

## Reflections on Local Place Plans dissertation

What follows is a condensed version of a dissertation which I undertook as part an MSc in Sustainable Rural Development with the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) in 2023.

Using qualitative social research, I sought to find out to what extent involvement in developing Local Place Plans, introduced by the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, built capacity for community ownership, focussing on the case study area of Berwickshire. In practice this involved interviewing people at the “coal-face” of community-led planning, such as those actively involved in community councils or development trusts. The research was completely independent and not commissioned by any of the organisations mentioned in the paper.

I have chosen this blog-style reflection to introduce key sections of the dissertation, from the perspective of my role as a community development practitioner covering the same area where I was carrying out the research. This has enabled me to weave in some insights from my work role to the findings.

I work for a “Third Sector Interface” or TSI. We are a link between the state and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector, a voice for local community groups to the local authority, and part of our role is to improve collaboration between the two. The TSI supported me in this research as part of my continuous professional development, but had no influence over the findings.

The research found low trust in the local authority and a general sense that their approach to interaction with communities was top-down and bureaucratic. Yet I am also aware, from attending Community Planning Partnership meetings and working closely with local authority officers and elected members, that there is an acknowledgement of the need for culture change within the local authority, to be more present in the community and to move away from ineffective consultations to meaningful community engagement, led by local groups.

While I know the following research summary may not be comfortable reading for those in the local authority, I hope that this willingness to change culture and to take a co-produced approach with communities will mean that the research conclusions can be digested with openness.

One tip I picked up as a mature student, juggling family life and work as well as studies, was to read abstracts, introductions and conclusions of papers, and only dig into the research techniques, literature reviews and presentation of results when time allowed or a deeper understanding was required. These sections give a good overview of the research without any potential for local recognition of any of the anonymised participants and so are set out below. A full reference section is also included for anyone who wishes to dig deeper!

I recommend that the findings detailed in the conclusion section should be used to constructively shape the approach we are taking to support community-led planning in Berwickshire and hope that the research will also inspire a co-produced approach to resourcing and supporting community-led planning further afield.

Beth Landon

## Table of abbreviations

CAP	Community Action Plan
CBP	Community Benefit Payment
CC	Community Council
COSLA	Convention Of Scottish Local Authorities
CPP	Community Planning Partnerships
DT	Development Trust
LA	Local Authority
LDP	Local Development Plan
LPP	Local Place Plan
PAS	Planning Aid for Scotland
PST	Place Standard Tool
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SCDC	Scottish Community Development Centre
TSI	Third Sector Interface
TSO	Third Sector Organisation

# **TO WHAT EXTENT DO LOCAL PLACE PLANS PRESENT AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP IN BERWICKSHIRE, SCOTLAND?**

## **Abstract**

This research explores the experiences of community bodies at the forefront of developing Local Place Plans (LPPs), to gain insights into the potential for this process to build capacity for community ownership of land and assets. The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, through which LPPs were introduced, is intended to complement Land Reform and Community Empowerment legislation to achieve this aim. However, there is uncertainty over whether this will be the case in practice, due to the increased burden which development of LPPs places on volunteers, low trust in the planning system and the potential for state co-option of the community sector.

Focusing on a case study in Berwickshire, Scottish Borders, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with seven representatives of community bodies involved in LPPs, or considering involvement. The interviews give deep insights into the barriers and obstacles faced by groups, the most appropriate support and resources they require and the extent to which involvement is building capacity and aspiration for community ownership.

The research reveals considerable preexisting involvement in community-led planning and aspiration for or involvement in community ownership. It also finds potential for development of LPPs to lead to further community ownership through increased social capital due to greater connectedness; through a stronger mechanism for the designation of land and assets of community value; and through enabling a more robust funding case. However, the findings reveal the existence of substantial barriers of pressure on volunteers and the groups' experiences of the Local Authority as culturally bureaucratic and centralised, which could negatively impact on social capital by stifling the self-organisation of communities.

The findings give key insights into the form a co-produced supportive framework might take, to facilitate a genuinely community-led approach to the development of LPPs. Such a framework could enable barriers to be overcome and has the potential to rebuild the trust that will be essential for a working relationship between the community sector and the local state if LPPs are to lead to increased community ownership of land and assets.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a world facing the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, where rural land is in the spotlight for solutions ranging from carbon offsetting, to large scale wind farms, it is critical that we do not lose sight of the well-established understanding of sustainable development as a "three-legged stool", combining environmental,

economic and social development (Warren 2009: 381) and placing local communities at the heart of development.

In Scotland, where rural land has been the scene of historic clearances of communities to meet the economic and leisure needs of a relatively small number of wealthy landowners, this remains a live issue. The concentrated pattern of landownership in Scotland persists, and now the purchase of large areas of rural land by “green lairds” for tree planting for carbon credits is posing a new challenge to rural communities (McIntosh 2023).

Community ownership of land and assets is arguably the most empowering means for local communities to make all forms of rural land use work for local people (McMorran and Scott 2013). In Scotland the Land Reform and Community Empowerment policy agendas have facilitated a change in this direction, complemented by a raft of other legislation, guidance and funding.

Alongside this shift, the understanding of complex adaptive systems in the natural world has been shown to apply far more widely, including to the way in which communities thrive at their best, in harmony with the environment, when they are able to self-organise (Gilchrist 2009). Delegation of power to local communities is therefore vital for sustainable development.

Two connected and important enablers of this delegation of power are for local people to have a meaningful stake in planning for their local areas and community ownership of land and assets. This research explores the link between community-led planning and community ownership, focusing on a case study in rural Berwickshire in the Scottish Borders.

The planning system in Scotland provides a statutory framework for decisions relating to land and assets. The Planning Act (Scotland) 2019 brought in various changes, notably the opportunity for communities to register Local Place Plans (LPPs) with the Local Authority (LA). Community Land Scotland (2022) have expressed the potential for this new legislation to lead to increased community ownership.

Research undertaken by SCDC (Scottish Community Development Centre) and Nick Wright Planning (Wright 2020) was commissioned by the Scottish Government to inform the publication of a draft “how to” guide for community bodies leading on LPPs. This research explored the “challenges and opportunities” of LPPs and highlighted the potential for them to present a burden of responsibility on local communities, which, without attention to capacity building and support, could exacerbate inequalities.

Community-led planning is not a new concept to many communities in Scotland which have some form of Community Action Plan (CAP) (Wright 2020). It is possible that the introduction of LPPs could present a mechanism for state control over the self-organisation of local communities. Alternatively, this new legislation could facilitate capacity building which would enable communities previously not engaged with community-led planning to be in a position to take on community ownership.

LPPs bring with them the potential to increase collaboration between the community (“third”) sector and the state and thus to facilitate community ownership. However, doubt remains about whether the legislation goes far enough to rebuild broken trust in

the planning system (Walton 2019). Others have expressed concern about an over-dependence on volunteers, relating this to the withdrawal of the state (Mulvey 2021).

Secondary legislation relating to the development of LPPs was adopted in January 2022, presenting the opportunity for community-led plans to be registered with LAs. One year on, this research set out to gain early insights into the relationship between LPPs and community ownership in the case study area. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to a body of work exploring community ownership in relation to planning more widely, a research gap recently identified by Doyle (2023: 9-10), and provide insights into the form a supportive framework could take which is co-produced with community groups.

Qualitative research, utilising semi-structured interviews with members of community bodies leading on LPPs, or considering doing so, was undertaken to meet the following aim and objectives and to answer the subsequent research questions:

## **Aim**

The aim of this research is to gain insight into the experiences of members of community bodies at the forefront of the development of LPPs, through a case-study in Berwickshire, in order to explore the potential for this process to build community capacity for ownership of land and assets.

## **Objectives:**

- To understand the pressures which involvement in development of LPPs places on community bodies and the obstacles being faced.
- To explore what support measures and resources are needed to ensure such community bodies are sufficiently equipped to develop LPPs.
- To gain insight into whether the experience of involvement in development of LPPs is encouraging aspiration towards, and building capacity for, community ownership.

## **Research questions**

- To what extent does the process of developing LPPs contribute to building the capacity of community bodies for community ownership?
- To what extent does the process of developing LPPs lead to increased aspiration of community bodies to become community land and / or asset owners?

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Limitations of the research**

These findings give a good depth of insight into the interactions of different communities with a single LA with regard to LPPs. While that builds a consistent picture of the approach of this LA and the impact that may have on community capacity, the findings might not be reflective of other LAs in Scotland. However, it is fair to say that the findings can contribute to this body of knowledge.

Those who agreed to be interviewed were in the main those who had decided to be involved in leading on an LPP. They may typify the “louder voices” or those with the greatest capacity for involvement, although this was not universally the case. It would have been useful if more of those who had decided not to get involved had been willing to be interviewed, to gain insights into what had led to this decision.

The choice to not pursue a mixed methods approach, primarily due to the time limitations for the research, limited the sample size and scope of information it was possible to gather. Quantitative data could have been collected from participants who were sceptical about developing an LPP and were not willing to be interviewed.

The state of progress of development of LPPs was not as advanced as was anticipated when embarking on the research, therefore insights were limited into what impact this would have on capacity once plans were developed or registered. However, the research did provide valuable insights into the potential impact on community capacity, the ambition for community ownership and into what was stalling progress.

### **Research questions**

**Research question 1: To what extent does the process of developing LPPs contribute to building the capacity of community bodies for community ownership?**

The findings support the assertion that for communities to thrive they need to have the power and resources necessary to self-organise. This process of self-organisation involves developing trusted connections within and beyond the local community, facilitating a level of collaborative working and opening up channels of resource, support and information, thus building the social capital necessary to prepare the community for successful community ownership.

Where barriers to this process are present, the ability of community bodies to successfully develop and implement LPPs is hindered, and the lack of progress has the potential to lead to disengagement, damaged trust, and reduced capacity for community ownership.

Several barriers to developing LPPs were found, notably the perceived “top-down” culture of the LA, characterised by poor communication, a distant approach, overly restricted access to funding, a lack of understanding of local communities and a lack of trust. In addition, the burden which the development of LPPs places on volunteers presented a substantial barrier.

If involvement in the process of developing LPPs can lead to such barriers being overcome, then LPPs could present an opportunity to increase social capital and take steps towards the thriving “well connected community” (Gilchrist 2009) which would be best positioned for community ownership. To facilitate this LAs must be willing to allow the process of accessing support and resources itself to be co-produced by community bodies in a position to develop LPPs.

This research provided an in-depth insight into what forms such support might take and highlighted the importance of local communities leading on the design and implementation of support frameworks in other LA areas.

Key suggestions for a supportive framework for the case study area, Berwickshire, were:

- Delegation of power through reduced bureaucracy for access to funding.
- Clear and jargon free communication and presentation of the invitation to develop LPPs.
- A clear structure to operate within, including a registration process and LPP templates.
- Access to support through a designated point of contact, preferably within the TSI.
- Receptivity and responsiveness of the LA to ongoing feedback from community bodies to enable support offerings to be flexible and locally relevant.
- Funded training and upskilling.
- Core funding for staff, not just project funding.
- For the LA to become more aware of community bodies other than CCs, such as DTs.
- Mediation between groups which do not have a good working relationship, upon request.
- For the LA to improve their relationship with community groups, by becoming more present in the community and by acting on community priorities identified within LPP which are within statutory duties.

**Research question 2: To what extent does the process of developing LPPs lead to increased aspiration of community bodies to become community land and / or asset owners?**

There was some evidence that involvement in LPPs leads to aspiration for community ownership. However, there was wider evidence of a link between aspiration for community ownership and involvement in previous forms of community-led planning,

such as CAPs, although this could have been due to the state of progress of LPPs at the time of the research.

There was evidence that community groups were aware of the potential for LPPs to present a stronger case for community ownership than CAPs. Despite the barriers and obstacles faced in developing LPPs, community groups were choosing to get to grips with them, primarily because they deemed it important to take up this opportunity to strengthen the community voice in decisions on land and asset use, and to enable access to funding and resources available for community-led projects, such as community ownership of land and assets.

### **Recommendations for further research**

It is recommended that this research is repeated in other areas, to ascertain whether the perceived culture in the LA was typical or unusual and to inform co-produced supportive frameworks appropriate in other areas.

A longitudinal study in one- and five-years' time would also be useful to explore progress in Berwickshire.

Pilot studies could be undertaken in areas without a group developing an LPP, with funded posts provided for local people to lead on an LPP and receive training, in order to discover whether this might have a positive impact in reducing inequalities.

Complementary quantitative research is recommended to gather data on the background of individuals involved in leadership roles within groups leading on LPPs, to gauge the pre-existing level of capacity and analyse whether there is a positive correlation between this and success in developing and implementing an LPP.



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