subject of

housing is emotive, but I don't want to see my community divided, neighbour against neighbour, as they have been' (quoted in Wilson, 2016).

This case study has been included at length to demonstrate the 'comprehensive' engagement in the Overton neighbourhood planning process and the proliferation of democratic practices that resulted (McGurk, 2015: 12). The final choice of housing sites was framed by the constraints of national planning policy and, once the question of site allocation was deemed settled, the steering group believed it could close off debate to enact a consensual collective and safely marginalise those whose continuing opposition was motivated only by material interest. Democratic debate overflowed into the referendum campaign as those individuals expressing personal preferences over the choice of housing sites endeavoured to marshal support and perform their own Overton public. It is worth noting that almost four times as many residents took part in the direct democracy of the referendum than participated in the earlier consultations, and that, while 249 people initially signed a petition against the housing sites, nearly 1000 opposed the sites at the ballot box. This suggests the mobilisation of support by those with direct attachments to the issues and the formation of new preferences in the referendum campaign. The democratic practices of this neighbourhood plan were actively performed through the allocation of housing sites, and the agency of housing expanded the boundaries of public participation, enacting conflicting publics and engendering lasting antagonism. The neighbourhood plan became a demonstration of housing as an object of democratisation, widening political space as publics mobilised in conflict and resolution.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the decision making practices of neighbourhood plans in the allocation of sites for new housing. Scholarly discussion of neighbourhood planning, and of public participation in matters of housing supply, has been critical of the

articulation of individual attachments and their potential to circumvent the legitimacy of democratic decision making. This paper eschewed a normative approach to investigate the situated practices of participation in neighbourhood plans and it applied a performative perspective to consider attachments, or matters of concern, as central to the democratic process. The paper argued that neighbourhood planning could be understood as a demonstration of housing as an object of public concern, and as the practical demonstration of possible resolutions to that concern.

Neighbourhood planning opened up the matter of housing to public debate and constructed a democratic polity around the question of housing supply, site allocations and possible resolutions. The paper evidenced the democracy talk that accrued to neighbourhood plans around the identification of housing as a matter of public concern. It identified three technologies of enrolment applied to construct the neighbourhood as a stable referent around collective decisions on site allocations. Individual attachments acquired a particular legitimacy during the referendum campaign with opportunities for argumentation over housing site allocations. The issues could generate considerable conflict with publics mobilised in support or opposition, resulting in deliberation and new preference formation.

There is little evidence from this research to suggest that the issue of housing allocations has become any less contentious following the localisation of decision-making to neighbourhoods. Despite concerns that public participation in housing allocations would reduce the opportunities for democratic debate, experimentation with collective decision-making in neighbourhood planning manifests negotiation, arguments, rival publics, and lasting antagonism.

Individual attachments are central to the democratic practices of neighbourhood planning. The demonstration of housing problems assembles a public mobilised by its attachment to those issues. Housing is a matter that calls for debate and around that debate the idea of a democratic neighbourhood is enrolled. Individual concerns

overspill from this settlement and the referendum campaign transforms private attachments into public issues to stimulate ongoing political contention over house building. The use of direct democracy to allocate housing sites in neighbourhood planning evidences the productive effect of individual attachments in opening political space and driving the democratisation of planning.

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