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# There is little proof that neighbourhood plans help housing delivery, by Richard Garlick

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25 October 2018 by Richard Garlick

**Neighbourhood plans are here to stay. The latest government figures show that more than 2,400 groups have started on producing one. They are without equal as mechanisms for engaging local people in the planning system.**



Politicians also love them. Planning minister Kit Malthouse has said that he wants to see as much neighbourhood plan coverage across the country as possible. This month, at our Planning for Housing conference, shadow planning minister Roberta Blackman-Woods also praised them.

Worryingly, however, both seem to believe that neighbourhood plans are a proven method of significantly increasing housing allocations. Blackman-Woods told our conference delegates: "Neighbourhood planning groups will bring forward more land for housing and higher housing numbers than they've been asked to do, because often local people know sites that are appropriate for development and are able to identify them in a way that a local authority can't". Last month, Malthouse told the Conservative party

conference that "on average, they reckon neighbourhood plans produce 10 to 15 per cent more housing than is generally targeted".

But the evidence to back both claims is flimsy. According to a spokesman in Malthouse's department, his comments were based on a 2016 government report. However, the authority of the research has been queried, and during legal proceedings in 2017, government lawyers admitted that the "analysis is plainly provisional and of limited weight". Independent research suggest a much less positive contribution to housing delivery from neighbourhood plans. Consultancy Lichfields published a study on the topic in October 2017. It found that, of 330 completed neighbourhood plans 'made' at the time, only 15 appeared to plan for genuinely 'more' or 'additional' housing compared with the local plan target. And those 15 only boosted housing allocations compared to local plans by an average of three per cent.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government acknowledges that new research is needed on this topic. At Planning for Housing, government chief planner Steve Quartermain said that "as the number of neighbourhood plans have gone up, we need to revisit the assertion we made some time ago ... about neighbourhood plans being used to facilitate more growth than perhaps would have happened without them".

So it is worrying to hear a minister and a shadow minister alike extol the contribution that neighbourhood planning can make to housing delivery without the evidence in place. Neighbourhood plans have community engagement virtues that mean they should be persevered with, even if they are not great enablers of new housing. But most consultants, at least, believe that they tend to constrain housing delivery. Nearly two-thirds of respondents to our consultancy survey last year agreed that neighbourhood planning had increased residents' ability to resist development. If political leaders want to further reinforce neighbourhood plans, they need to do so with their eyes open.

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