

[Nancy Holman](#)

Planning and the new (new) localism – what chance of success?

Blog entry

Original citation:

Holman, Nancy (2013) *Planning and the new (new) localism – what chance of success?* [Public institutions and governance](#) (21 Oct 2013) Blog Entry.

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Available in LSE Research Online: October 2013

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INLOGOV Blog ~ Official Blog of the Institute for Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham

Planning and the new (new) localism – what chance of success?

21 Monday Oct 2013

POSTED BY INLOGOV IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNANCE

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Tags

localism, Localism Act, Nancy Holman, NIMBYism, Planning, Social capital

Nancy Holman

Planning in a time of austerity is never easy – budgets are cut, needs are great and regulation can be seen as stifling growth. In England we are in just such a position and in the midst of a reformulation of planning that is on the one hand meant to deliver growth and on the other designed to empower communities. Most of these reforms are being couched in the language of localism with community participation at the forefront of policy.

However, these reforms raise a series of questions that have yet to be answered: Who will get involved in local planning? Will localism foster increased NIMBYism? And most importantly, can the localism agenda actually engender action toward policy implementation? My article, co-authored with Yvonne Rydin, examines these dilemmas through the lens of social capital and offers key insights into this latest governmental foray into local social relations.

Who will get involved?

The Localism Act provides communities with an opportunity to come together and formulate their own neighbourhood plans thereby shaping their locale. Key to this is engaging people in sufficient, meaningful and constructive participation. Social capital suggests that this can be kindled when like-minded communities come together over locally salient issues thereby creating networks of mutual trust and reciprocity. However, this scenario is not without problems as in order for it to work communities must believe that the benefits of participation are not offset by the opportunity costs of participating. In addition, the strong ties of bonding social capital that emerge from participative exercises can in turn foster more insular and exclusionary localities outweighing any strategic benefits to greater community involvement.

Will localism foster NIMBYism?

Even if the localism agenda fosters communities burgeoning with social capital and a zeal for participation, a real fear, from the government's perspective, is that these communities will be those best able to resist growth, which runs counter to the Coalition's aspiration for localist planning. Countless studies, from the location of mobile homes in post-Katrina New Orleans to LULUs (Locally Unwanted Land Uses) in Japan, have shown that strong social capital is associated with heightened abilities to avoid unwanted development. Whilst the government has put in place a number of measures like the New Homes Bonus to incentivise local communities to grow the jury is still out on how well this will work.

Will the agenda actually engender policy action?

As the old adage goes, "Almost anyone can write a plan, the difficult part is putting into action". Critically, there is nothing in the new system of Neighbourhood Plans that makes them more proactive and action oriented in terms of bringing land and development forward to achieve plan outcomes. Here, social capital tells us that, if communities wish to see their plans implemented they must situate themselves in networks that extend beyond local bonding ties into a bracing matrix tailored to the needs of the development activity so that they may access additional resources and investments. This means that there is scope to 'shape' networks to deliver more effective planning.

So, what might be the outcomes of government reform? As it stands, the rhetoric of localism is in danger of delivering only failed promises and thwarted desires for local communities. However, planners could regain a key role under the new agenda by focussing on how they could actively build the networks of specific forms of social capital needed to achieve participation, frame localist planning in broader terms by injecting much needed planning skills into the neighbourhood planning exercise, and deliver development that meets community needs by considering the necessary resources and engaging with those who have the power to deliver such change.

A full account of this research is available in my recent article with Yvonne Rydin: ['What can social capital tell us about planning under localism?'](#) *Local Government Studies*. 39 (1), 79-88.

Nancy Holman is the Director of Planning Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her work deals primarily with issues of governance and local planning including sustainable development, heritage conservation and community participation. She has often used social network analysis to explore the complex relationships in the multi-level, multi-actor partnerships present in modern governing arrangements.



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