

'We're not NIMBYS! Contrasting local protest groups with idealised conceptions of sustainable communities' *Local Environment*, 13(4), 1-15.

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Abstract

The term "NIMBY" is used prolifically in both academic literature and general public discourse to describe a locally based action group protesting against a proposed development. It is frequently used to dismiss groups as selfish or ill-informed, as is illustrated both by those who accuse opponents of possessing such characteristics and also by the attempts of many community groups to reject the label. This lies in sharp contrast to the much encouraged notions of public participation in planning and community life as proposed by the UK government's proclaimed vision of a "sustainable community". This paper argues that this dichotomy between "good" and "bad" participation can be misleading, by drawing on research from two case studies where locally based community groups opposed a specific, detailed development. The paper contributes to a burgeoning literature that reappraises conventional understandings of such groups by analysing often overlooked facets of protest groups, concluding that the conventional conceptualisations of them as NIMBY is inadequate and unhelpful in academic debate.

Keywords

active community, public participation, public protest, NIMBYism, sustainable communities

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Introduction

The term “NIMBY” (not in my back yard) is used to refer to locally based protest movements or individual campaigners opposing a planned development or land use. The term itself is rarely attributed in any way other than the pejorative, used to dismiss a plan's opponents as “[s]elf interested or irrational citizens who misuse the democratic process” (McAvoy 1999, p. 1). At the same time, however, public participation in decision-making and local governance is actively encouraged, the assertion being that those who take part are not only exercising their democratic rights, but also assuming their civic responsibility (Committee on Public Participation in Planning 1969, Hajer and Wagenaar 2003, Kitchen and Whitney 2004, amongst many others). This produces a dichotomy between constructions of “good” and “bad” participation – “welcome” and “unwelcome” contributions to the democratic process. Yet this paper argues that this characterisation is both simplistic and misleading. People united in pursuit of a common goal, even the opposition of a seemingly needed development, should not necessarily be dismissed as systematically as they often are. Furthermore, as shall be further outlined in this paper, groups labelled NIMBY often exhibit traits deemed characteristic of what the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) identify as “sustainable communities”. It details the nature and effect of locally based groups established, at least initially, to oppose plans for substantial developments close to residential areas.

The paper begins with an introduction to the literature regarding NIMBY groups, paying particular attention to recent critical evaluation of the term's use. As noted by Schively, the term and its use is complex and contested:

“the literature has characterized these phenomena in a varied manner, ranging from citing NIMBY responses as the epitome to democracy to considering LULU [locally unwanted land use] opponents as self-interested, uninformed, and not representative of broader community interests.” (2007, p. 263)

The article then outlines the present UK government's vision of a “sustainable community” as outlined by planning policy documentation. Through the use of two case studies, two core arguments are made: firstly, groups that may commonly be defined as NIMBY often do not limit their activities to a single, clearly defined and unambiguous goal. Secondly, and both by way of illustration of the former point, and as a critique of the conceived contradiction between “good” and “bad” participation, such groups often possess character traits that meet attributes of the government's idealised conceptualisation of a sustainable community.

The conventional use of the term “NIMBY”

The term NIMBY is used widely in academia, professional planning circles and within the public vernacular, to refer to a group that oppose a given development in a local area, usually due to the development's perceived negative externalities. It is generally implied that NIMBY groups frustrate the construction of “essential” facilities or developments such as infrastructure or housing. It is supposed that the designation of a protest as being “NIMBY” delegitimises and invalidates the arguments of opponents, by dismissing their contributions as selfish and narrow-minded. Additionally, and in further recognition of the negative connotations of the term, many groups are quick to dismiss such a label, viewing it as an identification that will neither win them friends in the wider community nor win them the support of local political representatives or planning officers.

Many researchers and academics have liberally used the term “NIMBY” regarding opposition to a range of developments without significant reflection upon its underlying assumptions, for instance housing schemes (Basolo and Hastings 2003), mental health facilities (Cowan 2003, Piat 2000, and Borenstein 1992), prisons (Martin 2000), waste facilities (Matejczyk 2001, Fredriksson 2000, Shen and Yu 1997) and biomass plants

(Upreti and van der Horst 2004); the term has also been used with reference to locally unwanted behaviour, such as prostitution (Hubbard 1998). Developing the conceptualisation of such anti-development campaigns as being negative, others have indicated how they may be illustrative of underlying prejudices such as racism and xenophobia (Hubbard 2005, Wilton 2002). Others have suggested how NIMBY campaigns can be offset. Weisberg (1993), for example, highlights the “Fair Shares” programme in New York, aimed at managing NIMBY protests by sharing out the negative developments between neighbourhoods and Dear offers advice to urban professionals for counteracting NIMBY movements and their “self-interested, turf-protectionist behavior” (1992, p. 288), though he also briefly recognises that such protest movements may also have some more positive implications.

Though it is recognised that some studies have been incredibly useful in explaining the rationale and dynamics behind many protest movements, NIMBY groups generally emerge as being intolerant, short-sighted, “free-loading” and, in extreme circumstances, socially and racially prejudiced. Such groups are, it is alleged, engaged in an essentially protectionist form of participation that is selfish in ends and uncivil in spirit, sentiments that are even more apparent in the discourse of the public and the media, which treat the activity of protest as an almost irrational “syndrome”. The term possesses a pervasive presence and durability. Given its negative connotations, it is a potentially powerful label that possesses a depth of political power by implying that protest groups should have their activities curtailed and their opportunities to participate limited, helping fuel its longevity beyond the sphere of academia despite its unhelpfulness either as an analytical framework or as a strategy for action (Gibson 2005). Yet, and in spite of its prolific use, the term and the assumptions it entails are not always treated critically or investigated in any substantial fashion.

Reassessing the use of the label “NIMBY”: challenging a discourse and unsettling assumptions

There have, however, been other more critical treatments of the NIMBY phenomenon that call for more careful treatment of the term and for a deconstruction of the assumptions inherent in its use. Of particular interest here is the work of Burningham et al. (2006), who call for re-evaluation of the usefulness of the term for understanding public participation, and Burningham (2000) and Wolsink (2006, 2000, 1994), who use empirical research to challenge the appropriateness of the label's use in certain circumstances. Wolsink (1994) details six assumptions regarding NIMBY objectors which formed the basis of the Dutch government's desire to legislate against them, and continues to illustrate how these assumptions are faulty with reference to a number of case studies and attitude surveys. He notes that objectors generally question the need and the desirability of the proposal to be placed anywhere, not just simply near them, and outlines how they appeal to a greater good, for example, resolving the problem of short-term waste disposal. In other cases, Wolsink states, objections are based on the specific detail of a given plan and not necessarily on the principle of development; so-called NIMBY objectors may be satisfied with a modified version of the proposal even if it is ‘in their backyard’. Burningham (2000) argues that it is important to consider the use of the term “NIMBY” in struggles over local development proposals. Through the case of a proposed bypass near an ancient monument near Worthing, Burningham illustrates that objectors often conceptualise their campaign as contributing to a greater public good, and elsewhere Burningham and O'Brien have discussed how the rather delimited boundaries of decision-making processes severely restrict the type and content of contribution that can be made by the public (1994). More recently Wolsink has vociferously attacked the use of the term and concept of “NIMBYism” (2006). Referring specifically to the work of Hubbard (2005), Wolsink describes the term as ‘invalid’ and claims that it does not unpack the concept sufficiently and is not definitive.¹ Others have questioned the misconceived assumptions behind NIMBY movements and the public perception of wind power (Bell et al. 2005, Warren et al. 2005) by identifying how protestors may, to at least some degree, improve the environmental and social justice credentials of proposals, whilst Devine-Wright (2004) calls for perceptions of public opinion regarding wind farm construction to be explained rather than described.

In addition to this burgeoning body of work, others have looked at both how protest movements may extend beyond single-issue or site-specific campaigns and have the potential to develop social and organisational capacity, confronting the conventional perception of groups as solitary or introverted. For example, Heiman (1990) used the term “NOABY” (not in anybody's back yard) to distinguish between protesters who dispute a facility, such as a waste incinerator, in principle, and protestors who wish to oppose such a development in their locality. Davies (2006) discusses how protest groups in Ireland have the potential to assume a wider discourse of environmental justice which would connect seemingly isolated campaigns to broader movements that espouse environmental and human rights. Ellis et al. (2006) make similar arguments with regard to the debate regarding and opposition to wind farm technology in Northern Ireland. Gibson (2005) uses a detailed examination of protest against a homeless hygiene centre in Seattle, Washington to illustrate how such movements, by challenging the embedded legitimacy and rationality of power holders and the decision-making process itself, can create healthy debate, challenge assumptions and in the process contribute to better policy outcomes (for a similar discussion see also McAvoy 1998). Despite finding some of the movement's arguments “morally objectionable” (Gibson 2005, p. 395), such groups, usually dismissed and depoliticised as NIMBY, can have a “thirst for environmental and social justice” (p. 387), and, as such, can powerfully contest conventional perceptions of such organisations, appealing for a more nuanced evaluation of the complicated nature of such phenomena. Additionally, some NIMBY campaigns may lead to sustained activism beyond a group's original campaign through the development of social networks and mutual trust (Shemtov 2003). Others still have identified how protests are an inevitable consequence of capitalist economies, and that such instances are a legitimate “expression of people's needs and fears”:

“As such it is an expression that is no more or less rational and legitimate than the market mechanisms and the profitability of capital. We can no more eliminate NIMBY than we can eliminate private development capital and the market mechanism. We are saddled with both sides of the dialectic.” (Lake 1993, p. 91)

Referred to by Gibson as “rethinkers” (2005), the authors of such critical literature challenge conventional perceptions of NIMBY groups, urging for a more sophisticated analysis of their causes and effects. There is, Gibson continues, a “binary dichotomy” between the rational/civic interest and the irrational/special interest; “Our political sympathies aside, why are some local opponents public-minded heroes and others selfish villains?” (p. 383). There are, in short, “good” and “bad”, “welcome” and “unwelcome” forms of democratic participation. To dismiss groups as NIMBY, or to critique their rationality as being entirely self-interested or even malevolent, may, therefore, be misplaced or misleading.

To explore this further, it is necessary to outline how “good” participation is characterised. The UK government's conception of sustainable communities, outlined by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG 2007a), provides a useful departure point for examining the topic in more detail. The attributes of sustainable communities are outlined in a range of government documents (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister [ODPM] 2005, in particular Appendix 1, 56–59; 2004, Egan 2004). An overview of these policies is provided in Figure 1. Throughout this and similar such documents, the role of local people and community leaders in delivering sustainability objectives is promoted, and generally such policy guidance is underpinned by a discourse of community participation and empowerment. For example, the ODPM (2005) cites the importance of local leadership and community engagement in the development of sustainable communities:

“Neighbourhoods are the areas which people identify with most. They are the places where they live, work and relax. We intend to put more power in the hands of local people and communities, supported by local, regional and national government, to shape their neighbourhoods and the services they rely on – including housing, schools, health, policing and community safety.” (Para 3.2)

Overall, this conjures an image of a clean, green “place”, peopled by engaged citizens who are concerned about their local area, who want it to grow economically, yet not at the expense of the local environment; people who appreciate the distinctiveness and unique features of where they live and will become actively involved in local developments; who will want to see appropriate, well-designed and mixed developments that conserve natural resources; and who are well organised, with local community leaders who are well respected and competent.

OUR VISION – SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

A flourishing, fair society based on opportunity and choice for everyone depends on creating sustainable communities – places that offer everyone a decent home that they can afford in a community in which they want to live and work, now and in the future.

Not all communities are the same – different places have different strengths and needs. But sustainable communities have many things in common: decent homes at prices people can afford; clean, safe, green environments; access to jobs and excellent services – schools, health services, shops and banks; and people having a say in the way their community is run.

A comprehensive statement of the Government's view of what makes a sustainable community is set out at appendix one, reflecting the work we have done in response to the Egan Review of Skills.

Sustainable communities should be:

- **Active, inclusive and safe** – fair, tolerant and cohesive with a strong local culture and other shared community activities
- **Well run** – with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership
- **Environmentally sensitive** – providing places for people to live that are considerate of the environment
- **Well designed and built** – featuring a quality built and natural environment
- **Well connected** – with good transport services and communication linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services
- **Thriving** – with a flourishing and diverse local economy
- **Well served** – with public, private, community and voluntary services that are appropriate to people's needs and accessible to all
- **Fair for everyone** – including those in other communities, now and in the future.

Figure 1. The government's vision of a “sustainable community”.

It should further be noted that whilst the components of a sustainable community are usually discussed with specific relation to planning policy, its inherent principles may be traced through a broader governmental agenda aimed at fostering civic engagement or renewal and “active citizenship”. David Blunkett, while the UK's Home Secretary, set out his vision for community participation and civic renewal in regeneration (see, for example, Blunkett 2003, CRU 2003, Blunkett 2001 2). Similar themes of engagement and community cohesion are traceable through Blunkett's time as secretary of state for education (1997–2001), most notably in his work to establish citizenship education as a statutory element of the National Curriculum (see Crick 2001 for a further discussion of this). More recently, similar initiatives have been pursued through other schemes and across government departments (see, for instance, DCLG 2007a for reference to these3). Yet, despite the notions of participation that are promoted by political leaders, it has been argued that “bottom-up” protest movements do not enjoy unequivocal support from the state (Mooney and Fyfe 2006). After outlining the Labour government's normative approach to issues regarding participation and community engagement in Scotland and more generally across the United Kingdom, Mooney and Fyfe proceed to illustrate how a case study group protesting against the closure of a local leisure facility had important continuing legacies and the potential to develop social capital. They also indicate how participation and engagement can be distinguished between approved and disapproved formats, adding,

“While active communities that engage in “approved” forms of local action are to be welcomed, those who challenge the authority of local government can experience the full coercive force of the state.” (2006, p. 147)

This paradox of desired active and engaged communities and unwanted public action is summarised succinctly by Cowell and Owens (2006) in their recent assessment of the potential impact of changes in the planning system in England:

“For development interests, and perhaps also for ODPM, “the community” is something other than those organisations that have used planning to challenge national policies, and so involving “the community” can be separated from setting strategic priorities.” (Cowell and Owens 2006, p. 411)

This research presented here explores this divide further, by contrasting the DCLG’s version of a “sustainable community” with how two groups, opposing proposed developments in their localities, construed and defined their role in the spatial planning decision-making process and more generally within their local communities. In analysing how groups presented themselves with regard to government definitions of good participation, we illustrate the necessity to resist the temptation to subscribe to simplistic views of public engagement.

The case studies, methodology and research outline

The research is based upon two groups that were, at least initially, established to oppose developments in their local area. They are presented here under the pseudonyms “Brundall Dale” and “Fordlow” to preserve the anonymity promised to participants; however, other details of the cases, such as actions and events, are broadly retained. In both instances, the decision-making process had reached public inquiry stage. Across both cases, 17 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with group members, locally elected councillors, planning and other relevant officers in the local authority, and, in the Fordlow case, the planning consultant for the developer. Additionally, observations were made at public inquiries as well as during informal interactions and meetings.

Brundall Dale is a small village in a rural and reasonably affluent area of North Yorkshire, with a population of several hundred residents. The group was established to attempt to prevent the development of a substantial motorway service area (MSA) 500 metres away from a small village along a busy stretch of the A1(M) motorway. The group, referred to here as the “Brundall Dale Residents Association”, boasted comprehensive public support, both from within the village and from neighbouring settlements, as well as having the endorsement of local parish councillors. They were to become a key (and fully recognised) participant in the subsequent public inquiry into five proposed sites for an MSA. Fordlow is a small, relatively affluent village in the Pennine fringes and, although rural, is within a half-hour commute from central Manchester and about one hour from Sheffield. The “Fordlow Residents Association” was formed to object to a proposal to build 131 houses on the site of a former light industrial works, adjacent to the village. They were granted official third party status at an appeal following the local authority’s initial refusal of planning permission. They too claimed almost unanimous support from local residents and local councillors, and were well represented at the inquiry, with over fifty members of the group attending the opening day.

The paper now takes three broad aspects of the DCLG’s definition of a “sustainable community” and outlines how the arguments and activities assumed by both groups, in both their campaigns and contributions to the public inquiry, go some way to achieving those goals espoused by central government. Firstly it argues that the groups, whilst attempting to protect their area from unwanted development, became empowered and active and, with time, extended their interests beyond the narrow remit as delimited by the public inquiries.

The analysis continues to outline how contributions made by the groups at the inquiries, though incredibly conservative in nature, honoured the local distinctiveness of the localities under analysis. Finally, attention is turned to how the groups, through their contributions to the statutory planning process, rather than merely preventing “progressive” or “necessary” constructions, may conversely help ensure that future development is sustainable and appropriate and may, therefore, contribute to better, more appropriate outcomes.

1. Active citizens or selfish protectionists?

According to Government guidance (DCLG 2007b, ODPM 2005) and as outlined in Figure 1, a sustainable community should be “well run with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership”, facilitating capacity-building to enable local people to become active citizens. In both cases studied, the groups provided community leadership, organising and running the campaigns against their respective proposed developments. In addition, they both used these campaigns as an instigation to become more generally engaged in their localities. All the interview participants in both studies were united in their belief the organisations contributed to local democracy and had positive impacts upon the wider community. A small core of individuals utilised their diverse experiences, skills and expertise to research relevant issues and to subsequently lead and coordinate contributions to the inquiry. Furthermore, and again with reference to both instances, group leaders worked hard at a grassroots level to include other members of the community in protests, in writing letters to the planning inquiry inspector and local political representatives, and to attend and contribute to sessions of the inquiry itself, therefore providing opportunities for both wider and deeper participatory practice.

Much of the evidence submitted to the inquiry by the group on behalf of the community expressed concerns that were not as individualistic or as selfish as much of the conventional literature suggests. For example, evidence presented at the Brundall Dale inquiry expressed more general concerns regarding urbanisation and the design template of motorway service areas. One member described it as being her “responsibility” to become involved in issues that threatened the local community. In both cases, participants felt that their activities contributed to a feeling of inclusion in the local community, and that the groups helped to galvanise the community in a spirit of cooperation. This stimulated many others to rather nostalgically say it reminded them of the “good old days” when local people had stronger social ties and took a more active role in community events, such as the village fete, contributing to what the DCLG describes as a cohesive community “with a strong local culture and other shared community activities”. Interestingly, as well as criticising statutory elements of public consultation in spatial planning, members of the groups claimed they and they alone were at the forefront of providing information to the public regarding the proposed developments, adding that if it were not for the activities of their groups the public would not have any discernible input into the statutory process. In addition, local councillors and group members themselves praised the ability of local people to assume democratic responsibilities and celebrated their contribution to the governance of their localities. Both organisations became increasingly involved in broader activities, not solely or specifically related to the development, both during and after the public inquiry. Groups organised community fundraising events, and developed newsletters and websites that gradually pursued wider issues. After the completion of the inquiries, leaders from both groups continued their engagement in the statutory planning process by helping, with the support of planners and local councillors, to write village or parish action plans and both also spoke of an obligation to assume a “watching brief” to guard against further inappropriate development in their areas. Notably, in the discussions that contributed to these later documents, and in the final drafts themselves, the communities made it clear that they supported development in their areas, but made it clear that it would only be welcome if it was appropriate and sensitive.

With this in mind, and whilst it is recognised that construing arguments in more inclusive or conciliatory terms may assist in a group's attempts to develop support for their campaigns, it is difficult to dismiss these two case study groups as merely selfish protectionists. The case studies illustrate how, when faced with an unwanted and unpopular development proposal, individuals can form a sizable alliance, pooling resources and generating support from the wider community to fight for their collective voice to be heard, acknowledged and responded to. Similarly, both groups, unlike local authority planners or local politicians, informed the public of events relating to the proposal and inquiry, acted as a barometer for public opinion and ultimately represented the predominant public view. Key members of both organisations continue to solicit the views of the public in an attempt to hold a long-term stake in the future of their villages. Lastly, the activities of the groups had a substantial impact in galvanising support from divergent people, celebrating local distinctiveness and heritage, creating pride in the area and attempting to protect "their" place, issues that are returned to in further detail later.

2. Supporters of local distinctiveness or conservative reactionaries?

DCLG guidance proposes that sustainable communities should engender a sense of community identity and cohesiveness. It was quite clear that such considerations underpinned many aspects of the evidence given at both inquiries and themselves motivated both groups' participation. The proofs of evidence submitted to the public inquiry by Fordlow Residents Association focused on four main topics: employment, transport, local character and social infrastructure. In their discussion of these themes, the group expressed views and interests that had broader implications for the locality. The secretary discussed the importance of the local architectural vernacular, advocating interesting buildings in any proposed development of the site "rather than more and more of these awful estates which are popping up everywhere". Furthermore, in their formal evidence the history of the village was summarised to illustrate this local distinctiveness, noting that the first recorded reference to the village dates to the thirteenth century and that the author E. Nesbit may have set her childhood classic *The Railway Children* in the village.

Similar points were raised by the Brundall Dale anti-MSA group during their contributions to the planning inquiry. Again, many of the arguments highlighted the perceived uniqueness of the area, and the fact that any development would be destructive to the built and social fabric of the locality. Members felt that the Borough Council and the Planning Inspector took increasing note of the representations made by the group as their status and knowledge of the system and procedures improved, and some believed the MSA issue helped to galvanise cooperation between several of the local parish councils, relations that at least three of the interviewees felt should be sustained beyond the resolution of the MSA campaign. Returning to the public sessions of the inquiry: contributions were made by a cross-section of the community, from people who had lived in the village all their lives, to local schoolchildren, all of whom spoke passionately regarding their personal perceptions and the distinctiveness of the area. The valuable contribution that may be made by such groups to the management of local areas was recognised by a development control officer planner who was interviewed. He stated that single-issue groups very often continue to exist after the resolution of an initial issue and can offer fresh and local perspectives upon potential development proposals or land use designations. He illustrated the point with a specific, named example that he had previously worked with and that remains on the Council's consultation lists:

They stayed as a group, and when other issues, other planning issues, were in the parish, they resurrected that liaison. In that sense, what started life as a group established to consider one single particular issue got them involved in planning, which, you know, there's nothing wrong with that!

In making such arguments, groups communicate the strong sense of place they possess for the places they inhabit, illustrating their pride in the community and their desire to preserve and enhance what, for them, makes it distinctive and special.

3. Promoting appropriate and sustainable development or blocking progress and local growth?

In both their sentiments and their contributions to the public inquiries, the case study groups expressed desires to create more environmentally sustainable local environments. This is in accordance with key tenets of the DCLG's definition of a "sustainable community": that the community should contain development that is, firstly, "well designed and built, featuring a quality built and natural environment"; secondly, is "well connected with good transport services ... linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services"; thirdly, "thriving with a flourishing and diverse local economy"; and, finally, "well served with public, private, community and voluntary services that are appropriate to people's needs and accessible to all".

During inquiry contributions, and in the private deliberations of the groups' leaders, Fordlow Residents Association objected to specific facets of the development proposal, describing the location as inappropriate and the scale of the development as uncharacteristic and unproportional, in effect creating two separate villages. During an interview, the secretary of the Residents Association said, "I could understand that it was a profitable thing to do, but not the right thing to do", adding that the proposed development would have become "a commuter ghetto" with future residents driving to shops and other facilities in neighbouring villages, rather than supporting local outlets, partly due to inadequate links transport facilities. She added that the local town "had long since reached its optimum size". The section in their formal evidence regarding social infrastructure referred to this, discussing the lack of local health care capacity, and the lack of play activities for children on the new estate. The group did not outright oppose housing development, and made this clear throughout their contributions and discussions when they claimed to welcome development that was of appropriate layout, and appropriate size and scale, and could be supported by local facilities. Members of Brundall Dale Residents Association, although generally opposed to any development on the greenfield site of the proposed MSA, centred criticism on the fact that the MSA was going to be of a similar size to the nearest village, adding that given the nature of the facilities that would be incorporated in the MSA and the distance that would have to be travelled by car to access the facility, local people would find little benefit in having such a substantial development on their doorstep. The following abstract from the group's inquiry evidence illuminates this fear:

"The sheer scale of the proposed MSA is such that it will dominate the surrounding area and destroy its unique rural identity. The proximity of the proposed site to the village is such that it is likely there would be pressure in future for infill development between the village and the MSA."

Turning now to consider the issue of economic vitality for the local areas under investigation, both case study groups raised concerns regarding the veracity of the evidence submitted to the respective inquiries regarding the benefits that the developments could bring to the areas. The Fordlow Residents Association stated in their formal evidence that they wanted the site and its vicinity to provide "an employment use for local people", stressing the importance of local jobs to the local economy. In addition to this, they called local company owners to the inquiry to talk about how much they valued the location of their current sites. The company owners expressed fears that this proposed development would detrimentally affect their business, as new residents would complain about noise; some buildings housed heavy industry, occasionally working 24 hours. This point is further emphasised by the following comment made in a research interview. When referring to plans to increase development on brownfield sites, the respondent stated, "I don't think John Prescott [then secretary of state with responsibility for planning] meant that unscrupulous developers should

be approaching businesses and engineering their redundancy just because there is a site which would be profitable to put houses on.” On a similar note, the Brundall Dale anti-MSA group queried the uncertain economic benefits of MSA construction for the local economy. While the group did accept the facility would create more jobs in the locality, they brought demographic and socio-economic statistics to the inspector's attention. The area, they said, fell within a region of high employment, raising concerns over the ability of the MSA operator to recruit from the village, and they criticised the low-skill and poorly paid nature of the expected work. Indeed, the group argued the MSA might have a detrimental impact on local employment markets, providing intense recruitment competition in the semi-skilled sector, and potentially pushing local business out of the area.

In both cases, the proposed developments were rigorously challenged and critiqued by the protest groups, due to the perceived unsustainability of the scale and land use of both sets of proposals, and campaigners further questioned the proposed economic benefits of the development. Such arguments, based around key components of sustainability as identified by the government itself, illustrate how groups do not necessarily base their opposition upon wholly concerns.

Conclusions

The empirical research detailed in this paper illustrates how labels such as “NIMBY” and “sustainable community” are highly subjective and politically charged. The former label is often utilised in an attempt to dismiss the arguments of a group as purely self-interested or to discredit the activities of those that mobilise. Yet, at the same time, such groups often become incredibly active in attempting to protect and promote “their community”, and possess those very attributes deemed characteristic of an idealised “sustainable community”. Despite forms of good and bad participation possessing similar characteristics, there is little scope for communities to occupy any middle ground, as, so often, participatory practice is either upheld as a positive contribution to the decision-making process or is castigated as being selfish or even hostile. There is a lack of consideration of how single-issue pressure groups may provide a foundation upon which locally involved, proactive citizens can become more involved in shaping their “place”. It is with this deficit in mind that the two case studies presented in this paper have been analysed. While both participated in single-issue-centred inquiries, both also challenged implicit assumptions within NIMBY-type discourse, and often fulfilling the good practice detailed through government guidance. The aim of the paper is not necessarily to defend protest groups, nor to dismiss the admittedly admirable vision of community outlined by current and previous UK governments. Rather, it illustrates how much more careful consideration of these terms, and their use in academic and popular parlance, is necessary.

Although the article reflects upon just two case studies, clearly limiting the scope and potential for generalisation of its findings, the strength of the correlation between the cases to the DCLG's idealised sustainable community unsettles the binary dichotomy between “good” and “bad” public involvement in decision-making; between altruistic and “NIMBYistic” participation. Thus, the findings contribute to the literature that challenges the simplistic labelling of certain groups as NIMBY. Moreover, we suggest, distinctions between “good” and “bad” participation may divert attention from the negative contributions made in “good” participation, as well as eclipsing the positive contributions that are made in “bad” participation – further suggesting that actors that are involved should be neither unduly vilified nor romanticised (Burningham et al. 2006, p. 17). In order to assess the value and propriety of participation, an in-depth consideration of the motivations, actions and outcomes of groups is needed, rather than relying upon the labels that they may either adopt or are assigned. There is clearly a need, therefore, to assume a much more critical posture when debating various forms of public participation.

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