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Article (Accepted Version)

Harrison, Elizabeth (2019) 'They are treating us with contempt'. The complexities of opposition in an English village. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68. pp. 54-62. ISSN 0743-0167

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‘THEY ARE TREATING US WITH CONTEMPT’: THE COMPLEXITIES OF OPPOSITION IN AN ENGLISH VILLAGE

Abstract

This article is an ethnographic examination of the response to proposed housing development in an English village which provides broader insights into the nature of democratic and decision-making processes around local development projects. Dissecting the complexities of class, age and length of residence, it argues that attributions of either ‘NIMBYism’ or ‘community cohesion’ simplify how and why people come together. Charges of NIMBYism in popular representation seek to exploit difference through certain well-established tropes. These often distinguish between the interests of poorer and longer-established residents with livelihoods rooted in rural areas, and those of wealthier people with urban-based livelihoods for whom rural housing is a lifestyle choice. Academic discussions of NIMBYism have sought to unpack the complexity of opposition, identifying problems in the uncritical use of the term. In contributing to this literature, I argue that it is important to consider how responses are shaped by both a combination of individual interest and sense of investment in place. I suggest that ‘community’ is an effective organising device for protesters that can obscure numerous differences and that the nature of political process and consultation also are crucial factors in shaping opposition. Concerns with the nature of nominally democratic processes and the role of outsider imposition are especially significant here.

KEYWORDS

NIMBY; housing; consultation; ethnography; England; community; activism

‘THEY ARE TREATING US WITH CONTEMPT’: THE COMPLEXITIES OF OPPOSITION IN AN ENGLISH VILLAGE

On a warm summer’s evening in rural southern England, villagers file up the hill to the church. In twos and threes, they chat amicably as they stroll along the narrow lane, moving over to allow the odd car to pass. Outside the church, some delay entering, enjoying the last of the summer’s sun. Come 6pm, all file in, gradually filling the pews until there is standing room only in the 12th century church.

But this is not a church service. It is a ‘consultation’ at which the District Council is presenting its plans for housing development on a field in the centre of the village. A council officer, the proposed developer, their architect and a communications assistant stand somewhat awkwardly next to their display boards, muttering that they have been ‘ambushed’. Although the consultation was advertised to take place throughout the afternoon, enabling individuals to ‘drop in’, the villagers have clearly organised amongst themselves to come together at the same time, in order to challenge the plans. One by one, angry and articulate people express their cynicism about the consultation process and their opposition to the plans. The developer and council officer are defensive. The meeting culminates in a statement of ‘no confidence’ in the District Council, supported with a unanimous show of hands. An older villager says that this is her first ever protest and she is there because: ‘they are treating us with contempt’.

1. Introduction

This article is about the politics of opposition that this polite and generally well-mannered protest reflected. It makes an empirical and theoretical contribution to our understanding of the formal and informal politics through which dissent is expressed and thus has wider relevance to debates around consultation and public participation. Through ethnographic examination of who was involved in the protest, why, and how they justified their positions, it contributes to a literature that attempts to provide a more nuanced analysis of the phenomenon of ‘NIMBYism’ than is articulated in some representations. In particular, I aim to do two things: first, to examine how individual and collective interests intersect with notions of belonging, justice and fairness; and second, to explore the tensions between the strategic use of narratives that celebrate ‘community’ and the reality that community is simultaneously meaningful and an invention that obscures differences – of wealth, identity and interests. The article specifically contests arguments that root opposition primarily in limited identity characteristics, particularly class, and suggests that narrow interpretations in terms of individual interests obscure the significance of meaningful political participation.

Several commentators date the emergence and analysis of the term NIMBY to the late 1970s/early 1980s (Borell and Westermarck, 2018, Burningham et al 2006, Dmochowska-Dudek and Bednarek-Szczepańska 2018, Eranti 2017). As Eranti (2017) notes, the phenomenon of people resisting developments that might be seen as acceptable were they sited elsewhere goes back a long way – for example, to protests against the siting of mental asylums in 19th Century Britain. The term NIMBYism became popularised as a subject for academic discussion with the publication of Dear and Taylor’s (1982) book *Not On Our Street* and has been considered in relation to a wide range of land-use contexts. As Borell and Westermarck (2018) identify, these range from those that are about

the siting of human service facilities such as halfway houses, drug treatment centres and homeless shelters (Lyon-Callo 2001), to (more recently) those that are about resistance to perceived environmental or technological threats, from wind farms (Burningham et al 2015, Bell et al 2005, Devine-Wright 2005, Haggett 2011, van der Horst 2007, Wolsink 2007), to fracking (Olofsson 2014) and road-building (Burningham 2000). The former cases have been seen as less likely to be based on issues of principle (in other words, people accept that they are necessary and desirable but *just not here*), whereas arguments against the latter may be more likely to be framed as illustrative of general issues and principles in which the need for the development itself is contested. The case of housing, and resistance to housing development, arguably sits somewhere between the two, with some accepting the need for new housing, but not where it is to be sited and others contesting the need itself (Gallent and Robinson 2011, Matthews et al 2015).

Since its first use, the term NIMBY has almost always been used pejoratively; NIMBYs are people who are portrayed as selfish in their opposition and focusing very much on their own place rather than seeing the wider picture or accepting more general interests. NIMBYism is thus presented as a constraint to effective planning (Matthews et al 2015). Charges of NIMBYism are then used strategically by developers and planners seeking to get their plans accepted (Cotton and Devine-Wright 2012). As Bedford et.al (2002: 323) describe it, developers see objectors to planning in stereotypical terms, as ‘self-interested’, ‘ill-informed’, ‘demanding’ and ‘unrepresentative’.

NIMBYism has also been strongly related to class; in the UK, the increasing ‘gentrification’ of the countryside provides fuel for the critics of ‘NIMBYism’, adding a class dimension to apparent selfishness. This has been common in public representation of opposition to housing and finds support in certain academic arguments. For example, Matthews et al (2015) argue that localism policies in the UK such as the Localism Act and Neighbourhood Planning have empowered middle

class community groups to oppose new housing developments: 'From this perspective, opposition is entirely selfish and self-serving, often the result of opponents wishing to maintain the value of their own property, or create an imagined rural idyll' (Matthews et al 2015:). Similarly, Sturzaker (2010) argues that power is being exercised by rural elites to prevent much needed rural housing development. Exclusionary views, he suggests, are particularly manifested in the lowest level of political decision making, parish councils, who are often more able to engage with the technical language and argument required by the planning process. This is a position also supported by Yarwood (2002), who focuses on parish councils as giving voice and power to those who seek to exclude particular groups.

A growing literature criticises the simple pejorative use of the concept of NIMBYism (Devine-Wright 2005, Feldman and Turner 2014). As is clear from the discussion above, some very different motivations for opposition to diverse uses of land have been elided. In addition, the equation of NIMBYism with middle class incomers has been questioned (Abram et.al 1996, Cloke and Thrift 1987, Hoggart, 1997). 'Class' may well be an important consideration, but defining this is not straightforward, particularly when class intersects with other important sources of values, including age, gender, place-based attachment and issues of belonging and length of residence. As has been widely noted, the 'insider-outsider' distinction is an important element in narratives that both justify exclusions and raise questions of legitimate voice (e.g. Elias and Scotson 1994, Maloney et.al 1994), but it also does not map neatly onto class status. Furthermore, even within the so-called middle class, there is considerable differentiation and indeed conflict that needs to be unpacked in order to move beyond a stereotypical picture of middle class identity.

Some have also attempted to nuance the assumption that opponents are motivated by purely private and economic interests (Eranti 2017, Haggett 2011), arguing instead that values and notions

of fairness and justice are an important part of the picture too (Wolsink 2007). As an element of this, place attachment needs to be understood (Devine-Wright 2009, Devine-Wright and Howes 2010). How do people value where they live and feel invested in it? Is this simply about anticipated economic effects, such as reduced house values, or something more positive, such as active valuation of landscape, place, or community? Eranti argues that ‘...it can be said that local land-use conflicts are always about fairness (or justice): whose voice is heard, whose interests are taken into account and how arguments are valued (2017: 286)’. In this article, I pay particular attention to such issues: how do notions of right and wrong, fairness and unfairness play a role in shaping opposition? How, in turn, is this related to people’s perceptions of their own role in shaping or influencing decision making?

Analysis of how people understand fairness or otherwise must entail wider reflection on democratic process, participation and the construction of both community and locality. As noted above, Sturzaker (2010) argues that parish councils exercise power in a way that is unrepresentative and partial. However, his research focused entirely on formal elements of the planning delivery process, including planners in local authorities and ten parish councilors across five local authorities. It did not consider how those parish councils related to, nor how they were embedded or otherwise, in the areas they represented. Understanding how different people at this level respond to and understand the nominally democratic processes in which they are enrolled is a crucial element in order to make sense of opposition. As Haggett (2011) notes, responses to the siting of wind farms are strongly related to faith (or lack of it) in decision makers and the extent of meaningful engagement and consultation. The extent to which people perceive that they have a voice, or power, may be an important consideration. Making sense of this requires a more nuanced position than simply pitting a group of formal representatives against their nominal constituency.

This article is an ethnographic examination of the background to, and events surrounding, the meeting described above, asking both who was involved, and why? How can we understand the nature of the motivations that were in this case easily dismissed as ‘NIMBYism’? I argue that such simple attributions constitute a stereotype that misrepresents the social and economic make up of specific rural places. It also ignores the ways in which responses are shaped by a combination of individual interests and whether residents feel themselves to have been properly treated by political and bureaucratic outsiders. Concerns on the part of protesters with the nature of democratic processes and with failures of consultation are especially significant here. At the same time, ‘community’ is also an effective organising device that obscures all sorts of differences and divisions – of class, but also of much more than this.

This paper arises from my long-term knowledge of the research site rather than as part of a specific research project. It is ‘insider ethnography’ in that I am a long-term resident of the village, having lived there for nearly twenty years. I was one of the original opponents to the scheme and attended meetings in this capacity. However, as the opposition evolved, so did my interest in it as an example of the construction of community, consultation and political engagement – themes with which I have engaged over many years as an academic anthropologist, both in the UK and internationally (refs). My insider status thus provides a privileged position, in that it has enabled me to understand diverse perspectives over a long period of time. In developing this paper, I have been careful to ensure that a balance of voices is presented and have maintained an awareness of my own positionality in this. The paper itself is based on participant observation at the various events described, alongside informal and formal interviews with both organised opponents to the scheme, dissenters and residents of the village who were not directly involved in the protest. These are supplemented by documentary review and analysis of meeting transcripts where these exist.

2. The ethnographic context

The vignette with which I opened this article describes the beginning of a process of local opposition that was eventually successful. Before moving on to explore the background to this, I will first set out the context within which it occurred in a little more detail. The parish of Downham¹ is long and narrow – stretching five miles north from the top of a hill into the valley below, but only 1.5 miles at its widest point. It is home to just over 200 households. The centre is around two miles from the nearest main road, reached by a single-track lane running from north to south, and by another lane that joins this from the east. The lanes are undulating, winding and narrow, with high hedges, contributing to the sense of relative isolation of the village. At the centre, there is a church, pub and a cluster of around thirty houses, twenty of which make up a close of council and former-council housing built in the 1940s, ‘The Close’, with a playground and three-acre field next to it, owned by the District Council. It is this field, ‘The Green’, that was the subject of the proposal to build 36 new houses that is at the centre of this article. Of the remaining houses, around 90 are scattered along the lanes, while the remainder are in an early 1990s conversion of a former hospital, located on the boundaries of the parish².

Downham is thus a dispersed parish, with the centre being a relatively small cluster of housing.

There is no school, village hall, or shop and public transport is limited to a few buses a week.

¹ A pseudonym.

² Although formally part of Downham, most residents of this housing see themselves as living in the neighbouring village, to which they are geographically much closer. They have tended to neither be involved in, nor have a view on, the events that were taking place around the centre of the Parish. Therefore, though the ONS census data referred in this article covers these houses, my ethnographic discussion does not.

However, a diversity of residents come together, both socially and practically. There are well-attended annual summer and autumn parties on The Green, a litter pick, a community orchard and allotments. A meeting shelter was built on the field by a group of villagers, a 'library' operates out of the redundant phone box and there are occasional music, film and theatre events in the Church. Not everyone takes part in such activities, and there is considerable differentiation among those that do, but this certainly appears to be an effective and functioning community. Formally, Downham is represented by a parish council comprising seven people – three women and four men³. At the time of the opposition to the plans for housing, the make-up of the parish council only partially reflected the stereotypes discussed above. All were relative newcomers; the longest-standing member had lived there for 25 years, four for between 15 and twenty years and two, for less than five years. All were older than 40. However, not all were affluent professionals and the council included both two residents of the Close and those from elsewhere in the Parish.

Data from the census of 2011 reveal the parish to fit into the characterisations of the changing nature of rural England discussed above: its population is older, more middle-class, educated and ethnically homogeneous than both district and national averages. For example, the average age is higher than the national average (at 43.7 versus 39.3) and in particular there are fewer people in their twenties and early thirties. While 34.8% of the population aged 16-74 is in 'managerial', 'professional' and 'senior technical' employment, this contrasts to 28.4% nationally and 29.6% in the district. Nearly 40% of the population in this age group is educated to level 4 or above, as opposed to a national average of 27.4% and a district average of 29.4%. The census records that of

³ That year, eight candidates had stood for the seven seats, so an election took place. This is quite unusual as it is more normal for the number of candidates putting themselves forward to tally with the number of seats available – or be fewer.

a total of 474 residents, 454 (or nearly 96%) classified themselves as white British. The national average is just under 80% and the district is 92.5%.

At 72.7%, by far the majority of the housing in Downham is owner-occupied. This is above the national average, but in line with that for the district. Only 7.6% of housing is rented from the local authority and 15.7% is rented privately. For social housing, this is well under the district average of 11.1%; private renting is slightly higher than the district average of 14.5%. The majority of the social housing in the village is in the centre: twelve of the twenty houses in The Close are still owned by the District Council, while the remainder were sold off under Right to Buy legislation. These are now private housing inhabited by both former council house tenants and others who have moved in over the last twenty-five years or so. Housing in the village is also seldom sold and, when it is, it can be very expensive. Data on average house prices is relatively meaningless, as it has been distorted in recent years by sales of some particularly large and expensive houses, which have sold for in excess of £2 million. Nonetheless, in line with other places in the district, even relatively modest three-bedroom houses in The Close are valued at more than £350,000. The stock of smaller houses has also been reduced over time as farmworkers' cottages have been extended and sometimes demolished and replaced with larger dwellings.

Such gradual changes in the built fabric of the village have taken place alongside changes in its socio-economic profile. Very long-term residents are fewer than they once were, though still present. For example, of the 20 households in The Close, nine have lived there for more than 40 years and, of these, five are comprised of people who have spent their entire lives in the village, including the offspring of other residents of The Close. There is also a family which farms much of

the land in the parish that can trace its roots there back over generations, and a number of older residents away from the centre that are born and bred in Downham.

There has also been an influx of newcomers, attracted partly by the apparently unspoilt nature of the place. Several of the larger houses along the lanes are owned by relatively wealthy people who have moved into the village, many of whom commute to London from the station in a neighbouring village, and some of whom send their children to private school. But many residents also work within a few miles or are self-employed in a variety of occupations, including both residents of The Close and those living along the lanes. Although there is little employment in the village itself (the pub, the forge, a livery stable and a farm being the most significant formal employers), there is nonetheless considerable diversity in employment and livelihood security. A comparison between a 1960s social survey of the centre of the village and the current situation reveals the changing socio-economic nature of the place. In 1969, the occupations of residents were dominated by rural industry: building workers (5), farm workers (5) and brick makers (5), as well as employees of the now-closed hospital (3). In 2019, the picture is unsurprisingly rather different; there are still builders and others in rural employment such as tree surgery, and gardening. These have been joined by alternative health practitioners, artists, musicians, teachers, academics and charity workers. The number of retired people has also increased, which in turn reflects a degree of continuity: several of the very long-term residents mentioned above are the retired brick makers, farm workers and builders of the 1969 survey.

The parish has therefore changed considerably over the last fifty years, reflecting changing socio-economic conditions more broadly. When the school was closed in 1969, many of its pupils were the children of farm workers and labourers. Such employment is now reduced and the houses in

which they once lived have become valuable rural property. The parish is therefore, at first glance, a perfect example of what Abram et.al (1996:354) call the 'emergent orthodoxy' that rural areas of Britain are increasingly becoming 'middle-class territory', taken over by gentrification. As I will argue, such a view is problematic as it encompasses such a broad range of characteristics as to be relatively meaningless. Nonetheless, it chimes strongly with another orthodoxy, which states that such residents will be overwhelmingly concerned with preserving their territory in the face of unwanted development. The equation of the data above with 'NIMBY' opposition and engagement in the planning process might seem to be relatively straightforward and uncontroversial. Such an equation was certainly part of the narrative adopted by those promoting the housing scheme, as I discuss below. However, this stereotype is to be too simple, however much it has elements of truth. The nuance lies in the diversity of motivations and identity characteristics, in the different ways in which people are attached to community and in the complexity of the responses to the feelings of disenfranchisement caused by what was seen by those involved as meaningless consultation and empty participation. These should not be dismissed as being simply about maintaining class boundaries and selfishness.

3. Opposition and community in the face of threat

3.1 The 'threat'

In this paper, I focus on the 'community' response to what people perceived as a specific 'threat', and not on the detailed background to the proposal itself, in which the motivations and positionality of key players, from the District Council to the developer, have been the subject of considerable speculation. Before turning to the community response, however, some explanation

of the broader context and commentary on what was being proposed is necessary, as this is a key part of what shaped that response.

The 'drop in' at the Church described above had been organised by the District Council as part of a consultation process for a project that aimed to build several hundred homes across the district⁴. A few years previously, the Council had undertaken a review of its property portfolio and identified a number of sites that were thought to be appropriate for housing development. This was broadly in line with government policy that has supported the notion that 'unused' publicly owned land and buildings should be disposed of for 'regeneration', housing, and other development⁵. Subsequently, the Council had entered into a partnership with a consortium of a developer, architect and housing trust, through which several of these sites would be developed for both market and 'affordable'⁶ housing, with the market housing funding the affordable housing.

The sites were varied. They included car parks, public toilets, council buildings, a social centre and recreation grounds - and The Green that is at the centre of this article. Here, the proposal was to build around 36 units of affordable housing, adjacent to the existing twenty houses, which would be let to people on the housing register. It thus represented a significant change to the hamlet, almost trebling its size. It is significant that this project was outside of the normal planning process; it was not part of (and in places directly contradicted) the district plan for housing that was in draft

⁴ Other elements of the Consultation across the district included a series of public meetings in key towns, as well as a website that was set up to record comments. The results of the Consultation process were later published, but by this time, the future of the project itself was already in some doubt.

⁵ Smith (2013) has described the local opposition that has arisen around such developments, focusing on the case of the development of a car park in the Yorkshire town of Hebden Bridge.

⁶ 'Affordable' defined as to be rented at 80% of market rent.

form at that time. For example, in this plan, Downham was identified as ‘an isolated settlement, not suitable for development’⁷. The scheme was nonetheless presented by the Council as an important opportunity to provide much-needed housing, including social housing, in rural areas. At the time, there were only two households requesting housing in Downham on the housing register, but Council officers argued that the need within other areas of the district justified the proposal.

The reasons for Downham being identified as unsuitable in the District Plan centred on its lack of facilities and infrastructure, and in particular its inaccessibility because of the narrowness of the lanes, which would probably need to have been widened to take the increased traffic. From the perspective of many of the residents, the plans also constituted a threat in a rather less material sense. This concerned the fact that, though the plans were presented as part of ‘regeneration’, this was not something that was needed in Downham. In particular, the community functioned effectively in a way that was not necessarily visible to outsiders, and had evolved over many years. This, they considered, would be threatened by the addition of so many houses. It would also necessitate the loss of certain aspects of the ‘character’ of the place – for example, through widening the roads, or possibly adding streetlights. I discuss this dimension of the threat in more detail below.

The initial announcement of the plans for the project generated serious consternation and opposition across the district. Action groups formed in several towns, and a series of public meetings were held. A march took place against the plans. Opposition focused on the process

⁷ This designation, in turn, reflects an aspect of planning policy identified by Gallent and Robinson (2011) that favours the preservation of landscape and character in rural areas, and thus contributes to the lack of affordable housing in such areas.

through which decisions had been made and on the nature of the sites themselves, several of which were unsuitable practically for housing or represented the loss of local assets. The furore of the autumn was then followed by a series of changes in both political leadership of the Council and its chief executive. Less than a year after it was first formally launched, it was announced that the entire project was to be dropped because two of the key sites for market housing were not viable due to restrictive covenants.

As noted, I am not in this article, dwelling on the politics or the wider dimensions of this ill-fated scheme. My interest here is in the response of one community to the threat and of what this tells us about 'NIMBYism' and opposition, although this in turn raises wider issues of the politics of locality and community. In what follows, I describe how the residents of the Parish came together in their opposition. This is followed by an account of the meeting in the church, considering how positions were articulated, and the discursive struggles over representation that followed this, including the position of the dissenters - those who didn't care, or who felt that the opponents to development were wrong.

3.2 Getting organised: the construction of community opposition

Rumours of the scheme had been circulating for some time within the village before the meeting in the church described at the start of the article. The parish council had learned that the field was one of the sites under consideration some two years previously, and in the summer of that year the then leader of the Council had come to a well-attended meeting in the pub at which he assured anxious residents that there was nothing to worry about. In September of that year, the parish

council asked residents about what they considered to be the best course of action in response to the unspecified plans (including doing nothing), through a short questionnaire that was hand-delivered to every household in the Parish. The result of this was overwhelming support for the parish council applying for 'Village Green' status for the field, which, if successful, would prevent any development at all⁸. The Parish council duly submitted this application, along with a bundle of evidence, at the end of the year. The parish council also had the field listed as a 'Community Asset'⁹. However, it was only when the plans were formally outlined at the District Council offices a couple of weeks before the meeting in the church that their detail became known to the parish council, and subsequently other residents.

Many of these residents were horrified at the plans. One circulated a leaflet headlined 'Save our Village Green', which was quickly followed by a meeting at another's home, attended by around twenty five people and leading to the formation of the Action Group. At the meeting it became evident that the motivations for objection were various, ranging from anger at the apparent lack of consultation, to concern about the possible loss of a valued village asset, and changing the character of the village with such a proportionally large increase in housing. Others focused more on the effects of traffic on the lanes and the lack of infrastructure. Among the objectors were residents of The Close who would be most directly affected, along with others who were not so directly affected but were nonetheless opposed, partly out of solidarity with the residents of The

⁸ The response rate was 87% from the 30 houses in the centre of the village, but only 12% from the estate on the village boundaries, two miles from the centre. 90% of those responding thought that an application for Village Green Status should be submitted, rising to 93% for the centre of the village.

⁹ A community asset designation ensures that, if land is to be sold, it must first be offered to the 'community'. There is no guarantee that a sale will take place. In this case, the proposal was not to sell the land, so listing as a community asset would not necessarily have made much difference to the fate of the field.

Close. An element of this meeting included an agreement that residents would go all together at the same time to the 'Consultation' to be held the following week at the church. Word was spread by telephone, email, and leaflets and members of the Action Group primed the press and local radio to be ready for a story.

Some members of the parish council were part of the Action Group, but the two entities also worked separately from each other, with the former engaging the 'system' from its position as formally representative organisation, and the latter taking a more campaigning role. It was the parish council that met with and lobbied the District Council and engaged a planning consultant to assess the planning grounds against the proposal. The Action Group organised a media and letter-writing campaign, took part in a march and collected signatures for a petition. It also engaged the support of the local (Conservative) MP. The Action Group comprised a wide cross-section of residents, not all of whom were implacably opposed to development *per se*, but all of whom were opposed to this particular proposed development.

3.3 The 'triumph in the church' and its aftermath

As noted, the church was full to capacity. Those attending were members of the newly formed Action Group, but also others too, including some of the longer-term residents who had not come to the first Action Group meeting and a representative from the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), who had been invited by the Action Group. The meeting, which lasted for just over an hour, started with a request from the Council officer that those attending should be 'polite and respectful'. Two weeks previously, a 'consultation' meeting in a town also targeted by the scheme had been packed to capacity and had become very heated. The Council officer and the developer were clearly expecting more trouble. An early point made (and repeated frequently during the

meeting) was that the designs were up for discussion, but not the principle of the project itself. According to the developer, this would just be the first of many 'surgeries' at which designs could be refined. This early statement was accompanied by an account of the challenges for housing in the district, including in rural areas - and hence the importance of the Downham site. After ten minutes or so, one member of the audience interrupted to ask that those speaking at the front identify themselves. There was general consternation that no elected representatives were present – and that a council officer had been given the task of defending the proposals.

The meeting then progressed with a series of questions, initially those that had been agreed and pre-assigned by the Action Group to create a sustained and articulate undermining of their opponents. These started with the basic rationale for the project (why here?) and moved on to considerations of sustainability, relating to the lack of transport, facilities and so on. Several people stressed the loss of a valued community asset and that consultation was meaningless. The process by which the site was identified was also criticised. For example:

So far, what I am getting is that you are here today to tell us almost how the housing development is going to take shape. What I think we are here for is to ask the question, 'why in the first place is this a suitable site in terms of environmentally, socially, economically?' Could you clarify what makes this a suitable site in the first place? In particular, why is this a good site from a planning perspective?

The meeting was on the whole polite, but involved shouting on both sides on several occasions, especially when it became clear that the consultation would not lead to any substantive change in the plans. As the Council officer said at one point 'we can discuss this for an hour, but we are not

going to change our minds'. In response a resident pointed out: 'What you can hear is our frustration when you say things like 'the consultation has already started', but you have already drawn up plans with your architects. That feels like a long way down to line to us'. There were also hoots of derision when, in response to the question 'why here?' the Council officer stated 'because we own it', and the developer said 'it just feels right'. As the meeting went on, people who had not been part of the planned questioning also spoke up. Among these were individuals who had a personal interest in the housing but were nonetheless opposed to it. As one woman put it:

My partner and I have lived here for 28 years. We were both brought up in small villages and wanted to stay in a community like that. We have brought up four children here. They love this area, three of them still live at home and can't afford to leave home. They all work. But if they were to live here, they would want it to be as it is now. And those houses you are proposing are just disgusting.

Another speaker, a man in his fifties who had spent his entire life in the village, also spoke up. He was at that time living in one of the council houses next to The Green with his wife and elderly parents but was seeking to move and might possibly have been a beneficiary of the housing, had it been built. He was angry about the fact that the proposal so clearly went against existing planning policy:

Why are you doing this in the first place, when you know that this site has already been identified as not being suitable for development? ... You've got all these strategies, all these documents, and you are supposed to follow guidance. Like we are – like any house-builder,

any developer. And then you come here and you don't seem to know anything about it. So why are you not only wasting your time, but also our money?

This contribution was followed by sustained applause. At the end of the meeting, the organiser of the Action Group asked for and received a show of hands in support of the following statement:

Downham villagers already support sustainable development. However, the village does not need 'regeneration'. Regeneration is a word used to mask removal by [the district council] of our valued community asset, which is listed as a community asset. And instead [the district council] wants to concrete over a green field of three acres and put 36 terraced houses on it. This is not regeneration – it is over-development. It is contrary to national planning guidelines and to [the district council] strategy. I propose therefore a vote of no confidence in the decision making process by the representatives of [the district council], who are conspicuous in their absence, who have avoided being transparent with the community until the plans were at an advanced stage. You have given a trickle of confusing information, which further discredits the process of consultation with us, the electorate.

After the meeting the atmosphere was triumphant. However much the visitors had remained intransigent, there was a sense that they had been put on the back foot. People congratulated each other on what they had said if they had contributed to the discussion. 'That showed them – they can't mess with us', said several people.

The meeting was thus an important moment for both displaying and generating a sense of community. People felt empowered, despite their frustration with the officials, and united in their

mockery of the 'lies and bullying'. One of the most important themes that came through from this was a strong lack of trust in the democratic process, or at least an articulation that this was far from an example of it. The suggestion that 'people would be listened to' was greeted with hollow laughter. Several speakers stressed that they wanted to direct their questions to the District Council official, rather than the developer or the architect. There had been close questioning about information that was or was not available on the Council website, and about the decision making behind the choice of The Green as a site for development.

A second, and important, observation is that it became evident that even those who might have had a personal interest in the housing were also against it and voiced this at the meeting. In this, the question of belonging was of central importance. Opponents' attachment to their home was about how it is now, not how it might be when changed into a different place through the addition of the 36 new houses. In this, arguments about 'local need' from the Council officer were greeted with particular derision. For her, 'local' could mean from a few miles away within the District; for residents, 'local' meant about feeling part of, and belonging to, Downham.

Following the meeting, the Action Group managed to get its story into the local newspapers and on the radio. It was also discussed on local Internet forums, where accusations of 'NIMBYism' sat alongside sympathy for the residents of Downham. The public discussion of the project and the opposition to it, particularly during a local radio broadcast, encapsulate many of the debates over representation discussed above in which 'NIMBYism' is closely associated with middle class (and therefore illegitimate) identity. A few days after the meeting, a member of the parish council, a member of the Action Group and the developer were separately interviewed on local radio. The

residents made the points about sustainability and inadequate consultation that had already been articulated in the church. When the developer appeared on the radio, he suggested that:

There are people adjoining the site who are for it, and there are people from around the area who are against it. And they are the people who are being very vocal. I think you will find that they are not representative of the whole village.... This is not a small group but they represent the more affluent members of the community who live around Downham, but they don't represent those who live directly adjacent to the site, who were very much for the project¹⁰.

Legitimate representation was thus portrayed as a key issue and particularly so because it undermined the objectors, who were 'more affluent', and therefore more easily dismissed as 'NIMBYs'. The basis for the statement was later confirmed to be two visits to the church consultation earlier in the day. One was by a retired couple living next to The Green, who had said that they would be glad to move into a smaller house. The other was by a young couple with a baby who were also interested to see if there would be a chance of them getting a house. Interestingly, the Council formulation of the argument in support of the scheme subsequently adapted to these two conversations to suggest that the new homes would include smaller ones for 'older people wanting to downsize and young families', although the initial plan had been entirely for three-bedroom houses.

¹⁰ Neveu (2010: 60) points out that ironically physical closeness to proposed developments is often a reason for dismissing some opponents, while other views are not taken into account because they are from those who are not 'direct victims'.

The Action Group and parish council responded to the statement with a letter to the District Council, local radio and press, which was signed by 16 of the 20 households living directly adjacent to the site, including council tenants and long-term residents. The letter concluded 'We, residents of [The Close], and thus living right next to the field, strongly object to your plans'. Of those who did not sign, one household is the retired couple mentioned above, a second man refused because he said he 'didn't want to be involved' a third householder was not approached because he was very ill at time, and the fourth was not in when approached. Importantly those signing the letter included council tenants who had not attended any of the meetings, had said they were angry at the plans but 'don't really like meetings'. They also included families in clear housing need, who in theory might be the first in line for housing through the scheme, but who were nonetheless opposed to the imposed nature of the plans: 'it's a lovely place here, and they just want to change it without even asking anyone' said one woman.

4. Dissecting opposition: dissent, identity, motivation

It is important to consider whether there is an element of truth in the observations of the developer, in that this cohesive group did not represent everyone. Among those who did not join the Action Group or did not attend the mass meeting at the church, there were some that might indeed have supported the housing. They included the young couple mentioned above who went to see if they might benefit from the scheme, as well as the retired couple who wanted to downsize. For the younger couple, their acceptance of the scheme evaporated when it became evident that they would be unlikely to benefit from it directly because they were not on the housing list. Few younger people in general took part in the opposition.

Those who did not take part were silent for a variety of reasons, which ranged from disagreement to disengagement. For example, Amy is 21 and lives at home with her family in one of council houses on The Close. She works in a local town and briefly moved into a rental flat there with her boyfriend but came home when the relationship ended. She disagreed with the protesters: 'No, I thought they were wrong. People have got to live somewhere. I know it would change it, but change happens anyway because of population increase. So, I wouldn't have minded the houses'. In contrast Will was strongly opposed, but didn't get involved in the protest, because 'I don't get so involved in village life'. Will is 24, single and lives with his parents and siblings in a former council house that they own. He has lived his entire life in the village and works in relatively low paid rural employment. He was unequivocal in his opposition to the scheme: 'No, those houses would have been terrible. I like Downham as it is now – it's the community. Even five would have been too many because of the traffic on the lanes'. Will conceded that he would be unlikely to be able to buy or rent in Downham but didn't see this as a problem, intending to move to rent in the nearby small town where there was more going on. When asked if he saw himself as living in Downham again one day, he said, 'well yes, or somewhere a bit like it, when I am older'.

These perspectives illustrate a broader point: in contrast to the widely articulated narrative that young people are being deprived of their right and desire to stay in the villages in which they grew up, not all younger people either want or expect to do this. Will's view was certainly shared by several others. As Neal and Waters (2006) have pointed out, it is also the case that some want to get away from places that they see as boring. On the other hand, clearly there are younger people who take the opposite view, and Amy's was not a lone voice in this respect.

What about the notion that opponents to development fit a middle-class exclusionary stereotype? Those who joined and took part in the Action Group were certainly not all 'middle class incomers'. Indeed, as I have suggested already, the label 'middle class' can be used in ways that are so broad as to be meaningless, encompassing diverse characteristics from education to employment status and wealth - and its automatic association with length of residence is similarly problematic. Examination of the variety of people involved in the opposition reveals a much more complex situation.

It was indeed the case that those who became most adept at challenging the District Council in their own terms through planning arguments tended to be university-educated and to have moved into the village over the previous twenty years. A few – but by no means all - of these were in a high-income bracket and all were in secure housing. These included people who did not live on the Close, several of whom would not be personally affected by the development, but all of whom presented their support of those who would be as reflecting solidarity in the face of the undemocratic imposition. These ranged from landed gentry to self-employed business people and a few commuters. However, this is only part of story. The Action Group also contained individuals in low income or precarious employment, as well as those who were not homeowners, and some who had lived in the village for generations. Among those who spoke up at the meeting in the church were those who fell into one or more of these latter categories. In addition, as noted, opposition also came from the 'non-joiners', who nevertheless added their voices when asked to do so. Certainly, there was not a polarisation between wealthy objectors and poorer supporters of the plans. It is also the case that objection was widespread: when, a few months after the meeting in the church, a petition against the proposed development was taken round the village, only a small minority (fewer than 10 out of 320 asked) refused to sign it.

Politically, a diverse spectrum of positions was also present in the Action Group, something of which members were both aware and prepared to look beyond in the face of the threat. People knew that they were in common cause with others whose opinions on a range of topics, from party politics through to foxhunting and Brexit, were vastly different. In Downham, social differentiation certainly exists and social interaction follows patterns in which people will tend to socialise with those with whom they feel most familiar. On rare occasions, this could be manifested in the extreme forms of social labelling and exclusionary discourses that critics of NIMBYism such as Sturzaker (2010) emphasise. For example, at one Action Group meeting, a view was expressed that the problem with the proposals was that they would bring 'the wrong sort of people' to live in Downham. This was accompanied by an account of earlier problems with 'the Council estate' which an individual claimed had previously been a 'dumping ground for the troublemakers of the district', but which had improved in recent years with its influx of new (middle class) residents. The fact that the housing was to be for people who were on the District Council's housing register led to assumptions on the part of a few residents that: 'they won't be able to afford cars, so how will they get about?'. Such statements overlooked (or ignored) the fact that existing council tenants in the village had cars and were in a position to travel for work. They were also rare and provoked considerable consternation and embarrassment among those in the group who saw them as unacceptable snobbery. They also indicate an important point: that opposition to the proposals reflected diverse motivations and identity characteristics, but that these differences did not prevent people from coming together when they perceived there to be a threat.

Anger against the plans was strongly articulated around the feeling that they had been imposed and that local objection was being dismissed as invalid: 'they are treating us with contempt'. This

anger galvanised a sense of community that transcended the divisions mentioned above, which included divisions of approach to the whole question of housing need in the village and how it should be dealt with. In Action Group meetings, there was considerable discussion of whether 'some housing' or 'no housing' was what was wanted in the village. Many people felt that providing some housing for 'local people' was an important principle. In this, a limited number of deserving cases were frequently mentioned – generally a few named individuals who would be unable to stay in the village in which they had grown up¹¹. The position taken by the Action Group of complete rejection was therefore a strategic one, rather than one that reflected an agreed ideal.

Importantly, for many of the opponents to the plans, they constituted a threat because they seemed to involve no consideration of how the community already functioned. I have noted the symptoms of community cohesion in terms of active engagement and mutual support. This was reinforced in the coming together in the face of the threat, but also pre-existed this. There was a strong view, regularly expressed, that the plans were problematic because they would so fundamentally – and dramatically - alter the balance of what was there already. That the village had changed over the years, but incrementally so, rather than as a result of a major change from the outside. And the anger was because this had not been understood, or at the very least was treated as being unimportant by the District Council and the developers.

It would be inaccurate to perpetuate a stereotype of rural cohesion in which there were not dissenting voices. This includes those who felt uncomfortable with – and antagonistic towards - the changes they had witnessed in the village over the years, characterised as 'all of you lot coming in'.

¹¹ Gallent and Robinson (2011) found a similar tendency in their examination of the responses of rural people to issues of affordability of housing.

There is, as anywhere where people tend to know each other well, a range of tensions within the village. These exist within and between family groups, along sometimes overt class lines (between those who live in 'big houses' and those who don't or send their children to private school or not), and between those who see themselves as properly rural as opposed to 'hippies who don't understand the countryside'. The key point is that, for the residents of Downham who came together in opposition, such distinctions were less important than a shared purpose in defeating a common enemy.

5. Conclusions

The housing crisis in the UK, and particularly in the South East of England, is an emotive topic, reflecting both real and serious concerns that many people are unable to afford homes and complex debates about the causes of the crisis and its solution. Within these debates there is a clear polarisation between those who suggest that it is unarguable that more houses must be built, especially in the South East, and those who contest this, opposing especially what they portray as the 'concreting over' of the countryside. The former comprises a diverse group, from central government planners, through to local councils charged with ensuring housing for their residents, builders/developers, and of course, those in housing need. Charges of NIMBYism seek to exploit differences through certain well-known tropes, in particular distinguishing between the interests of poorer and longer-established residents with livelihoods rooted in rural areas, and those of wealthier people with urban-based livelihoods for whom rural housing is a lifestyle choice. More broadly, they pit general interests against those of the local/specific inhabitants (Neveu 2010).

This article has shown, firstly, that portrayals of NIMBYism being associated with middle class identity and interests are simplifications. In this case, opposition to the development comprised people from across the social spectrum in terms of employment, education, housing status and length of residence, albeit in a location where there was already a lack of diversity in other terms. The ethnic homogeneity and slightly older nature of the protesters reflected both the village itself and the wider picture for rural areas of the district. Motivations for opposition were similarly varied and cannot be simply reduced to narrow self-interest. They included a few for whom exclusion was important - who wanted to keep the 'wrong kind of people' out, but there were more for whom such a position was highly problematic. For both these and those who objected to such views, the preservation of the sense of community, belonging and place was nonetheless of central importance (see Lovell 1998).

To an extent this sense of community was a romanticisation. In rural contexts in England, 'community' has long been associated with idealised and somewhat romantic representations of rural life in 'close knit communities', albeit communities that are threatened by the association of rural areas with middle class incomers (Neal and Waters 2006, Beaumont and Brown 2018). As Short (1992) argued:

if the word 'rural' has its own aura, so too of course does 'community'. Put the two together and the effect is to multiply the mythology to something more than the sum of its constituent parts. Add 'English' and the effect is like a chemical chain reaction, which grows and glows, subfusing everything in a good green light—but an ideological light, which can obscure as well as ornament the object of analysis (Short, 1992, p. 4)

My second conclusion therefore is that, rather than romanticise communities, it is important to understand the nature of the compromises that are made in their presentation to outsiders. This article thus contributes to well-established wider debates about how 'community' is represented, including who are seen by others as legitimate representatives of that community (Amit 2002, Cohen 1985, Hoggett 1997, Rogaly and Taylor 2009, Molden et.al 2017). Such debates are particularly well developed in the context of international development, where it has long been recognised that the legitimacy of community organisations is neither simple nor uncontested (Agrawal and Clark 1999, Guijt and Shah 1998). In the UK, they have especially important salience in the tension between wider strategic or more local planning priorities. In Downham, there was a very specific understanding of the nature of housing need being about maintaining such community. And this is partly why the objection to the imposed and non-democratic nature of the threat was so robust and articulate.

The problem was not just that the plans were imposed, but that they involved such a complete failure to understand the nature of the place – and an unwillingness to try to do so, made even more frustrating by a performance of participation that was seen as empty and meaningless. The account of the meeting in the church demonstrates that anger focused on democratic failure and a lack of trust in the motivation of the planners and developers. As Abram et al (1996) found, there is often a profound distrust of local government and its working. In the case discussed here, this was accentuated by the limited performance of listening on the part of the developers and district council, alongside all of the evidence that decisions had already been made. Opponents wanted to be able to make their own choices about what happened in the village, which they believed they understood better than the outsiders. In so doing, those dissenting voices that did not see the community in this way were silenced.

This presents a difficult challenge for those seeking to develop housing. There is a clear tension between what are believed to be strategic needs (for example, housing across a district) and the increasing requirement for consultation, participation and local control. The two are not easily reconciled and, as this case shows, in the process, what is defined as 'local' becomes an important arena of contestation¹². Local control is both rhetorically important and has also been enshrined in legislation, in the UK through the Localism Act and the idea of Neighbourhood Planning (Tait and Inch 2015). Councils have a 'duty to consult' and, more broadly, participation is seen as essential to the democratic process, including to decisions to be taken about how land is used (Cornwall and Coelho 2006; Taylor 2007). However, trusting 'communities' to know what is best for them also sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside both the requirement for 'rational planning' (Murdoch and Abram 1998) and the knowledge that communities are neither neatly bounded nor homogeneous. For the district council officials, the meeting in the church was an 'ambush' by villagers who were not participating in the correct way. For the villagers, the strength that was drawn from that collective act, albeit alongside frustration, was important for cohesion. This is a long way from the simple exercise of power by the affluent that is suggested by the ideologically-framed NIMBY discourses discussed earlier.

¹² See Hoggart and Henderson (2005) for a discussion of how contested definitions of the boundaries of the local play a role in the failure of social housing development in 'exceptions sites'. Similarly, Van der Horst and Toke (2010) argue that the 'local' is important for planning process outcomes, but that the definition of this is not value-free.

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