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A paper presented at the *Political Studies Association Annual Conference 2018,* Cardiff, 26 to 28 March 2018.

Full details of the conference are available at:

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ANNUAL CONFERENCE 26 – 28 MARCH 2018

Localism at the neighbourhood level: London borough governance and situated anti-politics

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ABSRACT

The Localism Act 2011 has successfully devolved planning powers to over 2300 English communities with over 530 "made" neighbourhood plans legitimised by referendums, involving nearly six million people. The devolution deals however, creating combined authorities, appear not to have generated double devolution, failing to extend power down to their communities. There is governance rescaling but the rationale of subsidiarity is inconsistently applied. London has the benefit of stability and experience with a city-region authority and mayor in place since 2000, underpinned by 32 large unitary authorities. It is noteworthy that neighbourhood planning powers have been taken up in London much more slowly than in the rest of England, with marked differences in progress between the boroughs, despite a statutory "duty to support" localism. Two major national studies of localism are reviewed to inform an examination of the politics of localism in London. The role of the local authority is found to be critical and evidence of a London governance effect is noted. Related academic studies are also referred to so as to supply some theorisation. The significance and force of the community's notion of "place" is observed. There has been remarkably little research into London borough governance since the Local Government Act 2000 reform. Based upon the evidence of localism and neighbourhood planning in London, which is proving to be problematic, a tentative case is made for a "situated" anti-politics in the capital.

Keywords: localism, neighbourhood planning, London, anti-politics

INTRODUCTION

Double devolution is a term coined by David Milliband on 21 February 2006, which neatly denoted a democratic reform with an ultimate commitment to a form of localism; "I call it 'double devolution' - not just devolution that takes power from central government and gives it to local government, but power that goes from local government down to local people, providing a critical role for individuals and neighbourhoods." (Milliband, 2006). This ideal was widely welcomed at the time, but despite subsequent legislation, both for "devolution" and "localism", these policies are poorly linked and current evidence suggests that the "power to the people" step is not universally delivered and in some places may be faltering. The two pieces of legislation since 2016 are distinct. The Localism Act 2011 was sponsored through parliament (with cross-party support) by Eric Pickles and Greg Clarke in the department of Communities and Local Government. The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 (and earlier deals) were Treasury-driven by George Osbourne. Each step implied by "double devolution" was separate in these philosophically different acts and the evidence suggests the policies are actually discontinuous. There are two well-resourced reviews of how the localism legislation has unfolded. One includes evidence about progress with the devolution agenda; the other is confined to localism. The earlier "User Experience" survey report, by Parker et al (2015), examined the implementation of the Localism Act 2011 and was sponsored by "Locality". This in-depth report, reviewing localism, and in particular neighbourhood planning, was intended to inform government policy and further legislation, which it successfully did. Locality, the sponsor and publisher, is the third-sector body funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local government, and charged with supporting local groups taking up their rights under the Localism Act 2011. The second and later Locality report, of an independent commission, examined localism but also the practical consequences for localism of the devolution deals. The Locality Commission found a "massive opportunity" missed, and noted that the assumption that "devolution will somehow trickle down to people and neighbourhoods... is misguided" (Locality 2018 p.12). Allegedly the fundamental point has been missed, that, "people are the end goal, not local government" (ibid 2018 p.12). Deploring the failure to allocate powers and resources down to the local level the report argues that the practice of devolution risks, "widening the gulf between citizens and politicians" (ibid p.34). Local government may be part of a continuing problem. There is a contested view from councillors themselves about the benefits of devolving power from principal councils to parish or town councils. This is an ongoing debate. Not surprisingly, there is overwhelming cross-party support in the councils for the transfer to local government of powers and budgets from Whitehall, but there are objections to top-down, rushed devolution deals, interpreted as; "the government is not committed to devolution as a process, rather as a way of restructuring and configuring local government and circumventing existing councils" (Copus and Wall 2017). In arguing that the government is failing to deliver greater devolution and local capacity-building, Billing et al (2018)

castigate the UK system as; "highly centralised, top-down and politically polarised governance". This paper will not examine the devolution agenda as such but rather focuses on how localism, as defined and enacted in 2011, has been taken-up by communities. The reports from these two major Locality surveys cited above are explored and the barriers to progress noted. Some of the academic research about localism is reviewed to see what theoretical perspectives are available. Within this national context the faltering progress of localism in London is then considered. An incomplete and poorly researched picture of localism in the capital emerges, but it is suggested that there are profound issues with localism found in London's local governance. An attempt is made to identify and define such issues, together with some outstanding questions and implications for consequent research.

AN UP TO DATE APPRAISAL (2017) OF ENGLISH LOCALISM

Six years after the passage of the 2011 Localism Act, a comprehensive review was timely into the practicalities and take-up of the statutory community rights on offer. To assess progress, the Commission on the Future of Localism was set up in 2017 and reported in February 2018 (Locality 2018). The Localism Act confers certain planning and land use rights to local communities in England, which were intended to deliver "a fundamental shift of power from central government and towards local people" (HM Government 2010 p.11). Concern about limited impact and uneven public engagement soon became commonplace however, expressed in academic literature and also voiced by community activists, political professionals and commentators; see for example the Mayor of Hackney objecting that the Act, "does not challenge the deep-rooted centralisation in the UK (Pipe 2013). The then Department for Communities and Local Government later reinforced the 2011 Act with the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 (informed by Locality's 2016 User Survey), but these provisions were more by way of a tidying up; by tightening deadlines for local government, giving more weight to neighbourhood plans, together with some reinforcement of housing requirements, etc. The key question at this stage is how far and with what result have the would-be empowered communities in England taken advantage of the new rights. Importantly these rights are collective, conferred on communities (including parish councils), not individuals. This legislation is designed to drive a genuinely community-led democratic revival. Insofar as progress is limited, of the intended shift of power, the Act could reasonably be deemed in part a failure. The Locality commission of enquiry was led by Lord Bob Kerslake, former Head of the Civil Service. It was independent, although it is reasonable to describe the eight commissioners as enthusiasts and advocates for localism, already fully convinced of the benefits of devolution. Their normative inclinations were underpinned by evidence of popular support (Locality 2018a):

	CURRENTLY HAS MOST SAY IN LOCAL AREA	SHOULD HAVE MOST SAY IN THE LOCAL AREA
National Government	25%	3%
Local Government	49%	26%
Local People	3%	57%

Locality Commission on the Future of Localism. YouGov poll of 1,628 adults

So, by way of endorsement of the Act they state their desire for, "power to be pushed down to the local level, unleashing the creativity and expertise of communities" (Locality 2018 p.5), but find that the promise of the legislation "has not been achieved" (ibid p.4) evaluating that the framework of rights "stops short of enabling the fundamental shift in power that is needed" (ibid p.21). Evidence was taken from 22 organisations together with online survey responses. It was found that the most important and best known right, to produce a "Neighbourhood Plan", has seen some success, currently with over 2300 communities in England (representing nearly 6 million people) developing their own statutory local plan (Raab 2018). Neighbourhood planning has however been inhibited in various ways and there has been little take-up of the related community rights. The Right to Bid, where the community can register an "Asset of Community Value" (mainly pubs threatened with closure) and raise funds to purchase the building, has seen limited success. The Right to Challenge, and take over a local service, has resulted in "little or no impact" (ibid p.31). A variety of obstacles to the exercise of community rights were identified. The issue of community capacity is central. Capacity encompasses technical and professional skills, resources, volunteer time and networks. Neighbourhood planning in particular is dependent upon this social capital. The limited targeting of the national support programme (supplied through the government appointed body; Locality), at a time of local government austerity, is noted (ibid p.31). Research and academic discourse has frequently highlighted the capacity issue identifying inequalities between areas and inequalities of participation between groups. This has been quantified by Parker and Salter (2017 p.484) who found that 7.5% of planning groups were in the lowest quartile of multiple deprivation (IMD 5) but 25.8% in the top quartile (IMD1). A second issue is the bundle of problems posed by unsympathetic local authorities, "in too many areas public bodies remain top down and risk averse" (ibid p.12). The attitude and culture of the local council was found to be crucial and widely varying, from strong official support and actual obstruction. There are related problems arising in local government of poor access to information and lack of accountability. The commission is insistent on the need to, "change local government behaviour and practice to enable local initiatives to thrive" (ibid p.3).

Well-grounded recommendations arise out of the commission's applied research which emphasises analysis within a functional framework. The evidence-based diagnosis leads to four defined domains for strengthening or "reimagining" localism. These are; an integrated structure of

good governance; suitable resources and powers available to communities; stronger devolved relationships; and the development of community capacity. The assessments and recommendations are underpinned by detailed evidence, supplied by active and committed participants, both citizen volunteers and paid practitioners. This evidence is supplemented by reference to relevant research and authoritative sources. The report is essentially interpretive in its appraisal of the efficacy of the range of community rights. There is also the review, referred to earlier, of the government's city-region devolution agenda. Taken overall the report is a community activists' perspective on localism, which identifies local government as culpable in inhibiting empowerment. Instrumental outcomes in land use and planning terms are not reviewed. Quite reasonably there is no attempt at theorisation about the governance implications of community-based initiatives, nor about the impact upon the communities which engage. In particular, analysis and explanation of agency and social capital is unavailable, although a need (post-EU referendum) to build participative democracy is posited. The main contribution is in resolving complex implementation and policy issues into an evidenced and clear depiction of the state of the art in localism, together with some detailed and pragmatic policy prescriptions. There is criticism of the design of the Act as well as of the government's inconsistency in commitment. The devolution agenda and subsequently Brexit, are said to overshadow the 2011 localism policy. In particular it is noted that the 2011 Act, and the Big Society agenda which framed the legislation, were not accompanied by, "a programme of significant investment for capacity building commensurate with the scale of the challenge" (ibid p.31). There was a move away from targeted regeneration initiatives, focussing on areas of multiple deprivation, to a universal provision which may have led to greater inequality of participation. The problem was compounded, because the period of the localism agenda has been accompanied by cumulative reductions in local government funding. Even so, the majority of the report's recommendations concern the conduct of local government. Six principles for neighbourhood governance are set out to meet the "challenges" which currently exists. Such challenges include, "lack of new leadership; partisan interests overriding commitment to place; lack of participation; and inability to effectively engage the community" (ibid p.19). There is the warning that in the absence of genuine collaboration there is a risk of reinforcing disengagement. Detailed recommendations, requiring a strengthening of the legislative framework, are set out; such as a requirement for councils actually to publicise these statutory rights, making it easier to establish parish councils and extending the powers of designated neighbourhood forums in cities. The culture of local government however is seen to be crucial. Devolution of council budgets and local procurement are suggested as a means of reinforcing localism. Based upon good practice identified, decision making by local councils in partnership with local organisations is advocated for example by; "co-production" in design and delivery of local services and the creation of "non-hierarchical spaces for community debate and decision making" (ibid p.23). A key theme

in the evidence, concerning party politics, is discussed. It is argued that, "deliberative, participatory, and place-based local democracy can unlock creativity, unity and community energy and harness the skills and tools for citizens to lead change in their local area" (ibid p.37). This idealistic assertion about deliberative democracy is not translated into specific recommendations.

Some weaknesses in the commission's report can be identified. There is a major disparity in the commission members' geographical coverage. Of the eight commissioners, six are locally-based outside London. The particular circumstances in London are not referred to even though it is commonly understood that take-up of localism is much slower than elsewhere, despite London's size and socio-economic status. In fact one of the three evidence/focus group events was held in London. However there was an open invitation form of recruitment, so that evidence of non-activity or failure (arguably characteristic of the London experience) is unlikely to be represented. There is a natural bias towards participation of the successful groups; moreover often represented by professional workers and consultants. An issue arises here about the authentic voice of citizen volunteers (who are supposedly empowered) and the role of professional staff who often speak for them. Struggling volunteers perhaps numerous in London are unlikely to have the time or the inclination to attend a "show and tell" event. In any case the emphasis throughout the report is upon experience in the English counties, which are generally "parished", rather than experiences in the cities generally, and particularly in London, which do not have parish councils. Even the parish councils, it is argued, require better support from their higher-tier authorities and some parish councils are seen to be ineffective. An urban community group however, wishing to embark on a neighbourhood plan, must first devise and agree a boundary and then demonstrate it is a fit and proper body. Only thus can it obtain "designation" from the council as a "neighbourhood forum", and start the planning process. Parish councils on the other hand are already endowed with; professional administration (their clerks); public funding with a bank account and authority to spend (the council tax precept); together with formal status and legitimacy (they are statutory bodies which are normally elected). Any urban group of public-spirited citizens has only an informal shadow of this resource and authority. They are hopelessly ill-equipped on their own to devise an urban development plan for the neighbourhood, which can pass the technical examination and achieve popular support. Although up to £15,000 in government grant and plenty of advice is available to a neighbourhood forum, full political and bureaucratic support from the local council for such volunteers would seem to be crucial. If parish councils have difficulties with the community engagement process while going through the stages in devising planning policies (or utilising the other community rights), how much more difficult is it for the organic, if somewhat improvised, and volunteer "neighbourhood forums"? The commission report contains much universal advice on community infrastructure and building social capital, but there are only two short paragraphs specifically devoted to the urban-based neighbourhood forums. The specific

disadvantages suffered by non-parished areas, in taking up community rights and participating in localism, are not addressed. Rather, evidence is advanced from existing forums, <u>where they do exist</u>, to make a case for devolving further powers to this new "governance model". It is suggested that there is, "scope for increasing powers which designated forums could take on around spending and service delivery" (ibid p.38). But in swathes of London and indeed in whole boroughs, designated neighbourhood forums do not yet exist at all. Successful communities, whether parish councils or forums, have voiced concerns about the deficiencies of local government, which are explored in the report. The un-parished urban groups face an entirely different order of problem and are especially dependent upon their local authority. There is plenty of best practice guidance and good advice about how local authorities might better support localism. Well organised parish councils and neighbourhood forums have contributed their experience and evidence, because they have the wherewithal to do so. The commission is remiss however in not seeking out the hidden stories of the poorly organised, the frustrated, the uninterested, the under-resourced and the otherwise unrepresented. There is evidence to suggest that some London councils have exercised their power and discretion wilfully to obstruct localism. There is barely a hint of this in the report. It is ironic that the report warns about localism being dominated by, "those with the loudest voices and those that have the confidence, skills, wealth and time to participate" (ibid p.16). Attention confined to the successful is a complaint that might be made about the report itself. Nevertheless, the commissioners and contributors have produced an eloquent defence of localism and a persuasive call to re-invigorate the initiative.

THE USER EXPERIENCE SURVEY (2014): NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING IN PRACTICE

The comprehensive User Experience report, running to 115 pages, was conducted two years prior to the Locality Commission study and is an obvious source of data for a review of localism. Surprisingly, no direct reference is made in the later commission report to the User Survey. The neighbourhood planning provisions of the 2011 Act, by far the most important and politically significant part of the Act, are the focus of this definitive progress check and analysis. The User Survey was published in 2016, using data actually collected in 2014 (Parker et al 2016). A follow-up review was carried out in 2016 (Parker et al 2017). The User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning in England study was sponsored by Locality on behalf of the government and employed a telephone survey of 120 local planning groups with six focus groups convened. Out of 737 then active planning groups, 120 were sampled for the survey. At the time, London was the second biggest region by population (an estimated 8.8 million) but encompassed fewer planning groups than each of the other nine regions except the North East, with a population of

only 2.6 million (Westminster 2017). Exact participation rates are not available as the data was "informally gathered" (Parker et al 2017 P.10). Crudely, London had proportionately only about a third of the number of active groups as the North East (with the fewest number of active groups) and about one fifth of the South East (with highest absolute number of groups). Neither of the two studies identifies participation rates by population nor quantifies the distinct lack of progress in London. Generally, take-up of neighbourhood planning by community groups in London was lagging relatively far behind the rest of England and the London groups were typically still in the early stages. The User Experience study employed 100 items in its telephone survey with correspondingly greater specificity and depth than the items employed in the Locality Commission investigation in 2017, which in effect employed 10 open items. The User Experience template thus supplied a rich source of data enabling some tabulated findings such as levels of local authority support compared with progress in planning. Both the User Experience and commission reports employed focus groups; three in the case of the 2016 Locality Commission and six recruited by type of area, such as "stalled area" convened by the 2014 user survey. One of the six User Experience focus groups, called the "stalled area" group, comprised community groups which were initially interested, but did not embark upon, or progress, the planning process. This is particularly interesting, and these groups (small in number) were identified from their enquiries made for professional advice from Planning Aid or Locality. There is likely to be a national cohort of hidden stalled groups, in which the London component may be disproportionately numerous. Both the Locality Commission report and the User Experience study were silent on the low take-up of neighbourhood planning in London. It is known that the urban neighbourhood forums generally encounter more difficulties than parish councils do, and this has been recognised by the government through the supply of a higher level of grant assistance. London even so is lagging all other regions, notably in the initial designation officially of "neighbourhood forum" status. Research access to non-starting or stalled groups in London would be needed to investigate the reasons why. An unknown number of undesignated and possibly frustrated community groups in the capital are, at present, voiceless.

The 120 groups surveyed by telephone in the User Experience study were all successful groups which reported on; how the process had gone, stage by stage; what advice had been used; the effect on neighbourhood relations and so on. As an example of the data supplied, the formal consultation stage in neighbourhood planning was regarded as very positive, with 86% of parishes and 71% of forums reporting that consultation had gone "well" (ibid p.40). The focus group responses are summarised so as to supply a qualitative assessment from each type of area; "urban disadvantaged", "growth" and so on. These are reported for each group but some common themes emerged, such as the local aspiration for a neighbourhood plan because of its statutory status and scope for control over the "type, design and location of development in their neighbourhood". A

common desire was expressed for better local authority attitudes and behaviours, with, "a more organised and clear set of obligations around the duty to support" (ibid P.64). The urban areas focus group (which presumably included some London groups) reached the consensus that, "Local Authority support, both in tangible forms but also in terms of attitude was critical" (ibid p.92). There were only three community groups in the "stalled groups" focus group, but it is perhaps surprising that there were any at all given the research brief. Generally, local authorities were seen as "not ready to actively support neighbourhood planning" (ibid p.107). One group claimed that, "the local authority wanted to keep all planning powers at the district level and were deliberately obstructive" (ibid p.106). These three may represent the tip of the iceberg. The report concludes that the evidence overall suggests, "neighbourhood planning can be undertaken by most communities if effectively supported, and in particular if the relevant local authority is supportive" (ibid p.75). Additionally it is noted that, although the community initiates neighbourhood planning, "in practice successful neighbourhood planning is co-produced" (ibid p.76). The idea of co-production is elaborated upon in the survey results, alongside other recommendations. The follow-up study in 2016 carried out 36 telephone interviews with groups which had advanced thorough the process. Half of these now had a "made" plan with statutory force (Parker and Wargent 2017). Although 92% of the groups indicated that the process was more burdensome than expected, 82% would recommend other communities to develop a local plan. Suggestions are advanced in the report for changes at each stage of the planning process, for example more use of consultants and templates for actual plan writing. On the critical issue of local authority support, 78% of groups reported that the authority had been somewhat or very supportive, but 11% indicated they had received no support and another 11% felt the authority had been obstructive. These negative experiences were ascribed to, "slow decision making, failure to provide detailed guidance, or lack of dedicated resources" (ibid p.5). The report acknowledged that this "may be influencing take-up elsewhere and should be explored further" (ibid p.5). The original finding, that the local authorities' "duty to support" should be clarified, was endorsed by 89% of the groups. In conclusion, the report suggests that this support "continues to be the overriding variable in the speed and success of neighbourhood plans" (ibid p.6).

THE ACADEMIC CRITIQUE: NEOLIBERALISM? EMPOWERMENT?

The localism as a term can be employed somewhat generically and presented as a policy at the disposal of local government. For example, the Local Government Information Unit in "Reviving localism: Three challenges" restricts the notion entirely to powers and funding made available to local government from Whitehall (Walker et al 2013). This might be termed single devolution. As another example, in a paper entitled "Who is accountable for localism?" five different models of localism, proposed as a heuristic or diagnostic tool, were based in local

government. The view was advanced that citizen-led collaboration is a possibility in only one model of the five. This single model is defined as polycentric governance where otherwise representative government is dominant throughout the typology (Richardson and Durose 2013). Such institutionalised definitions of localism are inconsistent with the idea of ostensibly empowered citizens exercising rights under the Localism Act. It is not unusual to find that, from the perspective of local government, agency for localism is confined essentially within institutional boundaries. There is a political tension and a discontinuity between the idea that the initiative for localism is retained by the formal institution of representative government, or that the initiative is seized by a citizenry directly entitled by legislation. Some helpful conceptual clarification is supplied by Hildreth (2011) in a framework devised to enable exploration of the concept. Hildreth offers both a simple typology of localism, together with a set of indicators with which to characterise each type. This framework has potential as a tool for an analysis of the post-2011 localism phenomenon. Some activists might argue that this is a localism "movement", with over 2,300 active groups to date and 530 neighbourhood plans approved by referendum (Raab 2018). But there are only seven approved plans in London (London Planners 2018). Between the two synoptic, survey-based reports on current progress and practice, reviewed earlier, and the academic papers reviewed below, there is a dearth of applied research and theorisation. There are emergent and obvious questions being raised from the descriptive material but little explanation or synthesis. Hildreth's helpful typology was slightly updated and modified by Evens et al (2013) so that there are three suggested types of localism. A managerial localism, "decided at the centre, but policy settings and delivery functions are devolved to the locality, under a strict regulatory framework" (ibid p.402). A representative localism is where single devolution occurs so that powers and responsibility are devolved to elected local government, which plays a community leadership role. Thirdly a community localism model is proposed where rights and support enable citizens in communities to engage directly in decisions and action in a form of participatory democracy. Evens et al associate the managerial model with the 1997 to 2010 Labour government, and the community model with the 2010 to 2015 Coalition government. These models are empirically-based, and we now have the User Survey and Locality Commission providing an evidence base for further theorisation. There are some obvious questions to ask. For example does neighbourhood planning contribute to, or counter, anti-politics? Is the development, typically over two years, of a neighbourhood plan by the community a form of deliberative democracy? The three forms of localism defined by Evens et al are a simple but necessary item of conceptual clarification. Evens et al go on to suggest that the academic perspective on localism encompasses two positions. Either localism is seen as potentially strengthening democratic engagement (essentially endorsing the community model), or the rationale is perceived as a means to better deal with local economic and social problems. This latter view sees the necessity of, "a fusion between representative and

community localism" (ibid p.404). This democratic engagement or problem-solving split is also a simplification where political scientists, planners and geographers have all contributed their perspectives and clear paradigmatic differences exist.

In reviewing the key literature it is difficult to find much interest in the "managerial" form of localism, although there are some profound objections to the "community" approach in the Localism Act, The efficacy of the Act's provisions is questioned, but also the motivations of the Acts sponsors.   There is a rejection of the potential for, or practice of, either improved engagement or any betterment of economic or social conditions. A thoroughgoing critique of the 2011 version of localism is available from a constructivist point of view, where Williams et al (2014) argue that the Localism Act is driven by neoliberalism, so as to promote individualism and market-based technologies which are inimical to local democracy. Even so, allowing that community and protest groups can actively acquire the agenda, Williams et al see the subversive value of transfers of power to the neighbourhood; "the changing architecture of governance brought about through the drive towards localism has opened up opportunities for the direct appropriation of governmental structures by local groups seeking progressive outcomes" (ibid p 2809). Clarke and Cochran (2013) in an analysis of the localism rationale and its antecedents describe localism as "spatial liberalism" and object that it can promote anti-politics. In particular; "Participation has also had little effect on decisions because elites, often unelected, set the procedures and agendas" (ibid p 15). Further, "this localism seeks to replace New Labour's technocratic government, but it appears to be doing so with just another form of anti-politics: naïve, populist liberalism" (ibid p 17). It has been argued that the Localism Act is simply a covert means of promoting the private sector (Ludwig and Ludwig 2014). Davoudi and Madanipour (2015), adopting Foucault's notion of "governmentality", that is to say the art and technology of government, warn of the dangers of the well organised and the well-off capturing decentralised planning. They question the legitimacy of neighbourhood forums, contrasted with the elected legitimacy of councillors, highlighting again the tension between representative and community localism. Sturzaker and Gordon (2017) have examined such tensions and identify examples of participation which are distinctly non-democratic. The imposition of austerity budgets on local government has been seen as inimical to localism allowing for the necessary attention and support for citizen empowerment (Lownes and Pratchett 2012). Davoudi and Madanipour (2015, p78) acknowledge the populist appeal of "romantic images of small groups bound together through cultural and geographical ties and collaborate reciprocally and locally to find local solutions for local problems". Neoliberalism however is seen as a replacement of welfare liberalism, resulting in a retreat from concerns about social justice. Communities under localism, "are expected to be responsible for their own conduct and their own fates" (ibid, p94). There are normative judgements being made about localism, and about the motivation, both of those who enacted the policy and the intentions of the citizens

participating. Thus there are propositions about how localism ought to be regarded which might be informing or reinforcing the political reluctance or obstruction allegedly found in some local authorities. Painter et al (2011) in a comprehensive review of localism were sceptical about claims for "empowerment" and devised four conditions as criteria as to whether genuine empowerment was manifest. 2011-style localism has yet to be tested against the four criteria; support by "complimentary legal and statutory frameworks", devolution to "different scales of local government", encouraging "active civil society" and, "different tiers of government treating localism as a policy priority" (ibid p 6).

Commonly, empirical research is critical of particular features of localism, discussing shortcomings as well as potential gains. As with Evans et al above, contrasts are sometimes made between localism under the Blair / Brown and the Cameron governments. Bailey and Pill (2015) review government attempts over a twenty year period to "empower" local communities. A distinction is made between the many initiatives prior to the Localism Act in 2011 and the current situation. Two models of neighbourhood "localism" are suggested, and these correspond to Hildreths "management" and "community" typology. An earlier "state-led" model characterised by central government funding and priorities, was targeted at areas of deprivation and typically set performance indicators for service delivery. The more recent "state enabling/ self-help" model is heavily dependent on voluntarism and local initiation. Thus: "top-down, state-led policy initiatives tend to result in the least empowerment, whereas the more bottom-up, self-help, state-enabled projects at least provide an opportunity to create the spaces where there is some potential for varying degrees of transformation" (ibid p 300). Stoker (2006), in his defence of representative democracy and analysis of anti-politics, endorses localism as a possible counter to anti-politics. For Stoker, localism, "enables the dimensions of trust, empathy and social capital to be fostered" (ibid p176). However, there are two serious objections. The first is the danger of narrow parochialism and not in my back yard ("NIMBYism") politics. Nevertheless Stoker advocates greater participation in various forms so as to promote the civic arena and he welcomes local tensions, "Conflict between interests and their resolution remains at the heart of politics, wherever it is conducted" (ibid p 177). He also raises the common objection of the need to address inequalities faced by different communities and to recognise "both diversity in communities and a concern with equity issues" (ibid p 177). These objections, to self-selection by local groups, are common and of course feature in the User Survey and Localism Commission report. Wills (2012) in a major study examined localism in London, emphasising the importance of existing community infrastructure, such as churches. Noting London's high population turnover ("limiting opportunities for place-based trust"), increasing diversity and the social pressures arising from housing and other issues, Wills nevertheless says "the death of social capital has been wildly exaggerated" (ibid p 117). The localism link is made with anti-politics noting, "the importance of social association to the well-

being of social groups and their ability to engage in political life" (ibid p 116). This is another affirmation of the community model, which it is argued, promotes a restored form of place-based urban governance at the neighbourhood or parish level. Jane Wills was one of the Locality Commissioners. A report (Pycock 2016) of interviews carried out with professional practitioners in London who were involved with neighbourhood planning supplied a common list of problems faced by local groups. The experience of neighbourhood planning was nevertheless portrayed as positive for these groups; "the interviewees were strongly of the view that communities were the winners from localism. Initial lack of confidence was being overcome by group formation and team building". Ironically, "the frequent disputes between neighbouring groups over borders enabled groups to build clear identities which gave them a new 'civic voice'" (ibid p.14).

LONDON APART: LOCALISM AND BOROUGH GOVERNANCE

The low and slow take-up of localism (exemplified by neighbourhood planning activity) in London is demonstrated clearly in the disproportionate numbers of active groups by region revealed by parker et al (2017) in the User Survey. Reluctance to support neighbourhood planning, or even obstruction, by local government was reported in both the Locality Commission report and the earlier User Survey, although neither of these distinguished London as having a worse problem. Community localism is intrinsically more difficult in urban areas without the advantages of pre-existing parish councils. The difficulties were well known; in defining and agreeing boundaries, mobilising a critical mass of citizens, lack of funding, finding the expertise and so on. Three years after the act came into effect, the Greater London Assembly Planning Committee produced a report on neighbourhood planning and community rights, which reported slow progress in London's heterogeneous and complex social and built environment (GLA 2014). Obtaining "designation", agreeing the community "vision" and devising policies was proving hard going in all but two of London's boroughs. No attempt was made in the report to examine the factors which differentiated the pioneering Westminster and Camden boroughs (with respectively 15 designated and 12 designated groups in being); and the many inactive boroughs where there appeared to be little or no interest in neighbourhood planning. A possible role for the Mayor and the GLA in supporting localism was not explored. By this time, actual opposition in some boroughs had already emerged, where it is alleged that some councils had been wilfully obstructive and reluctant to devolve their planning power, evidenced with a list of eight blocking tactics (Burton 2015). The volunteer network of planning groups known as Neighbourhood Planners London (2018) has monitored online the progress of designations and referendums across London. An assessment was conducted of borough council support to assess basic compliance with the national guidance on promoting neighbourhood planning. Local (borough) Plans were reviewed and only six Local Plans fully recognised neighbourhood planning and provided guidance, including, as

might be expected, the Local Plans published by the two favourable boroughs, Westminster and Camden. Fifteen Local Plans supplied partial recognition, while nine Local Plans give little or no recognition to neighbourhood planning. These latter boroughs promote their own community involvement strategies. There is a general correspondence between these three groups of boroughs (pro, indifferent and anti) and the actual levels of neighbourhood planning activity in each borough (Neighbourhood Planners London 2017). There are examples of blocking or displacement tactics, as with Lambeth Council which spent £140,000 producing a "refreshed masterplan" rather than supporting the community's neighbourhood planning group, "The programme will feed into Lambeth's Local Plan in 2016, and a co-productive approach will be undertaken throughout the large scale engagement strategy" (London Borough of Lambeth 2016 p.7). This report mentioned neighbourhood planning once, but as one of five identified "risk factors". Lambeth Council, like other boroughs, appears to have a commitment to the "representative localism" model, preferring its own approach to community engagement, even if this might conflict with its statutory duty to support neighbourhood planning. Although the Localism Act had all-party support in parliament, there has been some differentiation in party policy, for example, with the report on "One Nation Localism" where the Labour party identifies itself directly with the representative model of localism (Studdert 2013). Circumstantially there would appear to be an emergent antagonism towards neighbourhood planning in the policy community of London governance. Single devolution is preferred, not double. The main agenda is the concern with powers transferred from Whitehall to the Mayor or London boroughs, such as responsibility and funding for health and social care. The Mayor's recently published draft London Plan takes a similar position on localism to the boroughs. The provisions of the Localism Act and neighbourhood planning are conspicuous by their absence. A discussion document by London Neighbourhood Planners (2018a) points out that neighbourhood planning is excluded in the explanation of the London planning framework, which mentions London's "two-tier" system, when it is now three-tier. Various Mayoral policies for town centres, regeneration areas and so on, exclude the possible contribution of neighbourhood planning groups, despite the stated imperative for collaboration with local communities. The Neighbourhood Planners discussion document asks, "Is the impact of this apparent lack of interest, direction or support by the Mayor and GLA holding up progress on neighbourhood planning in London?" (London Neighbourhood Planners 2018a, p.8).

Another revealing indicator of the possible antagonism of the policy community towards neighbourhood planning in London can be found in a report called "Making the Case for Place" published in November 2017, following a year-long programme of professional meetings and field work. The programme was devised and run by Future of London, a policy network for housing, planning and regeneration professionals, from London government and the private sector. The report is replete with guiding principles and advice emphasising community engagement and

partnership. Local authorities and developers should use the "planning levers" and; "Communities should: Take opportunities to engage early in the planning process" (Future of London 2017 p.28). Nowhere throughout the report's advice and case studies is neighbourhood planning enlisted or endorsed. This is a remarkable omission and might bluntly be described as a professional boycott of the most devolved part of the planning framework. London borough governance has received very little research attention since it was reformed under the 2000 Local government Act. A wilful failure to co-operate with local communities exercising their 2011 rights and a failure to meet the statutory duty to support, would constitute a serious democratic deficit. Anecdotally, some boroughs have been described as oligarchic; "This so-called 'informal cabinet' is a one-party cabal prone to group think and confirmation bias. Formal cabinet meetings in public are simply a publicity platform for announcing policy. The necessary checks and balances are ineffectual" (Pycock 2017 p.5). On the other hand a recent democratic audit, assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, found that London (borough) government is "stable and effective" and that "this is one of the better functioning parts of UK government" (Travers 2017 p.11). Even so, electoral turnout in 2014 was only 39% and in five boroughs there are no, or less than four, opposition councillors. There is a recommendation for, in future, "expanding the opportunities for neighbourhood involvement in local policy-making" (ibid p.11). This audit was not predicated on any new research. Evidence has been found recently however that suggests there is a serious accountability problem in local government. The Communities and Local Government Select Committee looked at the effectiveness of overview and scrutiny committees. While quoting high profile reports of failures of scrutiny, such as the Casey report on Rotherham, the committee found widespread weaknesses; "in many authorities there in no parity of esteem between the executive and scrutiny functions" (Parliament, House of Commons (2017 p.3). Based upon written evidence, a workshop and witnesses, the report was highly critical of the cabinets, the impact of party politics and highlighted organisational culture as the most significant factor. It is unclear what the contribution of the London boroughs was to this evaluation, but the report is a further prompt to a review of London borough governance.

CONCLUSION

For volunteers to get together to devise their own Neighbourhood Plan is not for the faint hearted. Parish councils have a head start. Urban groups without this parish infrastructure face greater challenges and must first obtain designation. Producing a statutory plan requires technical expertise, a huge investment of time, multiple partnerships, constant engagement, and involvement which is demonstrably diverse. The two major investigations, in 2014 and 2017, into how localism is operating under the 2011 Act, have identified numerous problems and issues with a close correspondence between findings in the two reports. Both reports make recommendations; with

the 2017 Localism Commission report taking a somewhat evangelical stance, while the User Survey carried out in 2014 has led to some technical changes incorporated into the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017. The role of the local authority was found to be critical, with evidence of reluctant or no support and even outright obstruction. Progress in London, with only a fifth of the proportion of successful groups as the Southeast, is markedly slower and more difficult than in the remainder of England. The research methods employed in the two projects were likely to miss the unsuccessful groups; there may be a hidden cohort of frustrated volunteers without voice, and this is likely to be most true in London. London's localism tardiness is unexplored and unexplained and worthy of investigation. An agenda is available, from the ample evidence from active groups, of issues concerning; access to information, top-down decision making, unhelpful party politics lack of trust and so on. A localism in London study is required. A key element in such a study would have to be the democratic health of local government in London. A borough by borough policy analysis of the 32 councils would identify the very different localism strategies employed. No local authority however is going to defy an act of parliament and overtly refuse its statutory "duty to support" neighbourhood planning. A discourse analysis might find it difficult to discover tacit policies which are actually opposed to the law. The academic perspective on localism is disparate and inconsistent. Findings of a neoliberal project which is anti-political with social ill-effects, are contradicted by other research and do not coincide with the empirical studies which suggest widespread public support and tentative evidence of enhanced social capital. The distinction made between a representative model and a community model of localism may be commensurate with the politics of local governance. Evidence suggests that many in the policy community favour the representative model of localism, appearing to be more comfortable with the formal institution and representative government playing a leadership role and targeting support by need. This perspective also accords with their positional power and interests. There may be an inverse ratio of support, where those furthest from the formal institution favour the community model of localism, while senior council members and officers are opposed. It would be interesting to test some such hypothesis in the context of neighbourhood planning in London. No doubt academic and party political opponents of neoliberalism, who appear to favour the representative model, would wish to differentiate the models more clearly. Whether localism is "anti-political" is contested. Are communities who are working on their neighbourhood plan more or less engaged with politics, more or less trustful of politicians? If there is obstruction of localism in London by certain of its councils, then this conduct may be locally "anti-political". The possibility of a situated anti-politics might be tested. A behaviourist methodology using survey and interviews, similar to the two major enquiries should be employed as the evidence base for explanation and hypothesis testing. However, a much more interpretive approach, possibly grounded theory, might also be employed to explore anti-politics and social capital questions in more depth. This review of the two localism

survey reports and related academic studies is by way of a scoping exercise for a more substantial project. Localism policy is partly successful in its engagement purposes, but problematic, nowhere more so than in London. It is surprising that there is not greater interest in why London is deficient and apart.

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