

Rural Regeneration and Localism: A Case Study of Northumberland 2015

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Abstract

The Localism Act (2011) was intended to bring about radical decentralisation, encompassing reforms to the planning system to make it clearer, more democratic and effective. Neighbourhood planning was introduced to address the democratic deficit experienced by communities under previous governments. Neighbourhood plans, the main plank of the new legislation and intended as a robust addition to the plan hierarchy, were envisaged as empowering and enabling communities to control the type of development in their area.

This research focuses on the delivery of neighbourhood plans from the perspectives of policy actors, planners and communities. With Northumberland forming the main case study, three sub-case studies have been used; two neighbourhood plan Front Runners are compared with the successful rural regeneration initiatives of a Development Trust. These are used to examine the extent to which the neighbourhood planning process is bringing about the changes vaunted by the government. The research was conducted using semi-structured, in-depth interviews and content analysis together with participatory and visual appraisal tools in the case study areas in the north and west of Northumberland.

Drawing on collaborative planning theory and theories of neo-endogenous rural development, the research indicates that, through the collaborative processes of delivering neighbourhood plans, a regeneration of local governance institutions may be emerging. This thesis argues, however, that the processes of localism, expressed through neighbourhood planning, cut across entrenched patterns of land-use, land ownership and power relations in Northumberland. The thesis also argues that to fully understand the processes of localism and neighbourhood planning, the underlying socio-economic and political context in which neighbourhood plans are developed must also be considered.

It is further contended that the decentralisation, community empowerment and control of development promised through the new localism legislation remain largely rhetoric and a guise for centralist control.