TALK TO THE HAND? COMMUNITY COUNCILS AND PLANNING CONSULTATION

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Abstract Planning systems are not the property of planners alone, rather they are collectively owned by the broad range of stakeholders that planning involves and affects (after Hague, 2000). As a consequence, issues of participation, responsiveness and relevance are fundamental to the health and vitality of planning systems. To accurately diagnose this aspect of the patient’s condition it is necessary, as Allmendinger notes, to examine ‘the rich context in which planning operates’ (2002: 4). This article does so by shedding light on planning consultation at the local level. It examines the often overlooked relationships between community councils (the lowest level of statutory community representation in planning) and principal councils (a term employed to include all local authorities and national parks that make planning decisions). The article will illustrate the frequency, function and degree of agreement existing between different council tiers on planning deliberations and, from this, identify a number of crucial points of tension between community councils and the planning system. These tensions centre on the nature of democracy within the system, the legitimacy of local knowledge in deliberation, and perhaps most importantly, the (perceived) interests and values of the planning system as they are practised. The article will argue that these tensions produce both competence and confidence disparities between councils and, as a consequence, the planning dialogue is reduced to each council ‘talking to the hand’ of the other. Such circumstances raise important concerns regarding the vitality of the planning system in remaining relevant and responsive to these local participants, and thus the health of the planning system overall.
Keywords community councils, local authorities, local knowledge, participation, planning

Introduction

As Hague (2000) states, planning systems are not solely owned by planners themselves, but are owned collectively by the broader range of stakeholders that they involve and affect. Issues of participation, responsiveness and relevance are therefore fundamental to the health and vitality of planning systems. As many commentators have noted, postmodernity complicates the challenges that participation and relevance raise for modernist planning projects (see Allmendinger, 2001, 2002; Beauregard, 1989). Umomoto, for example, identifies the fact that postmodernity accelerates societal change and diversifies the cultural constituencies to which planning must respond. As a consequence, postmodernity ‘pose[s] . . . challenges related to communicating across culture-based epistemologies and soliciting the voices of multiple publics’ (Umomoto, 2001: 17). However, as Allmendinger notes, shifts towards the postmodern, ‘may be and often are unrelated to the practice of planning’ (2002: 4). It is important therefore to examine ‘the rich context in which planning operates’ (p. 4) in order to diagnose the ability of the planning system to respond to the challenges of participation and relevance. This article does so by shedding light on planning consultation at the local level. More specifically, it examines the often overlooked relationships between community councils and principal councils in Wales. Community councils designate the lowest level of elected community representation in planning in Britain. In England and Scotland, these councils retain the more traditional designation of parish council, but regardless of nomenclature, all are central to the process of town and country planning. Following the Local Government (Miscellaneous) Act 1976, community councils have the right to consultation over all planning applications being decided by their principal council. As a consequence, as Gyford et al. identify ‘planning issues . . . come to form a major element of [principal–community council] relations’ (1989: 270).

Although these relations are an important part of the relevance and responsiveness of the planning process, they remain relatively under-researched (although see Tewdwr-Jones, 1996). This article tackles this issue by drawing on a comprehensive study of community councils in Wales. In 2003, telephone interviews were undertaken with planning officers in each of the 22 principal councils in Wales (including county, county borough councils, and three national park authorities), as well as a questionnaire survey of all county and county borough councils. Of the 737 community councils in Wales (which serve populations ranging from 155 to 45,053 (1991 census figures), 17 were chosen for in-depth study. Each geographic area of the principality was represented, with illustrative council examples chosen representing a range of council sizes. In each local case, the research involved an individual interview with the council...
clerk, an extended focus group interview with councillors, as well as archival research of council minutes from 2001–3.

Drawing on this research, this article explores the dialogue between community councils and principal authorities on issues of planning. It will illustrate the frequency, function and degree of agreement existing in these council relations, and from this, identify a number of crucial points of tension between community councils and the planning system. These tensions centre on the nature of democracy within the system, the legitimacy of local knowledge in deliberation, and perhaps most importantly, the (perceived) interests and values of the planning system as they are practised. The article recognizes that while the local knowledge accessed through participation is used by principal councils in some cases, in others the planning vision is narrowed to include only ‘certain ontological and epistemological categories’ that benefit its interests and values (Porter, 2006: 361). This ‘statecraft’ process (Scott, 1998; see also Porter, 2006) results in the dismissal of local knowledge and the installation of a decision-making system that selectively ‘privileges scientific and technical knowledge over an array of equally important alternatives’ (Sandercock, 1998: 5). In turn, those at the local level often seem reluctant to translate their values and epistemologies into the frame of legitimacy required by the planning system. As a consequence, the system of planning consultation in Wales is often defined by relations of conflict. To those locally affected, the planning system is perceived to marginalize and silence legitimate interests, values and knowledges, while principal councils are frustrated by the inability of locals to frame their concerns within legally accepted epistemological bounds. In practice, each council tier appears to ‘talk to the hand’ of the other. In other words, those involved don’t appear to be paying much attention to the opinions, values, and constraints of the other party. As the essentialisms and fixity of modernity give way to the fluidity and fusions of the postmodern (see Bauman, 2005; Doel, 1999; Murdoch, 2006), this facet of planning consultation faces real challenges in remaining vital to the constituencies who own it. The tendency for each council tier to ‘talk to the hand’ of the other raises important concerns regarding the nature of participation by locally elected community representatives within planning, and the degree to which the planning system remains relevant and responsive to these participants.

Community councils in Britain: legislative background and function

As Cullingworth and Nadin (1997) state, community councils can be described as the lowest tier of democracy in the UK. There are over 9900 community councils in Britain (see Rydin, 2003): 8000 in England, over 1200 in Scotland, and 737 in Wales. Community councils were initially established by the Local Government Act of 1894, however the contemporary legal framework within which community councils operate largely derives from the Local Government Act of 1972 (Sections 27–37). Extension of the powers of community councils were introduced by the Local Government (Miscellaneous) Act of 1976,
part three of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997, and the Local Government Act 2000. The first of these granted statutory town and country planning rights to community councils; these entitlements consisted of the right to be consulted about planning applications in their constituency. As a consequence, as Cullingworth and Nadin (2003: 58) identify, ‘planning issues make up a significant part of [community council’s] agendas’. For those community councils in Wales, planning becomes a prime focus for their operations and relations with their principal authorities as Table 1 points out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Authority Department</th>
<th>Contacted council (%)</th>
<th>Contacted by council (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning Department</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highways Department</td>
<td>86.3</td>
<td>86.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance Department</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Health Department</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation/Leisure Department</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solicitor’s Department</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Department</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Department</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>35.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other department</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The data evidenced in Table 1 illustrates that, although there is not 100 percent communication between all Welsh principal and community councils on issues of planning, there is a regular, two-way dialogue between most councils. Ninety percent of all community councils contact their principal authority on this subject, whilst 80 percent are also contacted by their principal council. In terms of frequency, almost 90 percent of all community councils correspond with their principal councils on issues of planning ‘most months’ (Woods et al., 2003). This percentage is significantly higher than any other dialogue community councils experience, and is the most frequent and arguably the most important interaction that most community councils have with their principal council (indeed with any external body).

It is clear therefore that the statutory planning dialogue between community and principal councils is occurring on both a regular and reciprocal basis in Wales; it has become perhaps the major element of principal–community council relations. Before we turn to the process of this dialogue, it is worthwhile assessing the product or outcome of these deliberations. With reference to the actual decisions made by principal councils on planning applications, data from principal councils themselves suggest that community councils agree with
around 80 percent of judgements (Woods et al., 2003). Anecdotal evidence from unitary officers supports these figures, as the following responses outline:

Qn: In what proportion of cases did the response of the Community Councils agree with the recommendation of the Planning Officer?

I suppose to be on the safe side, 80% agree with the recommendation. (Officer, Principal Council)\(^5\)

I would guess certainly over 80%, but erm, when we make a decision that is contrary to the community view erm, it is something that quite annoys the community councils... when we do disagree it seems to quite upset them! (Officer, Principal Council)

Off the top of my head I would say something like 75%. It’s those 25% that give you the problem! (Officer, Principal Council)

Thus in terms of the outcomes of the planning dialogue between principal and community councils there is agreement in up to 80 percent of cases. On the face of it at least this appears to be an endorsement of the planning system’s relevance to those at the local level. However, as the above quotations imply, the situation is a little more complex than the statistics suggest. Despite agreement on up to 80 percent of decisions there is, therefore, a significant minority of decisions on which the council tiers disagree (perhaps 20–25% of application decisions). It is this minority of cases that cause significant tension within the planning consultation process, and raise questions over the democracy, legitimacy and relevance of the planning system as a whole.

**Perceptions of process: the planning consultation dialogue**

Despite the cases where disagreement over planning decisions appears prevalent, the process of consultation remains one that both council tiers value. From the perspective of community councils, 75 percent of councillors feel that this consultation role is the ‘key means by which they can “best serve” their community’ (Woods et al., 2003: 5), while – publicly at least – principal councils also recognize the importance of the process. As the following officers state:

I think clearly they’re a democratically elected political body, and they can bring local views to planning dialogue. Obviously, at the end of the day, the principal council will have to make the decision – but they [community councils] are involved in the process. (Officer, Principal Council)

Basically, the job of the community councillors means they’re there for a reason, and they are representative of their residents, and so they give – not the whole view, but they give a very important view in making decisions on planning applications. (Officer, Principal Council)

It is implied here that the community councils’ elected status renders their local view important in planning consultation. The planning system appears to recognize this democratic status and, because of this, accords a degree of accountability and representativeness to the information given – councils are generally
accepted as ‘genuine voices of local opinion’ (Gyford et al., 1989: 271). The following officers acknowledge this point more explicitly:

[Community councils] provide local knowledge, obviously [they are] elected as well so they do speak for their community. (Officer, Principal Council)

We do see their [the community councils’] view as a grass roots approach to the planning application and we have a serious look at what they are saying when we’re making our decision. In fact our members insist that the first thing on the agenda is the community council’s view. They ask for the consultations to go at the top of the report and the community council’s view is the first thing on the page. So if they don’t read anything else, they usually read the community council’s view on the application. (Officer, Principal Council)

From these statements one could surmise that the dialogue between community and principal councils is intrinsically valuable due to the democratic nature of the process. From this perspective at least the process reflects the ideal of a pluralist democracy, providing an opportunity for locals to participate in and influence discussion, as the following principal officer states,

Clearly, a level of community involvement is always beneficial [as] it gives people a sense that local views are being considered.

However, to accord the planning dialogue an intrinsic democratic value would be somewhat misleading. The process of planning consultation falls short of the pluralist ideal (in, for example, the 1861 democratic model of John Stuart Mill, see Pratchett, 2004) as community councils do not enjoy the ability to influence decisions in this dialogue. Community views in and of themselves are only legitimate reasons for planning action when they coincide with material considerations (see Tewdwr-Jones, 1993) and thus the process of consultation is merely that; principal councils have a duty to listen to community views, not act on them. Planning consultation between councils is therefore procedural, with power over decision-making remaining centralized rather than devolved to the lowest possible level (as advocated by the European Charter of Local Self-Government, 1985, Article 4.3, see Pratchett, 2004). The following officer outlines how this process is translated into practice:

I go occasionally to go and talk to them and they say, ‘Well you never listen to us’. Well [I say], ‘We always listen to you except that we don’t always agree with you’. Whereas a [community] council can say we are totally opposed to this because 1000 residents are opposed to it, the planning authority has to say, ‘well public opposition to a proposal is not itself a reason to refuse it, unless the opposition is based on sound planning grounds’. (Officer, Principal Council)

The legal framework of planning consultation therefore means that the process does not have any intrinsic democratic value in the pluralist sense. However, just because local views do not necessarily influence decision-making does not mean that the process is without instrumental value for the principal councils involved. From the perspective of principal authorities, community councils are often seen to provide useful information to the decision-making process. The
following examples from officers working at the principal council illustrate this point:

I think they [community councils] genuinely can have a lot of very good local knowledge. (Officer, Principal Council)

They [community councillors] can often bring you a good bit of local knowledge regarding the circumstances of an application, they can often highlight erm, physical factors if I can call them that, site specific issues which you’re not necessarily aware of yourself as a planning officer. (Officer, Principal Council)

Thus community councils’ input to the process of planning consultation is often valued by principal councils as it provides information that is often ‘out of sight’ to those at an extra-local scale. Such valued local input may include knowledge of the physical characteristics of an area, providing data on localized effects (such as seasonal flooding patterns, for example). This knowledge – accrued from the immediate inhabitation of an area by those who enjoy firsthand experience of it – is valuable as it is plugs an identified ‘data deficit’ in the decision-making process. This is data that, due to the economic and temporal constraints on principal councils, is unlikely to be derived through any other means – for example, as the following planning officer in a national park authority outlines: ‘The community council . . . tend to keep an eye on things for us and if they see something happening that shouldn’t be happening then they’ll often give us the whistle.’ Accessing this knowledge through planning consultation therefore improves decision-making for the principal council. This utilization of local knowledge by principal councils runs counter to the generally accepted employment of knowledge by the planning system. As Friedmann has outlined,

planners [usually] claim that their advanced degrees in relevant disciplines and professional fields give them privileged access to scientific knowledge and know-how. They also claim that this knowledge is generally superior to knowledge gained in other ways (from practical experience, for example). (Friedmann, 1987: 40)

As Friedmann suggests, the ‘pillars of the modernist planning system’ (Sandercock, 1998) are generally agreed to be scientific in nature, with knowledge only being granted legitimacy in decision-making if it complements or coincides with a positivist epistemological framing. However, in the case of planning consultation that concerns us here, local knowledge is often employed that is not only gathered by local people (rather than say scientists or other ‘experts’, see Corburn, 2003), but is also based on, ‘personal and familiar experiences rather than depersonalized technical calculations’ (Fischer, 2000: 132). In the words of Lindblom and Cohen, this local knowledge, ‘does not owe its origin . . . to professional techniques, but rather to common sense, casual empiricism, or thoughtful speculation and analysis’ (1979: 12). To an extent, therefore, the planning system appears to have changed its positivist framing to include alternative ‘epistemological categories’ (Porter, 2006: 361) in its operation. This could be interpreted to represent the system demonstrating responsiveness and relevance to the contextual worldviews of those it influences. However, an
alternative reading may be more likely. Despite the fact that the local knowledges under consideration fail to fit the epistemological orientation of the planning system, one can argue that they do resonate with the values and interests of statecraft (after Scott, 1988). Following Scott (1988), Porter considers statecraft to be the process that governments and related bureaucracies utilize to formulate problems in their simplest terms in order that state decision-making is rendered efficient and timely (2006). Thus, of primary significance to those involved in statecraft is the ability to resolve issues in a cost- and time-effective way. As a consequence, the complexity of the social world is often seen myopically (Scott, 1988), with issues of democracy or local knowledge being reduced to technical questions that can be solved, rather than encompassing more fundamental concerns of political or socio-cultural rights (see Porter, 2006; also Smith, 2001, 2004). In other words, in a situation where there are huge pressures on principal councils to ‘turn round’ planning applications within eight weeks (prompted by the 2001 Green Paper ‘Planning: Delivering a Fundamental Change’; for an overview, see Rydin, 2003), locals’ non-positivist knowledge helps to makes principal councils’ decisions more timely and effective, and as a consequence becomes a legitimate influence on decision-making. It seems, therefore, that there are sufficient gaps between the ‘pillars of the modernist planning system’ to selectively allow non-positivist knowledge to be recognized, but only if and when that knowledge resonates with the values and interests of statecraft – in this case, the bureaucratic pressures of the planning system as a whole.

We can see, therefore, that although planning consultation has little intrinsic value in a democratic sense, it does hold a degree of instrumental utility, especially for principal councils. It may also be assumed that the process has some instrumental value for community councils as, although not for the ideal reason of pluralist democracy, their knowledge can have an effect on decision-making. This mutually beneficial situation is likely to apply in the 75–80 percent of cases where each council tier agrees with the decision of the planning application at hand. However, where disagreement arises, the different interests and values of each party means that significant tension enters the relationship.

Interests, epistemologies and emotions in planning dialogue

Principal authorities and community councils often have very different attitudes towards development in the local area. In many cases these different attitudes may simply come down to the nature of development in a particular location, rather than the perceived threat of any development at all (as we have seen council tiers tend to agree on up to 80 percent of applications). However, their different views of development often become framed within a ‘pro’ versus ‘anti’ binary, with the principal authority attempting to facilitate growth and expansion on one hand, and the community council wishing to prevent it on the other. As the following views express:

There is this sort of in-built friction. You know, [the urban] needs to accommodate its development, acquire more land so that it can expand . . . we need to be identifying areas for development on the periphery – and the periphery is where the
community councils are, and those community councillors are by and large elected
to protect the rural identity of those areas. So that really is the crunch of the issue.
(Officer, Principal Council)

[The principal council] needs to accommodate its development, acquire more land so
that it can expand the urban area, we need to be identifying places for development
on the edge of town . . . . So when you’re talking about . . . development plans then
you’re usually talking about the urban area pushing out into rural areas. (Officer,
Principal Council)

I mean, the essential problem is . . . that there is an essential conflict of interests . . .
the tone of the [community council is] all about – you know – ‘protect our little rural
settlement from the march of the nasty urban area towards it’ – you know. And I
don’t know what you do to overcome that . . . there is that sort of fundamental
difference in view between [us]. (Officer, Principal Council)

As the discussion has outlined so far, the function of planning consultation at
the local level is not to respond to public outcry or criticism, but to conform to
planning regulations and strategic plans. Principal councils do so not by remain-
ing resolutely positivist in their knowledge base, but by selectively using infor-
mation gathered in a range of ways to enhance its statecraft. The above
quotations illustrate that in the many cases these strategic plans and statecraft
are not neutral towards development, rather they are both broadly facilitative
towards it. Indeed, in 2001 in Britain as a whole, 87 percent of all planning appli-
cations were approved, with 35 percent of developers’ appeals against refusal
being accepted (Council for the Protection of Rural England, 2002). It is
perhaps unsurprising therefore that this broadly facilitative approach towards
development is sometimes seen by community councils as a potential threat to
the existing built fabric and related way of life in local places. This ‘fundamental
difference in view’ towards development complicates the relationship between
council tiers, but also brings into question the relevance and resonance of
planning decision-making to those in local communities.

I think a lot of the time they [community councils] know . . . what really the issues
are but are sometimes ruled with their heart. (Officer, Principal Council)

As the above quotations imply, many community councils seek to maintain and
protect elements of their locale from unwanted development. In doing so, they
not only come into conflict with principal councils due to their opposing views
on ‘appropriate development’, but also in terms of the worldviews and value
systems that legitimize (or not) these perspectives. Emanating from the lived
inhabitation of their local place, community councillors generally have a
personalized and emotional connection to their area. This element of local
attachment and affiliation motivates many to stand for local office in the first
instance. As many phenomenological writers have identified, this more-than-
cognitive association between people and place is a crucial dimension of human
identity and society (see, for example, Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Heidegger,
1956; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974). As representatives of the
interests and values of their local population, community councillors bring these
situated knowledges to planning consultation, as the following principal council officers identify:

I think they [planning applications] are judged on who’s making the application rather than the merits of it. You know – he’s a local farmer: ‘Oh yes, he’s lived there thirty-odd years, his family’s been there for generations – of course he should have an extra farm building’; and then somebody who’s moved in from ____ and wants to build a house in the next-door field and it’s obviously definitely not [appropriate] – you know. (Officer, Principal Council)

All of the comments that we were having through from them [community councils] were partial; they didn’t look solely from the planning point of view – they were looking at it in terms of more personal connections, or [from] a very parochial point of view. (Officer, Principal Council)

It is possible to infer from the above comments that the more-than-cognitive intelligences (see Thrift, 2004) of community councils are not deemed legitimate in planning deliberation. From the conventional viewpoint (outlined by Friedmann earlier in this article) this is unsurprising as this form of local knowledge is not gathered through a technically robust method nor conforms to epistemological notions of objectivity or standardization. Indeed, it is through recourse to these nomothetic notions of generalization and standardization that principal councils explain their inability to take account of these values and knowledges in planning deliberation:

County Councillors . . . have got criteria that they have got to work to because if they make a decision, they’ve got to be able to stand up and defend it or it may be taken to appeal and it may cost them quite a lot of money if they make frivolous or unsubstantiated comments. (Councillor, Principal Council)

You have to look at the criteria and really what planning law is. You can’t change planning law – planning law is set by Government and you’ve got to work within those rules. (Councillor, Principal Council)

The inability of principal councils to take account of local values and knowledges causes tension between communities and the planning system. It is clear that those at the local level sense the importance of more-than-cognitive knowledge in their decision-making, yet even if those at the unitary level share this sense (perhaps because in their non-professional capacity they are part of that same ‘local’), planning rules clearly limit their ability to grant it legitimacy. This situation therefore complements what Eversley has identified as the generally cited reason for the failure of citizen participation in planning, namely the, ‘inability of the aspiring participants to satisfactorily understand the current state of planning theory and practice’ (cited in Fagence, 1977: 334). In other words, it is an uneducated populace who do not help the planning process by advocating interests, emotions and epistemologies that the system cannot and does not value. Planning participation breaks down, therefore, due to a ‘competence disparity’ between the planners and the planned (p. 334).

This difference in epistemologies and interests is perhaps the foremost point of conflict between ‘lay people’ and ‘experts’ in all fields of decision-making, not
only planning (see Fischer, 2000). However, in the planning system this conflict becomes complicated as, as we have seen, some local knowledge is granted legitimacy by the planning system. This ‘legitimate’ local knowledge is in many ways broadly similar to the more-than-cognitive knowledge that is deemed ‘invalid’; it is held by similar people and gathered in similar ways. This selective use of local knowledge thus complicates the conflict because it renders problematic the decision to de-legitimate these more-than-cognitive intelligences on epistemological grounds alone. It seems more likely – at least to those at the local level – that this form of knowledge is rendered invalid not because it is epistemologically questionable, but because it is neither resonant with, nor directly translatable into, the values and interests of the planning system. In other words, these forms of personalized and situated knowings are excluded because they fail to facilitate development. This article argues that, as those at the local level come to perceive the pro-development nature of planning decisions, the ‘competence disparity’ which occurs between council tiers gives way to a ‘confidence disparity’. In other words, locals become disconnected from the planning system not only because they are deemed to lack the competence to interact effectively with it, but also because their confidence in the planning system to fairly consider a range of development and conservation options is lost. In short, locals come to feel disenchanted and disillusioned with a system that effectively tells them to ‘talk to the hand’.

I always feel that at Community Council level whatever we say it’s just not listened to when it gets to County Hall. I could say that we disagree with something and then they’ll . . . I know . . . it is taken note of, but at the end of the day it is decided, planning decisions are decided in County Hall . . . I mean I feel that we know more about the area than maybe the County Council do. Sometimes I just feel that Community Councillors are washed over really. (Councillor, Community Council)

It just seems that we are wasting our time. People [in the principal council] don’t take any notice do they? (Councillor, Community Council)

I mean we’ve got professional people on our community council and its [sic] so annoying, you’ve got professional people who are being paid nothing . . . the only thing we want is . . . not to be treated like idiots. (Councillor, Community Council)

There is a lot of misunderstanding between the planning authority and [community] councils. There have been accusations that we don’t take into account their comments . . . . There has been an element of distrust I would say between officers and [community] councils, or the [principal] council and the [community] councils. (Officer, Principal Council)

We are all so fed up with the way we are being treated we might as well not be there! The only thing that is left to us if we continue to fail on this [getting our knowledge acted upon] is, as a community council, to resign! And then it might take a couple of headlines to show what is going on! (Councillor, Community Council)

Although cases of resignation and even disbanding, be they threatened or actual, are rare, the tension between council tiers on this issue is crucial to note to understand the planning dialogue appropriately. It is also important to recognize that
not all community councils ‘get mad’ with the system that seems to overlook their values and interests, some try to ‘get even’ with it. The planning consultation that, on the face of it at least, predominantly recognizes positivist knowledges, prompts some community councils to ‘professionalize’ their knowledge base. In other words, they attempt to translate their interests and values into a vocabulary and epistemology that the planning system formally recognizes. As the following community councillors explain:

We have to be very good on planning because we have got half the town in our community and we have loads of planning applications and we have to be very . . . professional in dealing with them. And the other thing is where we will feel strongly about something, we're willing to back it with getting solicitors, dealing with solicitors to co-present our case and all that sort of stuff. (Councillor, Community Council)

It started off with the Unitary Development Plan, erm, where our County Council set out parameters and rules under which it should act and then proceeded to draw up a plan that contradicted the very rules that they themselves had set out! Well, for an example they are talking about putting forty houses on four acres of land here, and then in its own guidelines it says that any development should be of the same nature existing currently in the village, now I mean to do what they are talking about doing would first of all increase the village size by 50%, and put forty houses, so you would have 50% of the village condensed on four acres of land! We did the research on it, we wanted a planner involved, who wrote four pages in ‘planning speak’ saying exactly what we had said (and he charged us a £1000 for it [chuckles] which was really great you know!). (Councillor, Community Council)

Despite these moves towards professionalization (that are encouraged by ‘Beacon’ Council status and ‘Good Practice Guides’ issued by the National Association of Local Councils), in practice they seem to have little effect on the political tension between council tiers. Even when community councillors adopt ‘professional knowledges’ to oppose developments, they still feel that their views lack influence in the planning dialogue:

We try and make, not an emotional decision, it’s always based on sound fact and could stand up if you like in an argument. It just seems that we are wasting our time. People don’t take any notice do they? (Councillor, Community Council)

I think one of the bug bears that we have had in the past is that we have been consulted on matters, I think that’s the same with, not just the County but with the Assembly Government itself, there is a lot of consultation, it doesn't always seem to matter a lot what our responses are, because they are going through the exercise. They have been required by the Assembly Government to consult us, so they do and then how much weight our response is given is difficult to know. We tend to think that the consultation is noted, our response is noted, but not much beyond that. So you wonder whether a lot of it is very meaningful. I am sure that they would say it is . . . (Clerk, Community Council)

Thus regardless of the vocabulary and knowledge system adopted by those at the local level, many community councillors feel that the ‘fundamental difference in view’ between themselves and the planning system over development means consultation is often a statutory obligation to be fulfilled, rather than a
considered deliberation over a particular application. The situation can perhaps be summed up by the following, perhaps outspoken, principal officer:

They can be a little bit of a nuisance now and again, but . . . I don’t want to sound sort of awful, but . . . obviously, they are part of the consultation process, and if their views are justified, then they’re justified, if they’re not, we don’t worry. (Officer, Principal Council)

Conclusion

This article has sought to outline the important but hidden relationship between community and principal councils on issues of planning. This relationship is taken as an important indicator of the health and vitality of the planning system and its responsiveness and relevance to its stakeholders at the local level. Taking the example of councils in Wales, the article has demonstrated that statutory dialogue on planning applications is a crucial component of council tier relations and comes to form a valued, but nevertheless contentious, process.

In line with the legal framework, council tiers in Wales tend to enter into dialogue in a regular, monthly capacity. This dialogue produces agreement in approximately 80 percent of cases, yet disagreement over the remaining 20 percent highlights a number of important tensions. The article has illustrated that despite the widely held view that planning solely legitimates knowledge that is nomothetic and positivist in nature, in practice a more mixed picture is apparent. The article has shown that principal councils selectively use local knowledge – knowledge that is not necessarily gathered through positivist epistemology but through casual empiricism, lived inhabitation of an area, and common sense – when it facilitates more efficient and effective decision-making. Thus knowledge is exploited not because it fits the epistemological orientation of the planning system, but because it resonates with the values and interests of statecraft (after Scott, 1988).

I mean, the essential problem is . . . is that there is a conflict of interests [between the planning system and community councils], and I don’t know what you do to overcome that . . . (Officer, Principal Council)

However, as the article has outlined, local knowledge not always coincides or is translatable into the values and interests of the planning system. When local knowledge conveys the emotional and community connections of individuals and places, the planning system fails to recognize or exploit it. This knowledge fails to register because it not only complicates the process of statecraft, but also tends to question the applications for development under consideration. In these cases, the values, interests and epistemologies of those at the local level are seen to come into direct conflict with both the theoretical and practical values of those of the planning system. In these cases community councils, ‘express views which seem to express a local “common sense”’ (i.e. a view that accords with the epistemology of local knowledge) but which, ‘falls outside the scope of the [principal] council’s planning powers as determined or interpreted by planning legislation’ (Gyford, 1991: 90).
As a consequence of this, from the perspective of those in community councils, the planning system is no longer deemed to be a democratic and pluralist system; rather it is seen as broadly facilitative of development. From a legal framework perhaps, this is not a problem. Principal councils have no obligation to respond to or be influenced by the values of local communities. However, in terms of the political relevance and responsiveness of the planning system, the problem is greater. To function as a relevant public system, planning should respect and respond to its stakeholders. Key stakeholders at the local level are elected community councillors and it is crucial to give due weight to the types of interests and knowledges that community councils bring to planning dialogue. This necessity does nothing, of course, to reduce the importance of questioning the nature of community councillors’ representation. For example, are councillors truly representative of their community and its interests? Could the generation of a more apparently inclusive and participatory planning system lead to a ‘tyranny’ of a minority (Cooke and Kothari, 2002), where power is circulated to a small clique at the local level who reinforce their interests rather than representing or involving a broader population? It is important therefore to remain sensitive to the ‘local trap’ (Brown and Purcell, 2005) when considering planning influence; scholars and practitioners must remain aware that there is nothing inherent within the ‘local scale’ that means that more equitable decisions and processes will be produced by and for this scale. With all these issues in mind, as Harvey (1973) and Healey (2003) have identified, it is important that both the process and outcome of planning deliberation is seen to be socially just. Without recognizing the importance of locals’ attachment to their communities, and the key role these places have for their collective and individual identity (Hillier, 2001), the planning system cannot be deemed vital, responsive, and just to the values and interests of those at the local level.

As Cairns (1996: 19) has identified, perhaps, the root of the problem is the generally held and longstanding view that ‘local government [is] a functional rather than a democratic system’. A shift in this view is required if the planning system is to remain responsive and relevant to the values and interests of multiple publics (Sandercock and Forsyth, 1992), particularly at the local level. This argument stops short of stating that power should be devolved to local communities, but rather suggests that the process of planning deliberation ought to formally recognize that, ‘scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge’ (Lyotard, 1979: 7) and as a consequence integrate more-than-cognitive knowledges into its interests and values. Embracing the need for a more postmodern approach to planning, one that theorists recognize requires the inclusion of its range of social stakeholders and the effective communication with culture-based epistemologies (see Allmendinger, 2001, 2002; Beauregard, 1989; Umomoto, 2001) is crucial if local communities and their representatives are not to be alienated further from the planning system and broader political structures. The battle, therefore, is over ‘whose reality counts’ (Chambers, 1997): the values and interests of centralism, development and economic growth, or those which more sustainably balance development, democracy, and interests at a variety of scales.
Notes

1. Principal councils include all local authorities and national park authorities that make planning decisions in the principality.

2. The 1972 Local Government Act also permits some community or parish councils to use the term ‘town council’, a practice that has been adopted by 102 councils in Wales. In addition, two community councils in Wales have been permitted by royal charter to use the designation ‘city council’ (see Woods et al., 2003). Whatever the designation, all enjoy similar rights and responsibilities, however a notable exception is those parish councils in England that have a tax-raising power not enjoyed by those in Wales and Scotland.

3. This project was commissioned by Welsh Assembly Government (see Woods et al., 2003) and directed by Dr Bill Edwards and Dr Michael Woods, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. The author, Dr Rachel Hughes and Dr Graham Gardner conducted the empirical work, however all arguments and mistakes in this article are the author’s own.

4. ‘Talk to the hand’ is a phrase used in popular culture to convey that a person is not wholly interested in what someone is saying. According to the free encyclopaedia Wikipedia: ‘‘Talk to the hand’ (or ‘tell it to the hand’) is an English language slang phrase . . . originat[ing] in African American Vernacular English as a contemptuous and urbanized way of saying that no one is listening, and is often elongated to a phrase such as “Talk to the hand, because the ear’s not listening” or “Talk to the hand, (be)cause the face don’t understand”’ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk_to_the_hand_%28expression%29, accessed October 2007]. In the context of this article it refers to the often strained and problematic conversations between community and principal councils over planning issues.

5. All community or principal councils and their representatives have been anonymized in this article.

6. As the following principal officer states: ‘The planning process is not democratic [at the local level], that’s very difficult for a [community] councillor to accept. It’s very difficult indeed’ (Officer, Principal Council).

References


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