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Empowering local people through the planning process: The emerging practice of 'Place Planning' and its contribution to community well-being in Wales

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Abstract: The past twenty years has seen UK Government aspiring to put greater power in the hands of local people. In England, the 2011 Localism Act and 2012 National Planning Policy Framework have created new opportunities for local people to influence development. The Welsh Government has taken its own stance: the Planning Act 2015 (Wales); the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 commit local authorities to improving social, economic, cultural and environmental well-being. Alongside these top-down processes, there is an emerging strategy to further engage local people in influencing the quality of their places and the well-being of their communities. A critical review of two tools designed to facilitate the Place Planning process in Wales is presented. Both tools help to increase opportunities for local people to have a voice in the planning process, and for the people who know places best to influence their well-being. However, questions are raised about the capacity and aspirations of communities to help deliver Place Plans, and assess the pressures on overburdened, under-resourced local authorities. Importantly, the increasing role of community-led initiatives has consequences for the role of designers and the skills they can contribute to place-making and well-being.

Keywords: Place, planning, well-being, community, Wales

Introduction

This is a critical point in time for our communities, with drastic reductions in local government spending placing greater levels of responsibility for the future of communities in the hands of their inhabitants. Increasingly stretched Local Authorities across the UK are focused on providing essential and statutory services, while planning and development services have faced cuts of 46% between 2010 and 2014 (National Audit Office, 2014, p4).

While in England the *Localism Act (2011)* has created new opportunities for local people to influence development, in Wales the *Planning (Wales) Act 2015*, the *Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013* and the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* have committed local authorities to improving social, economic, cultural and environmental well-being. Alongside these strategic policies, there is an emerging approach to further engage local people in influencing the future of their built environment through the development of 'Place Plans', led and authored by local communities and adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance. These policies present a unique opportunity to redistribute knowledge and decision-making power to local people, offering the opportunity for communities to 'reclaim the initiative' and for the people who know their places best to inform their future.

In response to these agendas, this paper explores the emerging Place Planning process in Wales and its potential to empower communities to take control of their future and to increase community well-being. It is suggested that in order to enable local people to understand their place and make a tangible difference to it, new methodological approaches and tools are needed. The innovative 'Shape My Town' method of analysis, designed to enable community-led plan making in Wales and beyond, is critically reviewed. Developed by Coombs Jones Architects and Design Commission for Wales (DCFw), it is the first Place Planning tool to be developed and tested in Wales. It offers an approach founded on the need to construct an evidence base, created through analysis of the built environment, to inform community-led decision-making. Two iterations are discussed: 'Shape My Town', a freely available web-based toolkit giving local people the tools, resources and inspiration to help shape the future of their built environments; and 'Shape My Brecon Beacons', a bespoke evolution of the tool developed for the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority that extends the tool to include community well-being and cohesion.

We argue that these tools, founded on principles derived from urban design research, help to increase opportunities for local people to 'reclaim the initiative' in the planning process and for the people who know places best to influence their future and well-being. We conclude by discussing the opportunities and challenges of transferring plan-making to local communities and the impact of this on the role of designers in contributing to place-making and well-being. While the complex interplay of localism and austerity present "*an opportunity for progressive urban design and a rupture in business-as-usual urban development*" (Gray, 2016, p.4), these challenges have significant consequences for how designers conceive the urban environment and the skills they can contribute to place-making.

Community-led planning and well-being

Recent policy in the UK has seen a shift toward increasing participation in decision-making. The UK Government's 'Big Society' concept and the *Localism Act*, which gained Royal Assent in November 2012, is giving local people more decision-making powers and offering communities opportunities to shape their environment by developing local plans. Top-down is being replaced by bottom-up, with the aim of "*reinvigorating the most local forms of government – parish, town and community councils – allowing them to take control of key local processes, assets and services tailored to the needs of local residents*" (RIBA, 2011, p.7).

The devolved Welsh Government has taken its own approach. Welsh Government's '*Regeneration of Town Centres*' report recommends that within the framework of a local authority's Local Development Plan (LDP), individual communities should have a comprehensive plan in place developed by a partnership of stakeholders and the community (National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Business Committee, 2012). The *Planning (Wales) Act 2015* similarly requires increased participation and public engagement in development planning. Alongside the accompanying *Positive Planning Implementation Plan (2015)*, the Act introduced the notion of 'Place Plans' as Supplementary Planning Guidance, led and authored by local communities. Welsh Government's *Planning Policy Wales* states that, '*Selective use of Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) is a means of setting out more detailed thematic or site specific guidance on the way in which the policies of an LDP are to be interpreted and applied in particular circumstances or areas*' (Welsh Government, 2015 p.21). This represents a shift toward greater emphasis on place and

community engagement in the plan-making process, giving individuals and groups a greater and more meaningful impact on the future of the places in which they live, work and play.

Alongside the devolution of plan-making power, Welsh Government has placed Well-being at the heart of Government policy. The *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* and *Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013*, commit local authorities to improving social, economic, cultural and environmental well-being. The *Future Generations Act* introduces seven well-being goals, creating a shared vision for public bodies to work towards to support individuals and communities to sustain and improve their health and well-being. The five ‘Ways of Working’ outlined in the Act encourage integration, collaboration and involvement and place well-being at the heart of regeneration policy (see table 1).

Together, these Acts create an environment in which local people can have an increased role in considering the well-being of their place. Taking control of the future of their place can empower communities to bring into consciousness the conditions that shape their place in their world; this self-determination is linked to an increased sense of well-being, purpose and community cohesion (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

Table 1: The seven well-being goals and five ways of working described in the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*

Seven Well-being Goals	Five ‘Ways of Working’
A globally responsive Wales	Long-term
A prosperous Wales	Prevention
A resilient Wales	Integration
A healthier Wales	Collaboration
A more Equal Wales	Involvement
A Wales of cohesive communities	
A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language	

The ‘Shape My Town’ method

In this context, this paper illustrates the use of the innovative ‘Shape My Town’ method (www.shapemytown.org), developed to encourage and enable community-led, local planning in Wales and beyond.

The method was developed to reflect the importance of understanding the built environment in creating successful places and to promote a move toward greater consideration of place-making and distinctiveness in new development. Welsh Government has identified “*the physical quality of the town and its rural area*” as a vital component in developing “*vital and vibrant places*” (Welsh Government, 2012 p.4). Research by CABE suggests 87% of people agree that the quality of buildings and public spaces have a direct impact on the way they feel (CABE, 2002), and research by Gehl (2004) has similarly linked the quality of public space to social use and liveliness. It has also been demonstrated that good quality design plays a vital role in enhancing the well-being of inhabitants, strengthening community, improving social and physical health, and increasing civic engagement (Knox & Meier, 2009).

Created by Coombs Jones and DCFW, ‘Shape My Town’ builds on a body of work understanding the physical character of a place, including DCFW’s publication ‘*My Square*

Mile' and *'Ruthin: Market Town of the Future'*, an award-winning community-led town planning project. The method provides an accessible web-based toolkit of information, guides and ideas to inspire and support community groups who want to play a part in shaping the future of their places. The target audience is predominantly non-professional and the tool offers a simplified set of questions to provoke discussion and analysis of urban design issues. The method consists of five phases that lead participants through setting up a plan team, building an evidence base for decision making, developing a vision, delivering a place plan and monitoring progress, summarised in Table 2. Best practice case studies, downloadable guidance and resources to help facilitate workshops and activities supplement the analytical tool.

The methods of analysis promote an approach to the understanding of places that is focused on the built environment. The primary aim is to reveal the sense of place and the components that give a place its character; as Powe and Hart (2016) identify, gaining an understanding of how a place has been affected by history and geography is vital in planning for its future. The analysis prompts consideration of the built environment at a range of settlement scales. The method draws on research that is morphological (Lynch, 1960), historical and visual (Cullen, 1961 & Worskett, 1969), multi-scalar (MVRDV, 2002) and people oriented (Gehl, 2004). While the above approaches tend to focus on one aspect of place-making, the Shape My Town approach is a qualitative multi-dimensional analysis that gathers, processes and reconstructs evidence derived from experiential, photographic, graphic and statistical surveys. The tool encourages local people to build an evidence base for change in their community through analysis of urban design issues, sense of place and distinctiveness, by working at a variety of scales, each with a series of guidance notes and associated 'questions to ask':

- Landscape: Setting, views, skyline, edges, parks and green space.
- Townscape: Heritage and history, form and layout, buildings and scale, and materials and detail.
- Streetscape: Public spaces, Streets and lanes, Furniture and surfaces.

Through evaluation and analysis of the information gathered and comparison to other places, key strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement are revealed and taken forward into a place plan.

Pilot projects: Increasing community coherence

The tool was tested through pilot studies in two communities in south Wales: Abergavenny, a relatively sizable and prosperous market town in Monmouthshire, and Ynysybwl, a village in the post-industrial South Wales Valleys. In a day-long workshop in each location, members of local community groups and councils came together to test the evidence-building phase of the toolkit. Feedback was collected through observation of the workshop in progress and use of a questionnaire to gather formal feedback from participants. This process revealed a number of key issues that were addressed in amendments to the toolkit.

The emphasis on built environment did not allow exploration of community facilities and the relationships between community groups in any detail. It gave a specific focus to the evidence gathered that excluded vital aspects of community cohesion and how the community functions within its environment. The well-being of a community - the way health, educational, cultural, housing, employment, leisure and social needs are met - are

important considerations in the planning process and by neglecting these aspects the tool was limited in its application. In many cases what is needed is not new buildings or public spaces but a greater consideration of how people live in a place and how their social needs are catered for.

Table 2: Comparing the Shape My Town and Shape My Brecon Beacons process

Stages of the process	Shape My Town	Shape My Brecon Beacons
Getting Started	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Setting up a town team -Working with the Local Authority -Working with the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Set up a place plan team -Form a relationship with the local authority - Reach out to the wider community
Gathering evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Landscape - Townscape -Streetscape 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Context and setting -People and place -Buildings and facilities -Life between buildings
Evaluating the evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Analysing and comparing your town -Evaluating distinctiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Drawing out findings -Engaging the wider community
Writing a plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Preparing a plan -Consulting planning policy -Identifying issues -Your vision -Developing a framework -Measuring success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Preparing a plan -Working with the local authority -Developing a vision -Developing a delivery framework
Agreeing and implementing a plan		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Agreeing your action plan -Stakeholder agreement -Agreeing the plan as Supplementary Planning Guidance -Monitoring and review

Considering community well-being: Shape My Brecon Beacons

Following development of the tool and pilot testing, Welsh Government announced a shift in policy toward greater consideration of health and well-being. Subsequent development of the tool has reflected the changing aspirations and remit of local authorities and the need for greater consideration of well-being as part of the planning process. In 2016 Welsh Government approached local authorities in Wales to develop concepts for place planning in their locale in light of these changes to policy. Working alongside the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, The Shape My Town method was used as basis for a bespoke version of the tool for use in the National Park. In response to the pilot projects and the changing policy landscape, the scope of the tool was extended to further explore the function and well-being of a community, taking the emphasis away from the built environment. A further step in the development of the tool was to link the outcome of the tool to planning policy and enable emerging Place Plans to be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance. To achieve this, the tool emphasised the importance of positive

relationships with the local authority and identified the role of planning officers in guiding and steering the plan-making process. Here, local authorities act as facilitators and mediators working with local people rather than implementing top down policy and procedure. This further addressed a concern with monitoring the use and effectiveness of the original web based tool; due to being freely available, it had proved difficult to track use and application. Through the involvement of the local authority in the process, the number and location of communities undertaking place plans in the authority area can be tracked and their development monitored.

The three analysis themes (landscape, townscape and streetscape) were reorganised to integrate community and well-being concerns, resulting in four new headings: Context and setting; People and Place; Buildings and Facilities and Life Between Buildings. As table 3 demonstrates, this reorganisation embeds well-being within the analytical framework to a greater extent than the original Shape My Town web tool.

Table 3: Potential well-being benefits addressed in Shape My Town and Shape My Brecon Beacons

Shape My Town	Shape My Brecon Beacons
Landscape: - Ecology and biodiversity - Physical health - Mental health	Context and Setting: - Ecology and biodiversity - Physical health - Mental health - Coping with climate change - Cultural identity
Townscape: - Cultural identity	People and Place: - Inclusivity and accessibility - Employment - Education - Health - Cohesive communities
Streetscape: - Spaces for social interaction - Accessibility - Connectivity - Active travel	Buildings and Facilities: - Economy - Housing equality - Low-carbon living - Coping with climate change - Environmental sustainability
	Life Between Buildings: - Accessibility - Connectivity - Spaces for social interaction - Active travel

While still founded on principles of place-making and analysis that works across a range of scales, the reorganisation encourages greater consideration of demographics, employment, public services and community services. The revised themes give a broad picture of the social well-being of a place and introduce a further layer of analysis to the method using readily available statistical data. Similarly, consideration of housing provision and tenure, access and transport connections extends the scope of the analysis and aligns

the outcomes of evidence building more closely to planning policy objectives.

Conclusion: Reflecting on the process

The emerging importance of health as a policy driver is leading countries to explore mechanisms for improving community well-being. Initially a top down process, governments are increasingly searching for ways to support communities to improve their own social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being.

Fully developed in England and emerging in Wales, localised planning processes will create the opportunity for communities to produce their own place-specific plans, manage services and build small developments. This empowerment of local people to lead regeneration processes could see plans being created by people who know their place best. Tools such as Shape My Town offer benefits of a strong foundation of evidence, built on local knowledge and understanding of local issues.

To succeed at plan-making and realise projects, communities need to be able to mobilise a range of skills and resources. While this puts communities in charge of their future, it requires activation of social capital, whereby community members become fundraisers, coordinators and 'champions'. Facing deep-cutting austerity measures, there exists a lack of capacity within Local Authorities to facilitate this and provide the necessary support to communities (Powe et al, 2015). There is currently limited financial support available for this type of community development and local people are being asked to shoulder the burden. Where there is no expert involvement, tools and resources such as Shape My Town provide a way to fill this gap and guide local people through a methodical process, enabling Local Authorities to do more with less.

However, with limited expert input, there is a risk that planning processes led solely by local people could result in narrowed vision and insularity (Powe, 2016). While local people arguably know their place best, external experts can act as mediator, provocateur, initiator and consultant and offer routes to wider participation and successful implementation (Petrescu et al, 2016). Additionally, experts can help to promote active citizenship, entrepreneurship and capacity building to achieve change (Herbert-Cheshire & Higgins, 2003). Built environment design professionals can contribute creative problem-solving skills and an innovative approach to place-planning which is likely to be missing from community groups and cannot be replaced by a toolkit. The long-term value which expert consultants can bring to plan-making should not be underestimated or compromised by short-term cost cutting.

In the context of an evolving planning system in Wales, the Welsh Government and Local Authorities have an opportunity to engage with local communities through Place Plans so that they can make a real difference to their own environment and well-being. Tools such as Shape My Town can enable this process to happen with stretched Local Authority resources, but to maximise the impact and long-term value of Place Plans, investment in professional design and planning skills should not be overlooked.

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