

GLA Review of Community Involvement in Planning in London 2011

This is a response to the GLA Review from:
Eileen Conn MA (Oxon), FRSA, MBE
email: e.conn@nutbrook.demon.co.uk
Living Systems Research
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Question 5: What do you do in your area/group/organisation to get involved in the planning system?

Local involvement:

- As an active resident, I take an interest in planning matters at my own neighbourhood level, at town centre level, and at borough level, and disseminate information I discover to residents and traders who have registered with my network information system: the Peckham Residents Network. This covers development control, planning applications and planning enforcement, and also planning policy developments, ie through the UDP and now LDF and Area Action Plans. My aim is to nurture an expanding horizontal network of local people who are informed about matters of collective interest locally, and how those matters inter-relate. Planning, along with traffic and environmental matters, are some of the main topics amongst these.
- I disseminate the information by a variety of events, and by email, and websites:
Residents Network: <http://peckhamresidents.wordpress.com/>
Local rail services: <http://www.southwarkrailusers.net>
Peckham town centre: <http://www.peckhamvision.org>
Bellenden neighbourhood: <http://www.bellenden.net>
- I take initiatives to stimulate local conversations at various levels to develop our own local ideas about what we like about our neighbourhood and what we want changed, and present this where opportunities arise to council officers and local councillors so that they are informed also, and can become engaged in the collaborative conversation. Some of these activities can be seen through the information on the websites.
- I am working also with other active residents in the borough to develop the evolving Southwark Planning Network, which brings together active residents from across the borough to share planning experience and give each other mutual peer support.

Dynamics of communities and interactions with public agencies:

- I have a long standing interest in studying the dynamics of communities and their interactions with public agencies. My conclusion from that, coupled with my detailed experience as an active resident, is that the voluntary sector and the community sector are wrongly taken as one entity or system. As a result some very different characteristics and dynamics of the community sector, which are beyond the radar of main policy and programmes, are missed altogether.
- I have developed an approach which is expressed in my model '*Community Engagement in the Social Eco-System Dance*' to help illuminate some of what is missing. My paper on this can be found at the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) website <http://tinyurl.com/social-eco-system-dance> where the aim is to stimulate discussion of new ways of thinking about this level of community activity and engagement with the organised world, and how to realise its potential. A key point is that the organised transactional world (the *vertical hierarchical*) and the informal relational world (the *horizontal peer*) are very different.
- These innate and natural differences have given rise to significantly different organisational and systems' structures and behaviours relating to collective endeavour in the two different worlds. The voluntary sector is primarily a *vertical hierarchical* sub-system, and the community sector is primarily a *horizontal peer* sub-system. Most of the *horizontal peer* activity is 'beyond or below the policy radar' as its nature does not fit into the standard preconceptions for data collection and research systems geared as they are to the *vertical hierarchical* way of being and

organising. The estimates are that roughly about 70% of the combined voluntary and community sectors would be 'beyond the radar' [1].

- My submission to the House of Commons review of the Big Society, pp 270-273 <http://tinyurl.com/EC-Commons-review-Big-Society>, drew attention to this issue, and used my model to identify some ways of correcting the problem. Similar comments apply also to the development of community involvement in planning. Here below are some brief initial thoughts about this in relation to the questions the Committee is considering, from my experience as an active resident in the planning process.

{Question 6. main problems for local communities in engaging with the planning system currently?

{Question 7. main obstacles and barriers for community-led plan making in your area?

- A major problem is that the system encourages an **adversarial approach** between the council and active residents, when for much of the time a collaborative approach would be far more appropriate and constructive. This is so at all levels and stages of development control and planning policy development. My paper <http://tinyurl.com/social-eco-system-dance> outlines the need and scope for collaborative working between the *vertical* and *horizontal* systems in the *Space of Possibilities*. To achieve these changes requires understanding and recognition by senior council management and senior local politicians of the need to develop a collaborative approach to make best use of local knowledge and wisdom in policy development and decision making. The changes though important, can often be quite small, 'adjacent possible' to those processes already being used. It is often about a style of working and the quality of relationships which are needed to engender a collaborative process.
- It does however require acceptance of a **culture shift**, widening the repertoire of organisational and managerial processes, which can't be successfully implemented as a fiat in the usual hierarchical way. It needs an exploratory developmental approach which this inquiry could very usefully set in motion. These kinds of changes, to develop a collaborative approach, would be of benefit to much local authority work, not just planning, where there is a requirement to engage with the community. So any successful changes would have lessons for application also in other subject areas. In Planning, however, there is a quasi-judicial process which forms local planning 'law' in terms of statutory planning documents and procedures, and also takes decisions in the development control process. So some staff operating in the planning quasi-judicial process may need to some extent to be organised and managed differently from those operating in the collaborative domain.
- A further major problem is the **lack of planning support** to the community in dealing with a highly technical field, but which also needs to be integrated with community development skills. Few voluntary sector organisations have any capability in planning and where there is, it is rarely linked with community development skills. *London Planning Aid* heroically attempts to fill some of this vacuum in terms of planning expertise, but it is too remote and limited in capacity, and not equipped to bring community development together with planning expertise. So it can give usually only marginal assistance, albeit on occasions it can be a life saver, as there is often nothing else. Instead of it being often the only resource, as a London-wide resource it needs to supplement a borough level system of support. In this the voluntary sector in each borough (or if and where feasible adjacent boroughs together) has a key role, in working collaboration with its own borough planning authority and planning activists, to create over time an adequate planning and community development support resource in each borough available to the whole community.

{Question 1. How will neighbourhood planning work in London? What new approaches are needed to reflect London's unique situation?

{Question 8. What would you like to see changed in the way local communities can influence planning policy and planning decisions in London?

- An aspect that is very true of London, though maybe not unique to it, is the wide extent of the dense residential urban areas. In our experience in Peckham and Southwark there is a never

ending stream of planning matters - applications, enforcement matters, and policy developments - that local residents have to get to grips with if they take an interest in their neighbourhood and are active locally. [Residents who are active in these and other local matters are a valuable asset to the borough as a key foundation for developing wider community engagement, if nurtured effectively and sensitively. The term 'usual suspects' widely used in local government circles to refer to active residents is pejorative and hardly conducive to encouraging active citizenship. It militates against what is really needed which is to support, nurture and encourage active residents to develop their links to others in their neighbourhoods on issues of collective interest.]

- In my experience, most if not all residents who are active in these matters are not motivated by interests in taking over some part of the planning authority's role, but are simply trying to get a word in edgeways in a rational and coherent way on matters of local concern to them, and on which they have valuable local knowledge. Instead they find that they constantly have to play catch-up in a reactive way, carrying a burden which demotivates many, firing comments over a bureaucratic bar under the pressure of deadlines, often in an adversarial setting. To improve this we need a collaborative process, nudging the existing processes into a new constructive style. Occasionally these kinds of processes do surface in the existing system but they seem to depend on individual officers with a personal proactive style and an apparent intuitive grasp of a more collaborative way of working with non-council officers. When they move, or leave, any progress in collaborative working stops.

{Question 2. What impact will the proposals have on local involvement in planning?}

{Question 3. will local people realise their development priorities through Neighbourhood Plans?}

- If we can use the current policy climate of giving more say to local communities and neighbourhoods, to achieve more collaborative processes and a certainty that planning authorities will really listen rather than just go through procedural consultation hoops, then it will have a beneficial impact. Otherwise I see another opportunity being missed by thinking that communities, neighbourhoods and active residents want to become like the organised institutional world and take on some of the development policy and control functions of the authority. The flaws in this thinking and approach are explained in more detail in my main paper.
- While there may be some community groups which want to take up some of the new powers of the planning institutional world as proposed for neighbourhood planning, it is unlikely that that will be true for the majority. It may be relevant in some localities for particular reasons, but in areas like inner London, it is probably the minority of cases. It may be that the assumption that this is what is needed arises from the failure I have identified to distinguish between the organised transactional part of the 'voluntary world' and the much more extensive relational world of active residents at micro level. In that world, in our experience, a much more pressing, important and significant issue is that the process needs to become more collaborative and respectful, instead of almost all adversarial. That does not seem to need a redistribution of planning functions, but does need a cultural managerial shift, and adaptations in working methods.

Question 9. Can the proposals for neighbourhood planning achieve positive change and lead to better involvement of the public in London? What else is needed?

- A lot of neighbourhood involvement in planning, and probably the majority of it, is from the smallest scale of interest and unlikely to lead to people wanting to set up new community organisations to play a major role in development issues.
- This micro-level activity of residents may at the moment be beyond the radar of the thinking that is inspiring the new powers in the Localism Bill, which seems to be more related to giving groups powers to take on a statutory role in development. While those changes may be relevant in some cases, it is possible that, just as in Big Society thinking more generally, the major part of community activity, this time in the planning world, is being lost to view again.

- This micro-level of activity, which is beyond the mainstream policy radar, is however crucial as the foundation for active community interests in planning and related matters, and also for stimulating a healthy and motivated local interest in democratic and civic processes in general. A bad experience in these micro levels of Planning, which is unfortunately often the case, is likely to contribute significantly to increasing cynicism, and alienation from democratic politics and civic engagement more generally.
- The current central government push for more local involvement in planning can however be taken by the GLA as an opportunity to initiate a process of examination and exploration of a way to develop the system more collaboratively and supportively for this important layer of micro activity across London rooted in each borough. A strong and healthy process at that level is the best way to nurture a healthy and constructive collaboration at the level of London-wide planning.

Question 4(i). How will neighbourhood planning relate to Borough-wide and London-wide planning levels?

My response comes from my experience of two different aspects or levels of neighbourhood planning:

- One concerns the work in developing the Peckham & Nunhead Area Action Plan (PNAAP) as a key part of the hierarchy of planning documents being produced in the borough level LDF (Local Development Framework). The PNAAP covers the large geographical area of SE15, but is focussed on the town centre where most of the development land is, while the social and economic matters that the PNAAP is attempting to address cover the wider area of SE15. For several years I have asked the Council if they would stimulate a process for plans relating to the smaller neighbourhoods within the SE15 area surrounding the town centre. This would have been an ideal way of gradually over time engaging many more people in the PNAAP process as it could have been linked directly to the issues they would raise about their smaller neighbourhoods that they could easily relate to, but which would not normally be addressed at the AAP level. This in turn would have been an effective way of engaging many more local people in the wider PNAAP issues. But the current working style and procedures gave no incentive or encouragement to the Council to pay any attention to my suggestions. As the process has been grinding on for several years it would have been very feasible to do. But it needed a process, managerial culture and joined up working between different parts of the Council, and also within and with the voluntary sector and with active residents, which is not currently available. All of this could easily be put in place if there was a small shift to a genuine collaborative process and an understanding of the need for joined up working between community development skills and planning expertise, and partnership between council, voluntary sector and active residents.
- The second aspect concerns the development of local ideas for the micro level of the neighbourhood, and the relationship of that to the AAP. My own neighbourhood of about 60 streets is in the south west of Peckham and incorporates the south west of the town centre (about 5000 households and maybe about 12,000 residents). As a local residents' group, we have for the last few years been encouraging residents to take photographs about aspects they like, and want to keep, in our neighbourhood and others that they think need changing in some way, and post them on the residents' website see: <http://www.bellenden.net/neighbourhood-pictures> . We are aiming to write this up into a 'neighbourhood profile' to give to the Council and anyone else who has an interest in our neighbourhood, including developers of any size. This document might be seen as a first level of a neighbourhood plan. One way of viewing such a document may be as a micro SPD (Supplementary Planning document) sitting underneath or alongside the PNAAP. Or it may remain as an informal local neighbourhood document. I am asking in the current stage of consultation on the PNAAP that the next stage draft includes a section on such a process for all local areas in SE15 and what residents could do to stimulate the development of their own document for their own self-defined neighbourhood to supplement the PNAAP.

Question 4(ii). What support is needed for local communities to understand and take into account the wider planning framework?

- Active residents working at all levels of the planning system in London, from neighbourhood to London-wide, need simple and easy access to support workers, in the voluntary sector, who are experienced in community development and the planning system.
- We need to develop a collaborative approach to working between the council, the voluntary sector and resident activists in planning.
- It would be best to develop these new processes, and an understanding of the details of the support needed, from the ground up, in each borough. This would provide a suitable context for the three main parties – council, voluntary sector and active residents – in boroughs to clarify the appropriate local support at the micro level for residents and others at neighbourhood and borough levels.
- I am sure that there will be residents active in planning in a number of boroughs who would be willing to contribute to such an exploratory development in their own boroughs, in a shared exercise across London. *Just Space Network* and the *London Civic Forum* would seem also to have a key role London-wide in helping to develop such a process, in collaboration with pioneering local communities.
- These suggestions could be developed further through a pilot exploratory project in some boroughs to clarify what is needed, involving active residents, voluntary sector and councils. I hope that the GLA review could recommend this.

NOTE

[1] The scale of the missing community activity is shown by the estimate that there are 600,000 to 900,000 'below the radar' groups in the UK, three quarters of the total in the 'voluntary & community' sector: see Phillimore, J. and McCabe, A. (2010). "Understanding the distinctiveness of small scale, third sector activity: the role of local knowledge and networks in shaping below the radar actions." *Third Sector Research Centre Briefing Paper 33, and Working Paper 33.*
<http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/Publications/tabid/500/Default.aspx>