

Chapter 2

The Patchwork Politics of Sustainable Communities

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to review government strategies for sustainable communities in England and particularly the programme of neighbourhood planning introduced from 2011 in which responsibility for achieving sustainable development was devolved to local communities. It explores the definition of sustainability that emerged from these neighbourhood plans, one in which the priorities of environmental quality and the welfare needs of social reproduction were constrained through a choice of economic growth or self-reliance. The paper reports on research with urban and rural communities seeking sustainability through neighbourhood planning and it reveals the starkly unequal geography of sustainable development that is emerging. The paper concludes that hopes of sustainability in England are now heavily dependent on the geographical whims of the property market.

Keywords Sustainable communities • Neighbourhood planning • Inequality

Introduction

The pairing of community and sustainable development has dominated the international policy agenda for at least three decades with its assertion that the imperatives of capital accumulation can be balanced for the needs of social reproduction (Raco 2005). As a framework of state strategy, the concept of sustainable communities has come to define a particular mode of governance in which responsibility for ameliorating the impact of unfettered growth is devolved to place-based voluntary and community associations (Mayer 2000). The community provides a model of sustainability in which the economics of collective consumption and the politics of community action can be engaged in the planning and stewardship of local

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development. The strategies of sustainable communities that result combine the market zeal of spatial liberalism with themes of redistributive justice and equality, finding in the concept of community both a model of resilience and enterprise and conversely a dynamic of mutual aid and cooperation (Clarke and Cochrane 2013).

The aim of this paper is to identify these competing strands in government strategies for sustainable communities in England and particularly the programme of neighbourhood planning introduced from 2011. It is argued that neighbourhood planning relegated responsibility for achieving environmental and social sustainability to the domestic networks of the community and largely absolved the state and the market of their obligations. The paper explores the definition of sustainability that emerged from communities and their neighbourhood plans, one in which the priorities of environmental quality and the welfare needs of social reproduction were pursued through a Hobson's choice of economic growth or self-reliance. In this unequal geography of community initiatives, the paper charts the development of a new patchwork politics of sustainability.

Sustainable Communities and Neighbourhood Planning

The sustainable community has a noble pedigree in place-based projects of visionary design and the fusion of nature and nurture. Its antecedents are rooted in a renunciation of capitalism, in the collectivist communities of Charles Fourier, in Peter Kropotkin's (1912) celebration of mutual aid, and in William Morris' (1890) anarchist naturalism. In these radical visions of sustainable communities, economic life was to be localised and organically fused with the rhythms of social reproduction and an idealised natural world (Harvey 2000). State development strategies continue to present the neighbourhood and community as an organic entity in which a discrete sustainability can be achieved in apparent isolation from global connections. No return to nature is imagined, however, and sustainability is to be achieved without the renunciation of capitalism. The sustainable community is conceived as a coherent collective amid a global market (Rose 1999), and cast as an economic actor in charge of its own destiny and responsible for its own well-being (Hall and Massey 2010). This rendition of the sustainable community can be examined through a study of neighbourhood planning in England introduced under the Coalition government from 2011–2015.

The Localism Act 2011 handed responsibility to communities for the regulation of private market development through neighbourhood planning (Brownhill and Downing 2013). Neighbourhoods were invited to draw up sustainable development plans within growth targets set by the strategic authorities. Neighbourhood planning powers could not limit the amount of growth but could influence its location and design by establishing the local policies that development would be judged against. Subject to a light touch examination, and ratified by popular referendum, a neighbourhood plan could become a statutory development document, nested

within and conforming to the strategic plan of the local authority and national planning policy. Despite its many limitations, neighbourhood planning appeared to offer local communities new political opportunities to develop a sustainable strategy of place. In areas across the country, therefore, communities saw in neighbourhood planning the potential to harness the practices of spatial liberalism to the requirements of social reproduction (Clarke and Cochrane 2013).

Table 2.1 Research sample of neighbourhood plans

Neighbourhood plan	City/Region	Parish/Town Council/Forum
Aberford	Leeds	Parish
Aireborough	Leeds	Forum
Allendale	Northumberland	Parish
Anfield	Liverpool	Forum
Balsall heath	Birmingham	Forum
Growing Together (Blackthorn and Goldings)	Northampton	Forum
Boston spa	Leeds	Parish
Caister	Lincolnshire	Town
Chatsworth Road	London Borough of Hackney	Forum
Clayton-le-Moors and Altham	Accrington, Lancashire	Forum
Coton Park	Rugby	Forum
Cringeliford	Norfolk	Parish
Cuckfield	Mid Sussex	Parish
Dawlish	Devon	Parish
Daws Hill	Wycombe	Forum
Exeter St. James	Exeter	Forum
Heathfield Park	Wolverhampton	Forum
Highgate	London Borough of Highgate	Forum
Holbeck	Leeds	Forum
Hoylake	The Wirral	Town
Fishwick and St. Matthews	Preston	Forum
Lockleaze	Bristol	Forum
Marton West	Middlesborough	Forum
Northenden	Manchester	Forum
Slaugham	Mid Sussex	Parish
Thame	South Oxfordshire	Town
Thorner	Leeds	Parish
Upper Eden	Cumbria	Parish
Winsford	Cheshire	Town
Woburn sands	Milton Keynes	Town

The first neighbourhoods to produce their own plans were able to mitigate the impact of large new housing developments by parcelling it up into acceptable smaller sites (Thame 2012), and change planning policy to enable more affordable housing to be built in rural areas (Upper Eden 2012). By the beginning of 2015, over 1300 neighbourhood plans were under production and the paper now turns to primary research to explore the definitions of sustainability that emerged from some of these communities. This research was conducted with 30 rural and urban neighbourhood plans (see Table 2.1). It involved a preliminary review of online resources for each neighbourhood, including constitutions, applications for designation, council decision papers, minutes of meetings, consultation strategies, draft and final plans, followed by interviews with the chairs and secretaries of neighbourhood planning committees or forums, observation at meetings, and separate interviews with the relevant officers from the planning authority. Participants gave their informed consent to the identification of their localities on the understanding that they could be identified from their role descriptors. The national sample represents only a minority of neighbourhood plans and the findings from this research are not presented as representative, however, they contribute to an understanding of the new challenges facing sustainable development planning in communities. In the following pages, a discussion of three of these neighbourhood plans is used to illustrate the patchwork landscape of sustainable communities that has appeared.

The Uneven Geography of Sustainable Development

Neighbourhood planning was designed to ‘create the conditions for communities to welcome growth’ (Clark 2011) and its spatial planning powers are oriented towards private development not public infrastructure. The only source of investment available to town and parish councils, and urban neighbourhoods who produce a neighbourhood plan, is a levy on any private development that takes place. The amount received from this Community Infrastructure Levy is dependent on market demand for land in the area. Market towns and rural parishes that have land sites attractive to the large volume house builders will receive a quarter of the revenues accruing from the Levy while suburban neighbourhoods on the urban fringe may also benefit once they have agreed a neighbourhood plan. Public investment in schools, community facilities and infrastructure will, to a significant extent, be resourced through this Levy and the uneven geography of capitalist growth may increasingly be reflected in inequalities in public spending (Clarke and Cochrane 2013).

In the deprived east end of Preston, the community of Fishwick and St. Matthews thought neighbourhood planning was an opportunity to improve the quality of their inner city environment. The opportunities for changing Inner East Preston were, however, very limited without public investment. Development sites were few, there

was little market interest, and the changes the community wanted to see required significant public funding. The Preston council planning officer working with the Fishwick and St. Matthews neighbourhood explained her concerns over the limit of what the plan could achieve:

I have this worry that it's one thing to write a plan but how do you actually put it into action? It is the delivery which is the difficult part. I mean there's no harm in having a few aspirations, but the area won't be completely transformed. It will still be the same area.

The only source of investment for the neighbourhood plan in Preston comes from charitable donations, and the community have benefited from a Lottery grant, under the Big Local programme, which will enable them to carry out some environmental works. Patronage and donations aside, the expected course of action for communities marginalised by capital growth is to become economic actors and create their own development market. This approach has been adopted in the midlands city of Northampton, where a neighbourhood plan is being led by a voluntary association, under the project name, Growing Together. The lack of any development market and the restrictions on other sources of public investment limits the ambitions that can be planned for in this neighbourhood, as the Growing Together coordinator explained:

To be honest I don't think there's any possibility of any sort of visionary vision for this area within the economic circumstances. It's a very difficult area to have a sort of bright, clear vision of the shining city in the sky in 20 to 30 years' time.

The solution for this community group is to be constituted as a charitable trading company that can bid to deliver local services for the Borough Council and generate income for the neighbourhood from public contracts. The neighbourhood plan will provide the community with the statutory framework through which this strategy of self-management can be envisaged. Growing Together plan to develop the capacity of residents for enterprise in the hope that sustainability can be achieved by market mechanisms. Their strategy appears to exemplify the self-reliance and resilience expected of communities under neighbourhood planning where sustainable development appears defined wholly in terms of economic self-sufficiency (Davoudi and Madanipour 2015). Without support from the local state, however, a social enterprise is unlikely to flourish in a deprived community (Trigilia 2001). The infrastructure for sustainable communities cannot be provided by neighbourhoods alone (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012).

In the east Pennine neighbourhood of Clayton-le-Moors, a neighbourhood planning forum is taking over public assets and running once-public services through local volunteer labour. The philosophy of this community company is that public services that are run by local volunteers become more truly public. The neighbourhood plan has become a blueprint for the social outcomes identified by the community while asset transfer passes the responsibility for achieving these outcomes to residents themselves. As the plan coordinator said:

If the community can come up with a plan that addresses all these issues, and sets out what this township is going to be like in the next 10-15 years and that is all done by the community, that'll be great because it shows the community's in the driving seat, steering this and it's not something that's being imposed by the local authority.

This representation of community control disguises the continuing role played by the local authority in the management of this asset transfer strategy. The leadership of the community company remains in the hands of professionals and retired councillors, and the production of the neighbourhood plan depends on guidance and support from officers in the planning authority. Rather than a model of community resilience, the transfer of assets to a community interest company appears to be a council strategy to reduce costs by harnessing the community as unpaid labour. This is rationalised through the argument that volunteer participation in the delivery of public services and the running of public assets makes a community sustainable. Rather than provide a framework for sustainable development, the neighbourhood plan becomes a design for resilience in the face of service withdrawal. Sustainability is the ability to survive without economic growth or redistribution.

Conclusion: The Future of the Sustainable Community

Neighbourhood planning has unfurled a starkly unequal landscape in which a plurality of sustainable communities has appeared. This is a patchwork politics of place, structured by the demands of capital accumulation into winners and losers. Under neighbourhood planning, the task of communities is to attract development while seeking to mitigate its negative effects and render it sustainable. The community is imagined as a market place in which sustainability can be bought and development rights sold. The disputed concept of the sustainable community now inspires a plethora of projects attempting to regulate an unrestrained development market or fill a vacuum in state investment planning. Neighbourhoods may seek to acquire public goods through otherwise undesirable development, utilise their resource of social capital to stimulate enterprise, or rely on unpaid labour to meet their collective needs. The future of sustainability will be etched in these precarious attempts to piece together a new umbrella of environmental and social protection.

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