

# Neighbourhood planning activity?

9 June 2017 by Jamie Carpenter

Analysis of data from the first 350 neighbourhood plan referendums shows little sign that enthusiasm for neighbourhood planning is tailing off, but reveals significant regional variations in the number of votes that have been cast.

Central Milton Keynes : nearly 90,000 votes in favour More than four years after voters went to the polls in a remote village in Cumbria in England 's first neighbourhood plan referendum, there seems to be little evidence of the neighbourhood planning juggernaut slowing down. Nearly half a million people have now voted in neighbourhood plan referendums in 111 local authority areas across England, an analysis by Planning has found.

The analysis of the first 355 poll results reveals that, of the 480,000 votes cast, 87.6 per cent have been in favour, with an average turnout of 32.7 per cent. The average turnout figure is similar to the figure recorded in last year's local elections (33.8 per cent) and higher than the turnout in this year's metro mayor elections (27.6 per cent) and the most recent police and crime commissioner elections, held in 2016 (27.6 per cent).

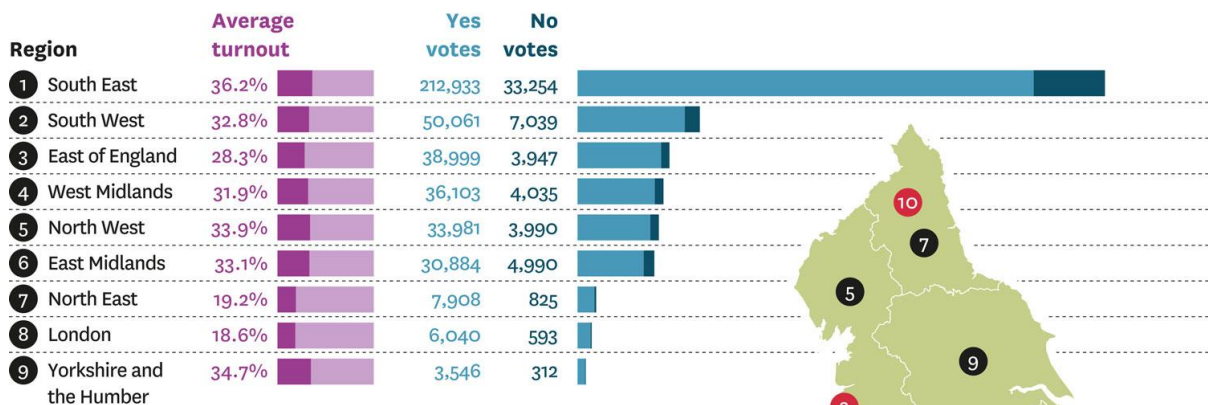
Planning's analysis also finds significant regional variations in the number of votes cast in referendums. Of the 480,000 votes cast, more than half (51.3 per cent) were in polls that took place in just one region – the South East – the analysis reveals (see info graphic, below). The combined total number of votes in three regions – London , the North East, and Yorkshire and the Humber – accounts for only four per cent of the total votes cast, according to the analysis.

So what lies behind these stark regional disparities? They can in part be explained by the different sizes of England's regions – the population of the South East, for example, is more than three times higher than the population of the North East. In addition, the South East's total is skewed by the inclusion of votes cast in the borough-wide referendum on the Central Milton Keynes plan, which registered nearly 90,000 votes in favour in 2015 – far more than any other poll to date. Nevertheless, Planning's findings add to evidence that neighbourhood planning activity is concentrated in certain parts of the country. University of Reading research published last year found a "large number" of active neighbourhood areas in the south of England , with 42 per cent of neighbourhood plan areas in the South East and South West regions.

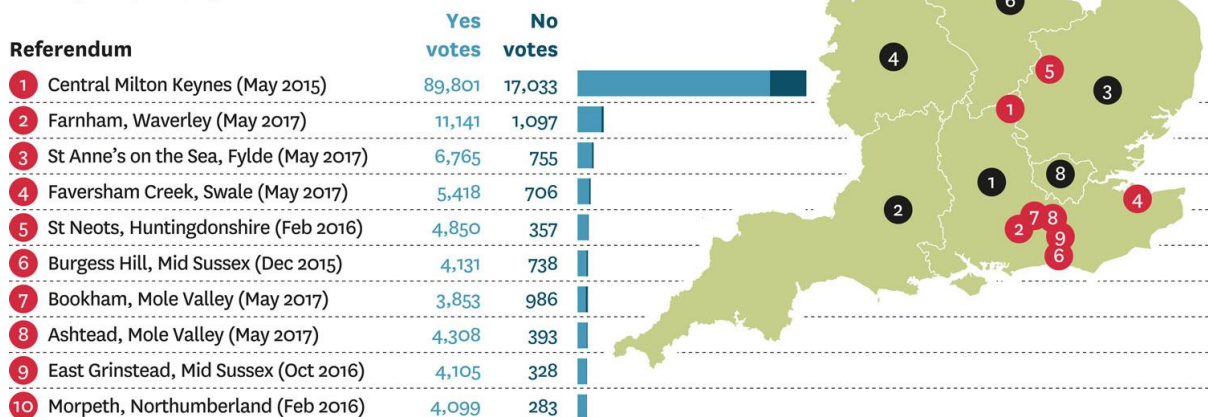
So what could be driving the higher levels of activity in these areas? Observers agree that development pressure is a key factor. "What we know is that land values are higher further down south and development pressure is – in general – greater," said Gary Kirk, managing director of neighbourhood planning support group Yourlocale. "That may be a reason why communities are more exercised about this." Chris Bowden, director of consultancy Navigus Planning, said that in most cases communities embark on the neighbourhood planning process due to concerns over development anticipated in their area in the future, or because of their experience of development that happened in the past. "People are easier to engage when there's something big happening on their doorstep," Bowden said. According to Bowden, one key factor that can drive turnout is whether or not a neighbourhood plan allocates sites. "If you start putting lines around a site on a map, it gets people a lot more interested," he said.

Neighbourhood planning consultant Tony Burton said that it is clear that neighbourhood planning activity has been higher in areas with established town and parish councils. In unparished areas – including many urban areas – communities are required to jump through the additional hoop of creating a neighbourhood forum in order to establish a neighbourhood plan. According to Planning’s analysis, average turnout in London (18.6 per cent) is the lowest for any region, and in only one other region – Yorkshire and Humber – have fewer people voted in referendums. Gavin Parker, professor of planning studies at the University of Reading , suggested that the figures indicating a lower level of activity in London might be a consequence of development being "de rigueur" in the capital. Engaging "super-diverse" communities in neighbourhood planning takes "intensive effort", Parker added. Planning’s analysis finds evidence that holding referendums on the same day as other elections boosts turnout. Peaks in turnout coincide with local elections held in May 2014 and 2017 and the May 2015 general election, the analysis shows (see info graphic).

### Neighbourhood plan referendums: votes cast by region



### The top 10 polls, by votes cast



Note: the analysis is based on the results of referendums held up to 25 May 2017. Source: Planning/DCS

However, for some, there is a question mark over how many of those voting in neighbourhood plan referendums are fully informed about what they are voting for. "If we think there could be a problem in people not having a high understanding of the neighbourhood plan they are voting for, that may be exacerbated when they are going into a voting booth and ticking several boxes," said Parker.

But others do not share this concern. "I suspect that a much higher proportion of people voting in a neighbourhood plan referendum will have read the neighbourhood plan ... than will have studied the parties’ manifestos at a general election," said Kirk. All votes count the

same, "and that's democracy", he said. Burton said that, if there has been a problem, it has been local authorities delaying referendums on neighbourhood plans in order to save money by holding the polls on the same day as other elections.

Burton takes heart from the fact that people are continuing to turn out to vote for neighbourhood plans, even as they become more complex and difficult to put together. "It's probably harder to do a neighbourhood plan than a few years back and they are still coming forward and still being positive, more innovative and testing on some policy areas," he said. "Innovation is proving appealing to people and they are turning out to vote to support it." Planning's findings show that the proportion of people voting in favour of neighbourhood plans has remained steady since the first referendum in Cumbria back in early 2013, with plans on average getting "yes" votes of nearly 88 per cent. For Parker, it is unusual for a democratic exercise to result in such strong votes in favour. He said that one explanation could be that neighbourhood planning has been designed in a way that "tends to direct plan authors to create fairly low-key, unambitious plans". But for Bowden, the figures show that neighbourhood planning is "here to stay. It's not perfect – getting urban areas engaged is the toughest challenge – but generally, it is working well and your analysis bears that out".