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## First person

**A revolution in planning is finally bringing power to the people, says planning consultant and local councillor Gary Kirk**



# Planning power is heading back to the people

**P**lanning is a key part of public life – but the planning system is complex, confusing and remote. Right? Wrong! It no longer needs to be this way because there is a revolution taking place in the world of planning that is transferring power away from local councils to neighbourhoods such as yours and mine.

This is a genuine attempt to demystify the planning system and replaces thousands of pages of complex planning law with a more simple, community-led approach.

This is all part of the Localism Act that has seen devolved decision-making in areas such as education, health and social care.

It is being achieved through what are called Neighbourhood Plans, which enable people to shape detailed planning policy for their area and specify where development takes place and what it looks like.

Housing for older people or for young families can be prioritised. Buildings and areas of open space that are important locally can be preserved. Issues of importance to the community can be highlighted and tackled – not only housing but also business, employment, heritage and transport.

## OPPORTUNITIES

As a parish councillor in Church Langton, it is not uncommon to hear views that planning decisions have failed to take local issues fully into account in favour of district-wide priorities.

This is neither unusual nor surprising. Neighbourhood Plans provide an opportunity for parish councils or groups of people coming together as a Neighbourhood Forum to determine planning policy for their area, forming the basis of planning decisions for a specified number of years. It is a powerful tool that gives genuine clout to local people.

Of course, a document as important as this needs to meet a number of basic conditions.

It must be “in general conformity” with local strategic planning policies; it must “have regard” for national planning policy and it must be compatible with European law.

This, though, is a relatively light set of requirements that allows the detail of planning policy to be shaped by local circumstances.

More than 700 parish councils and neighbourhood forums across England are taking advantage of these opportunities.

The vast majority of parishes are yet to take advantage, however.

Neighbourhood plans can take between a year and two years to complete and will require some professional input (for which Government funding is currently available).

For communities that currently feel disempowered and unable to prevent inappropriate development taking place in their area, this is an opportunity not to be missed.

■ *Gary Kirk is a parish councillor, a board member with the East Midlands Housing Group and an independent neighbourhood planning examiner with the Neighbourhood Planning Independent Examination Referral Service*

The views expressed above are the views of the author and not necessarily the views of the Leicester Mercury

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