

# Empowered citizens or hopeful bystanders?

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The new political appetite for 'localism' in town planning has triggered anxiety within local communities and amongst those charged with making it work, according to new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

A study led by Professor Nick Gallent of the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, looked at how communities in Kent have sought to influence the policies of [local authorities](#) and service providers and how, in the recent past, they have engaged with planning professionals around the production of 'parish plans'. The results suggest that Government may need to give further thought to localism's proposed division of planning workload as some community groups appear reticent about taking on greater responsibility for local planning and would prefer the existing system to be allowed to 'bed in', but made far more responsive to community input.

The localism agenda, which encourages the transfer of decision-making power from central to local government and, even further, to communities, is seen by those in government as an [antidote](#) to concerns about a lack of communication between decision-makers and those directly affected by their decisions.

Recently, participative forms of decision-making have been introduced with a view to making citizens 'stakeholders' rather than passive users of services and, in turn, achieving consensus around [innovative solutions](#) to a range of development challenges. The planning system has come to be a primary vehicle for this approach, but Professor Gallent's research

draws attention to major shortcomings in the way that communities interface with local policy makers, with protocols and procedures written into planning frameworks seldom backed up by the necessary investment of time in building local relationships.

Professor Gallent explained: "Planning and Local Government reforms are seen by community groups as serving the interests of [policymakers](#) rather than local people. Despite rhetorical support for greater participation, decisions affecting communities are often made elsewhere and communities themselves have become 'hopeful bystanders' rather than genuine contributors. Communities report being overwhelmed by the amount of engagement with service providers that comes with their participation, yet they remain underwhelmed by the 'quality' of this engagement and by the influence it appears to bring."

In turn, policy stakeholders often see local views as partial and at some distance from market realities and strategic priorities. Nor do they always see communities as equal partners in decision-making processes, with some regarding them instead as subjects to be educated and persuaded. Some even argue that community participation is a threat rather than a benefit to democracy on the basis that it is the voice of the vocal minority that is heard.

The previous UK Government sought to bring communities and other stakeholders together within 'strategic local partnerships'. The function of these partnerships was poorly understood in the case study area, with the Ashford Partnership appearing to provide only very limited opportunities to connect local people to the machinery of planning and service delivery. Their obvious shortcomings may be used to bolster the case for a different model and for a more direct connection between community-based and local planning. However, the dynamics of community action - and partial or limited involvement in 'parish planning' activity within communities - seem to pose a direct challenge

to the new government's stated goal of building a 'collaborative democracy'.

Professor Gallent commented: "It is difficult to connect varied local concerns to formal planning frameworks because there is rarely agreement about what should be done at local level, never mind between communities and stakeholders".

Ultimately, the findings suggested that both communities and policy stakeholders remain concerned over the future path of the localism agenda. Community groups realise that it does not guarantee that the relationship with professional planners will get better. Any improvement will require local actions and investment: it is impossible to legislate for the necessary 'culture change'. Planners, for their part, remain concerned that narrow interests will determine the direction of local planning, and that this will jeopardise the achievement of strategic goals. [Communities](#) would settle for decision-makers being more responsive to what they have to say without them having to do more themselves, while planning professionals' concerns over future development outcomes remain unanswered.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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