

# Sustainable development in regional planning: The search for new tools and renewed legitimacy

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on sustainability appraisal as a key technique for pursuing the political goal of ‘sustainable development’ within English planning. We conclude that unlike many planning tools of the past which have sought to depoliticise decision making by using more ‘scientific’ techniques, the early experience of sustainability appraisal has instead repoliticised them, by highlighting where tensions exist but without providing solutions.

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## 1. Introduction

Sustainable development has entered the lexicon of British planning centre stage. No substantial local or regional planning document is now complete without mention of how it seeks to support ‘sustainable development’, often adopting sets of principles and objectives which might variously be derived from central government documents, regional sustainable development frameworks, an authority’s own deliberations over what it means by sustainable development, or other sources. Moreover, since the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, sustainable development has become a statutory purpose for planning in England and Wales.

The notion of sustainable development is closely bound up with a resurgent confidence within the planning profession that it has something important and distinctive to contribute to society—however like so many others the planning profession remains unclear about what is meant by sustainable development. This comes in part from the many ways in which sustainable development can be defined and

drawn into policy debates: as an abstract concept and set of related principles, as a policy agenda, and as a source of legitimacy for different types of policy (Blowers and Evans, 1997; Haughton and Counsell, 2004a). For planners there are the added problems of how to mediate in debates between groups which use different understandings of ‘sustainable development’ to legitimate their particular views of how policies should be developed (Vigar and Healey, 2002; Rydin et al., 2003; Haughton and Counsell, 2004b).

In this respect it is important to note that despite strong efforts to provide clear national guidance on what is meant by sustainable development, in practice the term remains subject to widely varying interpretations. Even within government it is possible to argue that different departments have tended to prioritise specific aspects of the sustainability agenda. Planners have been drawn to focus on the environment and the participation aspects of the social dimension to sustainability, the Environment Agency has focused heavily on the environmental dimensions, and the Treasury and Department of Trade and Industry have sought to ensure economic growth considerations are always to the fore. It is worth noting too that running parallel to the requirement to put sustainable development at the heart of the planning system has been a direction that greater transparency and engagement with stakeholders is required.

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In this paper we draw on the literature on governmentality to focus on the role of sustainability appraisal in regional planning, using the theory to interrogate the competing rationales for how the technique has been introduced and used. Sustainability appraisal has emerged as a key technique in ensuring planning documents attend to sustainable development (Smith and Sheate, 2001a,b; Short et al., 2004; Benson and Jordan, 2004). We focus here on the introduction of sustainability appraisal into Regional Planning Guidance (RPG), the policy arena with which its formative stages are most associated. It is worth noting that sustainability appraisal was advocated by central government in the late 1990s as a means of assessing both RPG and Regional Economic Strategies (RES), with the approach subsequently being adopted by those preparing development plans, regional housing strategies, regional waste strategies and others.

The main aim of this article is to interrogate critically the use of sustainability appraisal as a means of mediating between alternative understandings of sustainable development. As part of this we use ideas of governmentality to examine how new political subjectivities are being created, involving analysis of how stakeholders in planning are being drawn into using and supporting a particular approach to sustainable development. We take issue with some aspects of the governmentality approach, arguing that it needs to engage more with the ways in which actors shape and resist their incorporation into processes for legitimating state goals. In undertaking this work we engaged in an analysis of published regional planning and related sustainability appraisal documents, plus 121 semi-structured face-to-face interviews undertaken with policy makers and stakeholders across the eight English regions in 2000–2003. The interviews spanned different stages in the policy-making process in the eight regions. In most cases the interviewees were policy makers in central and local government, government agencies, regional bodies, pro-development interests and environmental NGOs.

## 2. Sustainable development, knowledges and planning

### 2.1. Competing sustainabilities

The UK government was one of the most enthusiastic proponents of sustainable development at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, attracted by the possibilities that it offered for developing a growth-oriented, market-friendly approach to resolving environmental problems. Since those early days when environmental issues tended to dominate discussions about sustainable development, official thinking in the UK government has moved on markedly, shifting in 1999 towards an emphasis on the so-called three pillars of sustainable development, that is its social, economic and environmental dimensions.

The official UK government definition in *A better quality of life: a strategy for sustainable development in the United Kingdom* argued that sustainable development involved

“ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come” (DETR, 1999, p. 8). Backing up this definition, the strategy identified four objectives, which it said must be met at the same time:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;
- effective protection of the environment;
- prudent use of natural resources;
- maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth.

This definition of sustainable development is important for its emphasis on the need to develop an *integrated* approach to the four policy objectives. As such the official version of sustainable development promoted so-called ‘win-win-win’ solutions, that is those policies which can provide benefits for all four of the sustainable development objectives without diminishing any of them. So for instance, environmental gain should not be at the expense of economic growth, and vice versa. To ensure that sustainable development is adopted in various official strategic documents at regional level, it is expected to be explicitly taken into account in RESs (DETR, 1998) and RPGs<sup>1</sup> (DETR, 2000a; ODPM, 2004). Addressing concerns that the different sectoral strategies might conflict over how they interpret sustainable development, the government introduced a requirement that all regions should provide overarching ‘vision’ documents setting out objectives for sustainable development called Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks (RSDFs). The intention was that these would reflect nationally agreed objectives but allow for regional interpretation (DETR, 2000c).

Looking at recent planning policy we can begin to see how central government planners have sought to ensure that others follow the move towards a more integrated approach to sustainable development, rather than prioritizing for instance its environmental dimension. Central to this has been the process of codifying agreements on definitions and objectives within each RSDF. All other regional strategies are in turn expected to pay heed to the RSDF objectives, including those for economic development and for planning. To ensure this happens both RESs and RPGs are subject to a process of scrutiny against sustainability objectives—sustainability appraisal. The objectives-led approach of sustainability appraisal immediately highlights the importance of debates about how sustainable development objectives get chosen and used. It is in this context that we argue that it is important to examine debates about the choices of tools and their mode of implementation in order to understand how the parameters of acceptable practice are shaped in different sectors, not least planning.

In 2005 the Government issued a new national sustainable development strategy which moved away from the

<sup>1</sup> RPG was replaced by statutory Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) in the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act.

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