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Sustainable development and planning

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Introduction

The complexity of global challenges that shape the context for planning has been discussed elsewhere (see Chapter 1). It is worth mentioning here, however, five megatrends that provide the framework for delivering sustainable development (SD). The world *population is ageing, in both expanding and shrinking cities and regions.* This has seen new planning models coming of age such as planning for healthy cities, compact cities and low growth cities, among others. The *world is urbanising at a fast pace and cities are at the front of delivering SD*. Cities are forming urban networks and are powerful global actors. From the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group to United Cities and Local Governments, these organisations reach beyond the boundaries of cities and nation states to project influence on planning for SD. The *global economic power is shifting.* Planning for SD is increasingly seen as a lever for delivering new models of growth such as the green economy, the circular economy and the transition economy. *Climate change and resource scarcity* have also prompted planning responses around the world. These include planning for climate change mitigation and adaptation, low carbon cities and eco-cities. *Rapid technological advance* means that real-time urban data is plentiful and increasingly available. For the first time, planning can employ large scale urban modelling across the economic, social and environmental areas of our lives to aid decisions and improve outcomes. Planning for the smart city is such an example.

In addition to global forces, British planning has also been shaped by national conditions (see Chapter 1). Among these, at least three are relevant to planning for SD and for what follows in this chapter. First, the British planning system is devolved in the context of a discretionary planning model. This means that England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have their own national planning policy and guidance and subsequent SD agendas (see Chapter 2). Second, UK planning has been through successive rounds of deregulation, which in England have been paralleled by a view that planning inhibits growth. However, planning for SD seems to distance itself from this view under the promise of delivering new, sustainable growth. Third, following the Great Financial Crisis, local authorities have experienced stringent austerity measures, impacting especially upon planning departments. Emerging evidence suggests that in some local authorities human and financial 'sustainability resources' have been first to be cut. This has had an impact on the capacity of local planning to deliver SD on the ground.

With these global and national challenges in mind, this chapter looks at how planning for SD is framed by policy and delivered in practice in the UK. SD is a long contested concept (Turcu, 2012). However, there is agreement among scholars that it represents the intersection of three spheres (economic, environmental and social), which need to be balanced over time (to ensure intergenerational equity) and across scales (to consider planetary boundaries). This chapter deploys this understanding of SD. It also acknowledges the intersections of planning for SD with other concepts and models discussed in the sustainability literature, such as sustainable, green, ecological or low-carbon urbanism, and smart, circular or healthy cities, among others. There are two main parts to the chapter following this introduction.

The first part considers how the planning system at the various levels impacts on SD. It makes three claims: the national planning frameworks of the four nations – in particular the English one - do not provide a clear framework for the delivery of SD. Hence, room for 'manoeuvre' is large; the current

English focus on neighbourhood planning (which puts communities in the driving seat) can be challenging for the delivery of SD in practice; and UK-wide austerity measures have hit local authorities unequally and thus, the ability of planning to consistently guide the delivery of SD on the ground.

The second part of the chapter looks at planning practice in the case of northwest Bicester, the first eco-town in England, to illustrate some of the claims made in part one. It finds that the challenge posed by the ambiguity of framing of SD in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in England is bypassed by drawing on previous planning policy; local communities are instrumental in the delivery of SD on the ground, but also 'feared' by planners because of their new neighbourhood planning powers; and the local planning department has not been affected much by austerity cuts because of the projects' flagship status and location. The chapter concludes by drawing wider lessons, of national and international relevance.

Policy, legislative and fiscal context

Planning has been under societal and political pressure to protect the 'common good' by ensuring the development of sustainable cities and communities (Polk, 2010). We live in a world that is increasingly challenged by its environmental limits and resource scarcity. Planning as a discipline provides ideas about how spatial arrangements and patterns are manifested and processes are managed in order to achieve an optimum balance of needs or demands within available resources, with public interest at its heart. These are key issues for SD. It has been argued, however, that planning theory fails to fully problematize planning from a SD perspective (Næss, 1994), because planning is traditionally associated with boundary-delimited and relatively short-term fixed goals and outputs,

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while SD implies cross-boundary thinking and a long-term process of shifting goals and outcomes (Næss, 2001, Bagheri and Hjorth, 2007).

SD is also a challenge for planning practice, especially in relation to its operationalization on the ground. Planners have to implement the concept in practice, because "turning concepts into reality must lie at the very heart of what planning is about", and somehow make sure initiatives do not merely "pay lip-service to the words but do justice to the original concept" (Campbell, 2000: 259). This is a challenging task. Moreover, delivering SD is not a legally binding target at the European level and, with the exception of countries in Scandinavia, where important strides have been made to mainstream SD into planning policy, in most other European countries planning for SD has relied on moral commitments and political resolve. Environmental and economic concerns dominated political agendas in the late 1980s and early to mid 1990s, whilst it was only in the late 1990s that the social agenda associated with SD started to emerge. The early to mid 2000s saw a relatively equal balancing of the three dimensions of SD and the addition of a fourth – the institutional/ cultural dimension – due to a growing interest in governance processes. However, the aforementioned global trends are changing the balance yet again and in most European countries, the SD agenda has returned to a primary emphasis on economic development, with an environmental and social secondary focus in European countries such as Sweden and Germany.

SD has been a central theme of British urban policy since the late 1980s and this has been complemented by a substantial body of academic research. However, it was only in the mid 2000s that a SD policy agenda crystallised through a series of policy papers, built on earlier initiatives since 1999, including the 2004 Egan Review (ODPM, 2004) and two complementary 2005 Sustainable Communities five-year plans (ODPM, 2005b, ODPM, 2005a). This culminated with the UK re-launching its new Sustainable Development Strategy: Securing the Future (DEFRA, 2005), which provided five guiding principles of SD: living within environmental limits; a strong, healthy and just

society; a sustainable economy; good governance; and sound, responsible science. The strategy also named building sustainable communities as one of four UK priorities and suggested a set of SD indicators (ONS, 2014). This strategy is still in place today.

Delivering the UK's SD strategy required new policy frameworks and planning policy is, perhaps, one area of British policy which has been strongly shaped by it. This had to be framed within the UK's devolved and discretionary planning system. Although the basic structures of the four planning systems in the UK's four countries are similar (see Chapter 2) there are differences in their detail and delivery on the ground. All national planning policy in the UK introduces a presumption in favour of development that contributes to SD, however, there is variation in the way it is framed. That is to say that while England's 2012 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) relies on planning's three roles (as driver for economic, social, environmental development), which are discussed in greater detail below; Scotland's 2012 National Planning Framework 3 (NPF3) places a strong emphasis on place-making; Wales' 2014 Planning Policy Wales (PPW) uses a well-being perspective; and Northern Ireland's 2015 Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) employs a focus on climate change adaptation and mitigation, and eco-system services.

The changes introduced by the UK Coalition Government (2010-2015) have since seen a greater divergence between the planning system in England and the other three countries, especially in relation to England's specific focus on cities. Before 2012, planning policy in England was stated in 25 different Planning Policy Statements (PPS), with four of them having a strong relation to sustainable development: PPS1 which looked at overall planning for sustainable development (2005); PPS1 Supplement framing zero carbon new built (2007); PPS11 microgeneration (2008); and PPS22 renewable energy (2004). This was replaced by the NPPF in 2012, which "underpins sustainable development and planning in England" (HMGov, 2016) and offers England's view on the economic, social and environmental role of planning in SD (Box 12.1)

<Insert Box 12.1: NPPF's view on the economic, social and environmental role of planning (DCLG, 2012) p. 2-3>

The NPPF is part of a wider reform in English planning, enshrined under the 2011 Localism Act. It introduces Neighbourhood Planning and aims to curtail the planning powers of local government by delivering 'sustainable localism'. This means that communities in England are given powers to challenge municipal planning decisions and draw up their own Neighbourhood Plans. Neighbourhood Planning rests on an ideology of 'stakeholder citizenship' with ideals of civic duties and rights, and appeals to individuals' responsibilities for social well-being (Scerri & Magee, 2012). As a statutory tool that promises communities the autonomy to shape local development and realise local ambitions, it has the potential to allow the advancement of pro-environmental action from the grassroots level in an age of eco-awareness. In other words, it can be seen as a way to achieve SD via community-led planning.

A full critical discussion of the NPPF and its implementation is still to emerge. However, there is emerging criticism on at least two counts: its loose definition of SD; and its overreliance on the powers of communities at the local level. On the first count, the NPPF provides little guidance for the operationalization of SD in planning practice (NewsForum, 2011). Box 12.1 is a good illustration of this, showing how planning's three roles lend themselves to multiple interpretations. On the second, it is argued that the NPPF's enthusiastic promotion of community participation in planning (via localism and neighbourhood planning) has its caveats. That is to say planning knowledge that is co-produced with local communities can be 're-scripted' to ensure conformity with already existing forms of planning practice, which contravene the 'representative democracy' claims made under neighbourhood planning (Parker et al., 2015, Bradley, 2015, Davoudi and Cowie, 2013). Moreover, neighbourhood planning is a form of 'liberal institutionalism' drawing on community participation

but also existing local institutions, and so, opens up for discussion the geography of civic infrastructure and capacity in England (Wills, 2016).

Communities have also been an area of debate in planning for SD; while their merits and achievements have been much praised, they have also been associated with a number of challenges in relation to the delivery of SD. SD appeals to common responsibilities and goals, and Campbell and Marshall (2000) have questioned the ability of individuals to work for collective interests, positing that individuals favour self-interests in decision making, due to differences in opinion and conflicting needs. Communities in planning tend to associate themselves with physical boundaries and that challenges the inter-connected and cross-boundary thinking prevalent in SD debates. They also argue that "expanding the opportunities for public participation in environmental planning is not always the best option" (*ibid*: 153) because of the limits of collective action (such as free-riding and shirking) associated with environmental goals (i.e. air/ water pollution), which potentially affect larger sections of the population (Rydin and Pennington, 2000). Finally, the interest in Neighbourhood Plans has been particularly strong in rural and commuter belt regions with affluent communities (Matthews et al., 2015), areas that traditionally have a history of 'local protectionism', but also experience of community-planning in its previous guises i.e. Parish Plans or Community Design Statements (Matthews et al., 2015, Inch, 2012). This means that communities can lobby against SD goals that contravene local interests, but also that some communities start at an advantage in influencing planning processes.

Moreover, current austerity measures resulting in public expenditure cuts together with wider changes in the political landscape have challenged the effectiveness of English planning to deliver the social and economic role of planning for SD outlined in the NPPF. For example, many efforts towards the integration of SD in mainstream policy have been curtailed since 2010 (Rydin and Turcu, 2014); and substantial reductions in local authority budgets have seen planning and/or sustainability capacity and

resources reduced or eliminated (Jane, 2013). In addition, Brexit negotiations may greatly impact the environmental dimensions of planning. Planning is a system through which the state controls and manages space and the European Union (EU) does not have a direct role in national planning. However, some areas of EU policy do have a big impact on shaping national planning policy and the spatial distribution of people, industry and commerce. The EU has a series of key goals including the promotion of economic and social cohesion, conservation of natural resources and cultural heritage, which help to achieve a more 'sustainable' economy across Europe. As such, much of the UK's environmental legislation is transported from EU directives. One such example is the requirement for an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for larger developments and developments with potentially significant environmental impact (i.e. airports, motorways, power plants etc.), whereby predicted impacts of the development on people, flora, fauna, soil, water, air, climate, landscape and cultural heritage are investigated and reported.

It is unclear what EU-level regulation and legislation will mean in a post-Brexit era. While the UK remains a full member of the EU, with all corresponding obligations and it is expected that these will be maintained via various 'deals'. However, following Brexit, there is no guarantee that it will happen and it is uncertain what will happen to EU legislation and regulation, which fall just within the transitional period. This includes various amendments to air quality (an area for which London has been sanctioned more recently), transport, energy and water legislation, all areas of relevance to spatial planning.

There are at least three changes, which are of particular importance to planning for SD in the period of Brexit negotiations: EIAs, maritime planning and energy planning. First, all member states will have to strengthen the quality of EIA procedures by July 2018 by enhancing links with other EU-level actions and developing further strategies and policies in areas of national competence. Second, by March 2021, all member states will have to transport into national policy the Maritime Spatial

Planning Directive. This is a new directive which establishes a framework for maritime spatial planning in order to promote the sustainable growth of maritime economy, spatial development and natural/ maritime ecosystems. Third, there will be a series of changes in the EU's energy market (IEM) and carbon trading scheme (ETS), which will require joint compliance with relevant EU rules on energy, environment and competition. It is rumoured that the UK will want to stay in the IEM but will leave the ETS, which charges power plants and factories for every tonne of CO2 they emit. All this uncertainty will have an impact on how existing and new development is planned for and built and adds to wider concerns regarding the current government's position on environmental issues. In fact, the 2017 Spring Budget has been seen as "a missed opportunity" to tackle green problems such as energy efficiency and air pollution, with generally little space and funding allocated to the environment and sustainability agenda (Aid, 2017).

Planning for SD in practice

This section examines planning practice in the delivery of North West Bicester (NWB thereafter) and draws on a range of publicly available data and five interviews with representatives of the planning, development and consultancy sectors, involved in the delivery of NWB. NWB is the first eco-town in England and an extension to the market town of Bicester. Bicester is located in Cherwell District Council, county of Oxfordshire, and is a 'growth' town with large housing targets in the South-East of England, ten miles from Oxford. In 2007, a government initiative was set up to develop eco-towns in England in response to a wider and acute housing shortage in the UK. These were seen as an opportunity to achieve exemplary sustainability standards in at least one of the following areas: deployment of environmental technology; building low-carbon homes; achieving social and spatial integration; and delivering 30-50% affordable housing (DCLG, 2007). In 2008, 15 locations were selected and in 2009, 4 winning locations, including NWB, were announced and identified in *PPS: Eco-towns*, a supplement to the then *PPS1: Sustainable Development*, as 'exemplars' for SD. The

local authority supported the idea and in 2010, *Eco-Bicester: One Shared Vision* was formulated working closely with a social landlord (A2Dominion) and sustainability think-tank (Bioregional), and using One Planet Living (OPL) principles to flesh-out the characteristics of an eco-town (BioRegional, 2015). This was adopted by the council and subsequently included in its Core Strategy 2011-2031 Part 1 (or Local Plan) as Policy Bicester 1, a strategic allocation for up to 6,000 new homes (Cherwell, 2016).

When the NPPF came into force in 2012, a Masterplan and supporting vision documents for NWB, drawing on the previous *PPS: Eco-towns*, was approved by the council in 2014. In 2015, the *PPS: Eco-towns* was annulled for all areas except NWB through a ministerial statement. Concerned that this 'exception' would be cancelled in time, the council decided in 2016 to bring the NWB eco-town standards into a *Supplementary Planning Document* (SPD). The SPD sets out the minimum standards for NWB and supports the implementation of the Local Plan. Arguably, the SPD bypasses the current NPPF by drawing heavily on previous planning policy and OPL principles. It reportedly takes into account advice in the NPPF, but that is difficult to map bearing in mind the NPPF's loose definition of SD and direction for implementation. The SPD also offers a strong SD framing for any neighbourhood planning process and ensuing Neighbourhood Plan that may be adopted in the future. When fully delivered, NWB is planned to provide (Cherwell, 2016:3):

- "Up to 6,000 "true" zero carbon homes;
- Employment opportunities providing at least 4,600 new jobs;
- Up to four primary schools and one secondary school;
- Forty per cent green space, half of which will be public open space;
- Pedestrian and cycle routes;
- New links under the railway line and to the existing town;
- Local centres to serve the new and existing communities; and

- Integration with existing communities."

NWB's first phase started on site in 2012 with intended completion in 2018. Elmsbrook is an 'sustainability exemplar' for NWB, following OPL principles (BioRegional, 2015) – see Table 12.1. It has an OPL Action Plan which is reviewed annually and sets up SD targets such as a 30% reduction in embodied CO2; zero waste to landfill during construction; reducing car usage to 50% (from 65%); and 40% of its area is to be dedicated to open space. In addition, it aims to achieve a net biodiversity gain, climate change adaptation, and a combination of zero carbon and Level 5 Code for Sustainable Homes[i] for housing across the development. By 2017, Elmsbrook built some 400 homes; one energy centre, a nursery, community centre, eco-business centre, eco-pub and primary school; and some 1,500 sq. m. of commercial space (BioRegional, 2016).

<Insert Table 12.1: Ten OPL principles guiding the delivery of Elmsbrook (photo credits: BioRegional) >

Planning for SD at Elmsbrook has meant achieving 'exemplary sustainability standards', such as maximising potential for affordable housing, walkable neighbourhoods, water/ energy/ waste efficiency, job creation and community governance. This has been facilitated by political support and planning standards adopted by all levels of government; and "strong partnerships based on like-minded individuals" representing the local authority, A2Dominion and Bioregional.

Communities have been involved in planning at Elmsbrook mainly via community involvement and community capacity building initiatives, rather than the new powers of localism and neighbourhood planning. Extensive consultation has been carried out with the existing and surrounding communities under a town-wide strategy to respond to community needs. This has involved creating opportunities for community capacity building such as Bicester Green - a centre for skills, sustainability and

recycling, where "people from all walks of life come together to share and engage in the art of repair" (interviewee) - and the Community House for "residents' own use and enjoyment" (interviwee); but also by providing demonstration homes, a school extension and self-build programmes.

Planners, however, have worked under the assumption that under the new powers of neighbourhood planning, communities could challenge their decisions in the future and so, they have been seen as important to have on board. It would be interesting to monitor in the coming years whether any of these mechanisms will materialise and what their interaction will be with the strong framing provided by the SPD, OPL and the example set by Elmsbrook. Community boundaries were clearly delimited at Elmsbrook, which can be seen as a barrier to planning for SD. However, planners used the OPL framework as a tool to think across boundaries and address this.

Cherwell District Council is situated in the wealthy South East of England and this made it less likely to be hit as hard as other areas by the austerity cuts imposed on English local councils since 2010. Budget cuts have been made, but the council has managed by changing the way it operates via sharing management and services with adjacent councils. Increases in local tax have also been used to bump up the reduced local budget and fund services including planning and economic development (Banbury Guardian, 2015). Planners at Cherwell District Council noted that this, together with NWB flagship project status and its location (in a growth area), have spared cuts in the planning department. Following from this, the case of NWB demonstrates that current planning practice for SD depends on: the ability of the local authority to 'internalise' austerity cuts and so sustain planning departments and institutional sustainability knowledge/ skills; the 'visibility' of the project; and a capacity to reach out to partners beyond planning to both define what SD means in practice and partner for delivery. All these, I argue, are a long way from mainstream planning practice for SD in England at the moment.

Conclusions

This chapter has looked at SD within the wider framework for planning policy in the UK and focused on one example of planning practice for SD in England. It has found that the planning policy and guidance for SD in the UK and particularly in England through the NPPF, does not provide a clear framework for the delivery of SD in practice. It has also claimed that the current English framing of neighbourhood planning and communities in planning can be challenging for the ideas and goals purported by SD; and that the consequences of current austerity cuts, which have seen sustainability resources diminished at the local level, and the uncertainty surrounding Brexit have been additional barriers to planning for SD in the UK.

Indeed, some evidence of this has been found in practice, as in the case of NWB. The development of NWB/Elmsbrook has caused controversy from the beginning by evading normal planning control routes. In other words, planning for SD at NWB has been drawing on planning policy that pre-dates the NPPF and an additional SPD, which have been 'accommodated' within NPPF's loose framing of SD. NWB is an exceptional planning practice example, due to its special eco-town status, however, it stands testimony for the significant amount of 'interpretation' (and documentation) that planning practice in England has to undertake in order to deliver SD in practice. One can argue that the rather prescriptive SPD and OPL framing adopted at NWB can be seen as a source of tension within the context of current neighbourhood planning and future Neighbourhood Plans. At least two lessons can be inferred from this discussion. They refer to: the emerging institutional innovation in an austerity climate; and communities in planning for SD.

First, emerging evidence suggests that the changing nature of planning frameworks in the UK, together with austerity cuts and uncertainty brought by Brexit have resulted in institutional innovation

at the local authority level including, among others, revenue generation, financialisation of assets, pro-growth mechanisms and alternative models of service delivery. How sustainable this is going to be in the long term is questionable. However, in the short term, some local authorities have found ways to keep afloat. NWB shows that current planning policy and austerity measures have provided impetus for the council to 'do things differently' and, in terms of planning for SD, there is evidence of shared services, particularly in terms of economic and transport strategies. Multi-authority approaches to such endeavours seem sensible and likely to promote holistic thinking and consideration of extra-local impacts and priorities, which fit very well with the broader aims of SD. This, however, raises questions about how planning responsibilities for SD are framed, located and delivered in practice; and how they intersect with responsibilities which lie beyond the influence of planning (Turcu, 2018). Second, the focus on communities in planning for SD can be challenging, both across the UK and internationally. While engaging communities in planning has been seen as an important step in the democratisation of planning processes, some literature points to the tensions between the wider aims of SD and community priorities, particularly in the form of anti-development sentiment (Matthews et al., 2015), and perceptions of local identity, also fostered by an awareness of environmental impacts on a local scale (Seyfang and Smith, 2007, Mitchell, 2001). Arguably, this gives credence to the argument that deep-seated SD requires significant strategic action from higher levels (Robbins and Rowe, 2002) and challenges previous assumptions about the benefits of involving communities in planning such as raising sustainability awareness and co-producing knowledge, among others (Healey, 1992, Healey, 1997, Seyfang, 2010, Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010). Moreover, the ability to pursue SD at the local level by engaging communities in planning in the UK is heavily dependent on the skills, resources and awareness of communities involved in the process. That is to say some areas and communities may start at an advantage at the cost of others. Despite the fact that the neighbourhood planning model in England does not create a planning system that exclusively relies on public initiatives, it is nevertheless a model which by indirectly relying on community resources and infrastructure, directs one's attention to the geography of such initiatives.

Box 12.1 – NPPF's view on the economic, social and environmental role of planning (DCLG, 2012) p. 2-3

• an **economic** role – contributing to building a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right type is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth and innovation; and by identifying and coordinating development requirements, including the provision of infrastructure

• a **social** role – supporting strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by providing the supply of housing required to meet the needs of present and future generations; and by creating a high quality built environment, with accessible local services that reflect the community's needs and support its health, social and cultural well-being

• an **environmental** role – contributing to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment; and, as part of this, helping to improve biodiversity, use natural resources prudently, minimise waste and pollution, and mitigate and adapt to climate change including moving to a low carbon economy

Table 12.1 – One Planet Living (OPL) principles

1. Health and happiness
It is easy, attractive and affordable for people to lead healthy, happy lifestyles within a fair share of the earth's resources.
2. Equity and local economy
Thriving diverse and resilient local economies support fair employment, inclusive communities and fair trade.
3. Culture and community
A culture of sustainability and community has been nurtured, building on local cultural heritage to foster a sense of place and belonging.
4. Land use and wildlife
Communities contribute to an increase in biodiversity and biological productivity and support beautiful landscapes.
5. Sustainable water
Water is used efficiently in buildings and in the products we buy, and water is managed to support healthy land-use and avoid flooding and pollution.
6. Local and sustainable food
People are able to eat healthy diets high in local, seasonal and organic produce and lower in animal protein.
7. Sustainable materials
Goods and materials -for construction or consumer goods -are sourced locally and made from renewable or waste resources with low embodied energy.
8. Sustainable transport
It is easy for people to walk and cycle and low and zero carbon modes of transport are provided.
9. Zero waste
Resources are used efficiently, waste levels are close to zero and ultimately zero waste is sent to landfill.
10. Zero carbon
All buildings will be energy efficient and run completely from renewable energy.

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[i] The Code for Sustainable Homes is a voluntary standard in England which allows councils to adopt their own sustainability levels (1 to 6) as a planning requirement for new residential development. The Code was abolished by the government in 2015.