

snakes and ladders

Sue Brownill asks TCPA members and other *T&CP* readers to share their memories of community-led planning in the UK with a project (which involves the TCPA as a member) looking into its history

capturing the history of community-led planning



Have you been involved in community planning initiatives? Would you be interested in sharing your memories and experiences? Do you have a loft filled with papers, memorabilia and 'stuff' you would like to share? If so, a new project looking into the history of community-led planning would love to hear from you. Read more about the project and how you can get involved in this edition of 'Snakes and Ladders'...

There has been a long tradition of citizen-led planning activity in the UK, particularly since the 1960s, when new forms of political activism and advocacy planning emerged.¹ Groups such as the Eldonians in Liverpool have creatively challenged development proposals,² and in places such as Coin Street in London campaigns have led to direct community control over land.³ Others have presented their own popular plans for rural and urban neighbourhoods, such as The People's Plan for the Royal Docks and numerous parish plans.⁴

These campaigns and initiatives, and many others, have not only developed new ways for communities to gain control over local spaces, but have also created different forms of planning and shown how planning can deliver locally relevant and socially just outcomes. This activity has gone on alongside the work of engaging with the planning system through entanglements with the formal processes of participation in statutory plan-making and commenting on planning applications.

But while there is acknowledgement of the importance of what could be termed community-led planning, and some examples where its lessons have been captured, it is the engagement in *formal* participation that has more often than not caught the attention of planning historians and others. 2019's celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Skeffington Report into participation in planning are a case in point. I and

others used this milestone as an opportunity to reflect on the evolution of participation in planning – what we have learned and what future directions might be taken.⁵ A possible exception here is the recently published history of Planning Aid,⁶ but this has also been a movement aimed at linking communities to the planning process and to planning professionals rather than being solely 'community-led'.

By contrast, the recording of community-led initiatives has been mainly done on an ad hoc, case-by-case basis, with some local groups active in capturing their histories and particularly prominent examples being recorded, such as Tolmers Square⁷ or the 'Weller Way'.² Quite rightly, there has been a focus on techniques.⁸ But unlike movements such as squatting and community housing and formal participation in planning, no attempt to bring together the histories of community-led planning has been made at the national level in a systematic way, to enable us to fill in the knowledge gaps and learn from experience.

Partly emerging from reflections following an event on the Skeffington anniversary held at the TCPA offices in 2019, a group of us decided that we would like to fill this gap by setting up a project involving the TCPA and a number of universities to gather together 'hidden histories' of community-led planning from all the nations of the UK to both celebrate and learn from them. The 'Spaces of Hope' project has received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to do just this, and to build a digital archive of testimonies, documents, plans, posters, badges – you name it – that bring these stories to life.

We will also be exploring the TCPA's own archive, which is yet to be fully catalogued, to bring its vast experience of working with communities both through and beyond Planning Aid to wider public attention. And we will be carrying out case studies in different parts of the UK, which will follow particular initiatives and places in more depth, producing memory walks of local activism and holding local workshops (COVID restrictions permitting) to discuss the alternative planning practices that people have engaged in.

Finally, there will be a number of events bringing participants together, including a story-telling event

and final workshops bringing past and present into conversation, to reflect on how the role of community planning can be strengthened and developed so that its potential might be more fully tapped.

The outcomes will include a searchable digital archive, which will include photographs, recordings, videos, etc. that capture this history and provide more in-depth information on particular initiatives. We are also hoping to produce guidelines on how people can research their own community planning history.

The Spaces of Hope team involves myself along with fellow planners Andy Inch (University of Sheffield), Geraint Ellis (Queen's University Belfast), and Francesca Sartorio (Cardiff University), historian Glen O'Hara (Oxford Brookes), community artist Loraine Leeson (Middlesex University), digital archivist Mike Pidd (University of Sheffield), and Hugh Ellis from the TCPA. There are two researchers: Debbie Humphry and Jason Slade, one at Oxford Brookes University, the other at Sheffield University.

The time feels right for doing this research as these histories are in danger of being lost – yet they can tell us so much, not just about what communities active in planning can achieve, but also about how to apply the lessons learned from this activity to the present day. Already through talking to people we are aware of examples where local groups are doing just this, and our project is designed to draw these ideas together and link them, rather than repeat this process.

And this is where you come in. Readers of *Town & Country Planning* will, I am sure, have many valuable stories about their experiences of community-led planning. If my own loft is anything to go by, then you may well have boxes of papers, agendas, T-shirts, mugs, photographs and other memorabilia gathering dust, which is why I am using this column to invite you to participate in the project in a number of ways:

- First, we would like you to contact us if you know of any initiatives that you think the project should look at. We are defining community-led planning loosely, as planning taking place largely outside the formal system. This may include alternative community plans or proposals for an area, campaigns, the creation of local spaces, the use of art and creative methods to get the message across, and communities working together to positively change the localities in which they live. We are interested in stories of success but also in campaigns which did not succeed and plans that did not come to fruition. So there are plenty of possibilities to draw on here.

- Secondly, we would like to know if you have any documents, memorabilia, press cuttings, etc. about these or other initiatives which we would be able to capture digitally in the first instance, i.e. photograph or scan to include in the archive.
 - Thirdly, we would really like to talk to you – particularly those of you who have had a sustained involvement over time. These interviews can be anonymous if you wish to protect your identity, and we would ensure that you know what to expect and are happy to proceed before we begin.
 - Finally, we will be setting up a mailing list to inform people of the progress of the project and to release initial findings. If you would like to know more about the project, be included on this list or get involved in any way, please let us know by emailing us at contact@peoplesplans.org or by filling in the short form available at <http://bit.ly/peoplesplans>
- You can also follow us on Twitter at [@PeoplesPlans](https://twitter.com/PeoplesPlans) and we are building a website at <https://www.peoplesplans.org>
- All information will be treated confidentially. The proposal has been approved by the Ethics Committee at Oxford Brookes University, and we will be following procedures to ensure confidentiality and data protection.

We look forward to hearing from you, and we hope you can help us to explore the diverse history of people-powered planning.

● **Professor Sue Brownill** is with the School of the Built Environment at Oxford Brookes University. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 S Damer and C Hague: 'Public participation in planning: a review'. *Town Planning Review*, 1971, Vol. 42 (3), 217-32
- 2 J McBane: *The Rebirth of Liverpool: The Eldonian Way*. Liverpool University Press, 2008
- 3 I Tuckett: 'Coin Street: There is another way'. *Community Development Journal*, 1988, Vol. 23 (4), 249-57
- 4 R Yarwood: 'Parish councils, partnership and governance: the development of 'exceptions' housing in Malvern Hills District, England'. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 2002, Vol. 18 (3), 275-91
- 5 S Brownill, G Ellis, A Inch and F Sartorio: 'Older but no wiser – Skeffington 50 years on'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2019, Vol. 88, Mar./Apr., 122-25
- 6 G Parker and E Street: *Enabling Participatory Planning: Planning Aid and Advocacy in Neoliberal Times*. Policy Press, 2018
- 7 N Wates: *The Battle for Tolmers Square*. Routledge, 1976
- 8 T Gibson: *The Doers' Guide to Planning for Real*. Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation, 1998