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# University, Localism and Neighbourhood Planning in Northampton

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Affairs, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2012

# Overview of the presentation

- University and the Town
- Local engagement and the creation of the Northampton Institute for Urban Affairs (NIUA)
- University as honest broker in neighbourhood development and research
- Example of Spring Boroughs Neighbourhood in Northampton
- Limitations of Localism
- Conclusions

# University in the Town

- University as a major employer and engine of economic development in a town of 210,000
- University somewhat detached from the town geographically and politically until strategic decision in 2008 to be “an engaged university”
- University role as honest broker , and potential resource in a contested political environment
- University also a major developer e.g. in the Town Centre and in the Enterprise Zone

# Local engagement and the NIUA

- The NIUA was created in 2008 to engage with local authorities and communities in the “growth agenda” for the sub-region, including research, community involvement and professional development (CPD)
- NIUA is a team five with backgrounds in planning, housing, community, and social care; mostly working part time. Remit to engage others across the University
- Slow build up of local engagement, trust, credibility...still early days
- New Combined Centre for the Built Environment also established 2011 to add teaching offer on the built environment (with Moulton College and UCMK)

# University as honest broker in neighbourhood development

- Assistance to three communities submitting bids to be Neighbourhood Planning Front Runners
- Case study of NIUA role in Spring Boroughs Neighbourhood Plan Front runner
- We offered research, advice, professional training – either free or a limited fee basis often following up known community contacts
- Some student project work as well

# Spring Boroughs Case study

- The most deprived area of the Northampton, located between central area and the station
- Many houses below decent homes standard
- Conflict between the principal community organisation and the council over regeneration strategy particularly over housing policy
- Community organisation applied to be a front runner
- Council reluctantly agreed largely due to NIUA honest broker role
- Front runner status granted and NIUA has now been invited by both sides to chair the Neighbourhood Forum

# Limitations of Localism as a context for our role

- Localism has raised expectations that Neighbourhood Planning and Community Right to Build can be used to stop development i.e. To override policies communities do not like
- It has raised expectations that Neighbourhood Plans would be community controlled when in fact the local authority manages the process and Neighbourhood Plans must conform to local authority plans to Government planning guidance
- NIUA are in the middle of this tension



# Conclusions

- Poorer communities need skills in Plan making and design; The University is one possible provider (there is competition and little money around); local authorities have a big say; but we can be an honest broker
- Community engagement requires “political” and advocacy skills, as well as multi-disciplinary technical skills
- Though the Localism Act itself is limiting and imposes bureaucratic hurdles which restrict radical change; there are opportunities for community empowerment and training
- Universities are in the middle between local authorities and communities but they can provide a long term, committed resource to both