

A Critical Evaluation of New Localism and Neighbourhood Planning of the UK from a Social and Spatial Equity Perspective: Neighbourhood Planning of Highgate as a Case Study

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Abstract: The devolution of governance to communities is an integral aspect of the state strategy of localism. This paper critically evaluates New Localism and neighbourhood planning from a social and spatial equity perspective, mainly on whether or not this agenda can contribute to fairness especially equal participation, whether people can equally benefit from this agenda and whether the needed spatial housings and amenities are provided. The neighbourhood planning of Highgate will be regarded as a case study.

Keywords: Localism; Spatial equity; Social equity

1. Introduction

The coalition government of the UK devolved power to local people. Neighbourhoods obtained the power to make neighbourhood plans ^[1]. However, localism and neighbourhood planning attracted many critiques since the beginning of this agenda. This essay will critically evaluate the aforementioned agenda from a social and spatial equity perspective. Social equity is defined by Shafritz and Russell as the equal treatment of each individual in the political system ^[2]. This essay will evaluate whether this agenda can contribute to fairness, especially on equal participation, whether people can equally benefit from this agenda and whether the needed spatial housings and amenities are provided. The analysis includes the influence of this agenda on the planners who develop neighbourhood plans and the broader influence of this agenda on the planning system and practices of local authorities. This essay has considered the neighbourhood planning of Highgate, London as the primary example to illustrate my arguments.

2. New Localism and neighbourhood planning

The Localism Act 2011 helps the coalition government achieve its New Localism goal. Generally, through the review of the Plain English Guide to the Localism Act 2011, the act influences the social and spatial equity from the following aspects: giving new rights and powers for communities and locally reforming the planning system and decision about housing ^[3]. The Localism Act 2011 removes the regional tier planning strategies and allows neighbourhood planning. Neighbourhood planning enables people in the neighbourhood to be involved in the future developmental affair of their neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhoods have the opportunity to decide where and what types of new development should be implemented. Furthermore, the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 influence the New Localism and ‘Neighbourhood Planning’ from a social and spatial equity perspective. The Ministry of Housing, communities and local government can require local authorities to designate an area in the neighbourhood and decide whether to hold referendums on the neighbourhood development plans ^[4].

The overrepresentations of certain social groups have turned out to be a problem while planning before the beginning of the New Localism and neighbourhood planning agenda ^[1]. The agenda attempts to contribute to democracy and equity through the principle of equal expression of people on what they want ^[5]. This shows that the coalition government and several supporters of the localism agenda believe that if the government holds immense power is not beneficial for the achievement of equity. Instead, the government should provide equal participation opportunities for local people so that they can represent themselves properly and contribute to social and spatial equity.

The government plans to invest around £22.8m to support neighbourhood and professional planning from 2018–2022 for various issues, such as housing, design and neighbourhood forum. Tony Armstrong, the CEO of the locality, believes this plan will help many neighbourhoods to develop their neighbourhood forum and neighbourhood plan, and they can express their opinions in their neighbourhood. Further, he believes that giving local communities more power is a key to contribute to fairness in society ^[6]. This shows that the supporters of this agenda believe that social and spatial equity can be better achieved through the approach of giving people more participation in their neighbourhood developmental affairs. Although this programme is considered as beneficial for neighbourhood planning, its outcome requires time for examination. Additionally, it is unknown whether the financial support will be sufficient for most neighbourhoods to handle various neighbourhood plan-related issues.

3.Challenges

3.1 The difficulty of planners to intervene and contribute to an equal outcome

The decisions about neighbourhood development will be driven by the self-interest of each individual, which may lead to forceful competition among various interest groups. However, the middle class tends to be more influential with ‘Not in my back yard (NIMBISM)’ as their primary viewpoint. They will use neighbourhood planning against the new development ^[5,7]. Research results on participatory democracy ^[7] showed that based on the BSAS sample data that surveyed around 3000 people in England, homeowners are strongly against new housing developments, while private renters are relatively neutral and social renters are considerably supportive of new housing developments.

The foremost challenge in planning is the difficulty of planners to intervene and contribute to an equal outcome. Pieces of evidence have already shown, at least in several neighbourhoods, that the rich are more influential than the poor in their local development affair. The devolution of power to local citizens means that planners can have less involvement in the local development affair. Moreover, it is a challenging task for planners to contribute to equal participation and make different classes equally benefit from this agenda. Although the Housing and Planning Act 2016 provides the local authority more opportunities to intervene in the neighbourhood referendum affair, it is hard for them to change the attitudes and opinions of NIMBY (a characterization of opposition by residents to proposed developments in their local area).

3.2 NIMBYism

Poverty is a primary challenge faced by 21% of the UK population living in households. Housing is intimately connected to the risks and experiences of poverty. High housing costs can worsen the situation of people who suffer from poverty. Increasing housing affordability is a measure to contribute to social equity. It has identified the prevalence of the NIBILISM attitude in the neighbourhood. The predicted support, opposition and development based on the BSAS data in Table 1 shows that more people oppose development in different regions of the UK. It is unlikely that the New

Localism and neighbourhood planning can contribute to the increase of the number of housing [7]. These can be regarded as evidence to show that it is unlikely that localism and neighbourhood planning can spatially provide the housing and amenities needed.

Table 1 Support for or opposition to more homes being built in the local area by a broad region

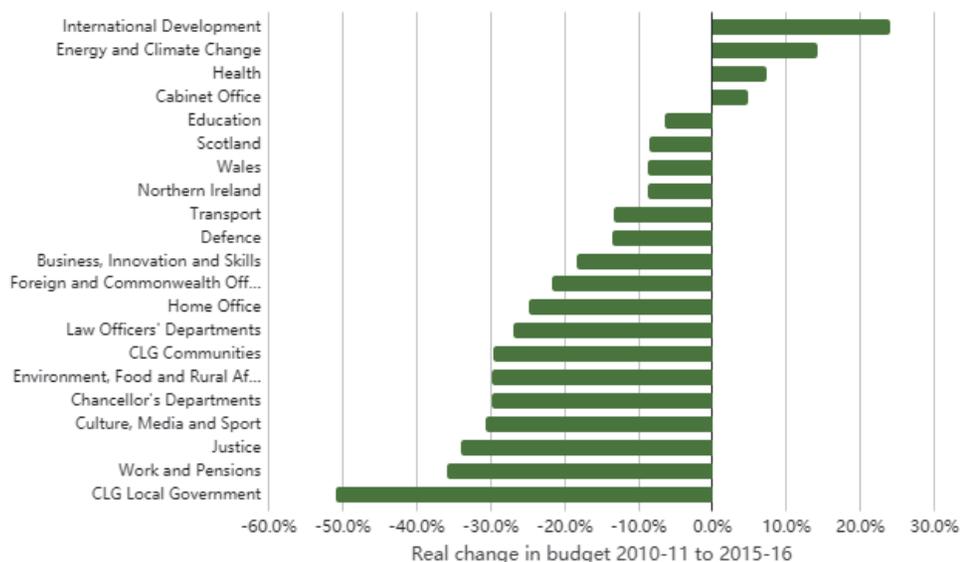
Support new homes built in local area	North and Midlands	South	London	Scotland & Wales	Great Britain
Support strongly (%)	4.3	3.8	7.5	6.4	4.9
Support (%)	24.6	22.7	26.7	32.4	24.8
Neither support nor oppose (%)	24.9	21.4	17.6	21.1	22.5
Oppose (%)	31.3	31.8	27.3	25.8	30.3
Oppose strongly (%)	11.9	17.6	19.8	12.4	15.1
It depends (%)	2.2	2.7	0.9	1.5	2.0
Don't know (%)	0.9	0.0	0.2	0.4	0.4
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Majority for development (%)	-14.3	-22.8	-13.0	0.6	-15.6
Sample number	1432	1057	306	502	3297

Thus, the second challenge faced by planners is to tackle the problem of NIMBISM, including its outcome of providing more housing and making housing more affordable.

3.3 Lack sufficient funds to develop a neighborhood plan

The austerity accompanied by the proposal of a ‘Big Society’ was implemented from the very beginning of localism. Reducing local expenditures is the main measure to achieve austerity [8]. Figure 1 shows the changes in departmental spending limits between 2010-2011 and 2015-2016. The spending cut in many departments shown in the figure means that neighborhoods receive less help from the government. Cuts in welfare spending will have the greatest negative impact on families with children. The IFS estimate that low-income earners will suffer more than the middle-income group. Meanwhile, young people will be negatively influenced by reductions in housing benefits and new housing subsidies. This essay argues that these can serve as evidence to show that cuts in welfare make those previously disadvantaged groups suffer greater losses.

Figure 1. Real-terms % cuts in departmental expenditure limits, 2010–11 to 2015–16



From the perspective of neighborhood planning, austerity campaigns and spending cuts have a direct impact on the formulation of neighborhood planning. The government does not provide sufficient funds to the local communities (funds usually range from £20,000 to £100,000). This means that the local communities have to raise money by themselves to develop neighborhood plans. This contributes to the fact that prosperous areas are more likely to have a

neighborhood plan and deprived areas are less likely to have a neighborhood plan ^[9]. Lack of local planning capacity and financial support for the community are the main obstacles to neighborhood planning ^[10].

The third challenge faced by planners is to provide enough assistance to communities that lack sufficient funds to develop a neighborhood plan. Neighborhood planning is a relatively time-consuming and expensive task. Due to cuts in spending, neighborhoods have less funding to do this. It is difficult to provide adequate professional planning assistance, such as conducting environmental impact assessments and reviewing neighborhood planning due to the limited funds.

4. Highgate neighborhood as an example

This essay uses the Highgate neighborhood in London as an example to illustrate the argument. Highgate is a neighborhood with around 18,000 residents ^[11]. It is a suburban neighborhood located in north London ^[12].

On the Highgate Neighborhood Forum website, the forum expresses the willingness of involving the broader community in their affair. Some measures are used to encourage community participation, such as sending e-newsletter and organizing community events and meetings ^[13]. This shows that the Highgate Neighborhood Forum attempts to involve all members of the community extensively. This essay believes that e-newsletter and the organization of community activities, as well as meetings, are a relatively equal way for the community to participate in the neighborhood planning affairs. The reason is that everyone can participate and express their ideas freely. Their voices can be heard on the forum.

On the Highgate Neighborhood Forum, many recent developments have been criticized for negatively affecting the appearance of the area ^[11]. In addition, through the review of the Highgate neighborhood plan, although some sites have been identified as potential development sites, the original plan did not highlight housing demands, the provision of affordable housing, housing structure, etc. On the contrary, in the Development and Heritage section of the plan, conservation is a dominating focus, and development has to respect and protect the unique characteristics ^[13]. Since the neighborhood forum has been established, neighborhood plans are made based on the neighborhood forum. Planners cannot change the neighborhood plan to make it more inclined towards development, which is reflected in the neighborhood plan.

The Highgate Neighborhood Forum clearly stated in its early documents that the forum has the right to raise funds through grants, donations, and other means ^[13]. This is one aspect to illustrate that in the early stages of the neighborhood forum, they have made some preparations to tackle the potential problem of shortage of funds. In addition, the Highgate Neighborhood Forum also raises funds for residents to do some air quality tests. Their meeting locations are provided by the communities ^[11]. These aspects indicate that the austerity policy has an impact on the Highgate neighborhood planning. Due to the austerity campaign, the government did not allocate many funds to help the neighborhood create a neighborhood forum and formulate neighborhood plans. Although the neighborhood can receive subsidies through the 2018-2022 subsidy program, it is still unknown whether the subsidy planned for 2018-2022 is sufficient. Because these funds have to tackle problems related to neighborhood planning across the country, and it may be more focused on emergency needs.

5. Conclusion

In short, this essay critically evaluates localism and neighborhood planning from different perspectives. Localism and neighborhood planning are believed to help resolve the previously over-representation of some social groups and contribute to more equal participation. The government's new financial support for neighborhood planning attempts to contribute to a fairer and more effective outcome of this agenda. However, NIMBISM is considered the main barrier to equal participation. The austerity and spending cuts have caused more suffering for the previously disadvantaged groups. It is unclear whether the neighborhood, especially the deprived neighborhoods, can obtain sufficient funds to establish neighborhood forums and their own planning documents. There is evidence that this agenda is unlikely to help increase housing. Planners are also facing many challenges. Some feel that it is difficult to intervene and contribute to

equal outcomes caused by NIBISM. In addition, the planning system has less control over the future housing supply, and it is hard for them to guarantee the housing and other amenities needed can be provided.

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