Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect
Geoforum 37 (2006) 921–931
GEOFORUM
www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

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

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Received 25 August 2004; received in revised form 27 January 2006

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.

Keywords: Planning; Regions; England; Sustainable development; Governmentality; Sustainability appraisal

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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doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2006.02.001

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[1] (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

[1] RPG was replaced by statutory Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) in the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act.

objectives-led approach to sustainable development, albeit without specifically disgarding it. In essence the old definition of sustainable development failed to provide an adequate basis for achieving clarity in how to translate its ideals into practice. This was especially the case in regional planning, where continuing confusion and controversy often meant that even after protracted wrangling in the production of draft regional planning guidance, it was ultimately left to central government to arbitrate on difficult decisions.

2.2. Governmentality, technologies and planning

Looking at this issue at a more abstract level the choice of planning tools is also one of choice about differing professional and scientific knowledges, philosophies and political priorities. Seen in this context debates about the selection, refinement and application of new policy tools necessarily also reflect wider debates about the role of planning and planners in society, including their roles as brokers of knowledge, guardians of scientific protocols and facilitators of participative planning processes. There has been considerable work already on how planners develop techniques for making better decisions, notably exploring alternative 'technical-rational' and 'deliberative' models, although as Owens et al. (2004) argue this has often tended towards an unhelpful polarisation between these approaches. In their overview of appraisal techniques, Owens et al. (2004) argue that in analysing how appraisal is undertaken we need to examine more carefully not only the processes of appraisal, but also how appraisal influences policy outcomes. Their work also highlights the need to focus on the role of different kinds of knowledge and when and how these are used within the process.

In setting out to examine appraisal systems we wanted to see whether the governmentality literature, drawing on some of the later work of Foucault and his interpreters (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1999), might help us to move on from current debates on technical-rationality and deliberative planning. This is not a hugely radical departure, as governmentality has been of growing interest to some planners (see Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2002), whilst a number of recent contributions to regionalism debates have examined the notion of governmentality as a way of analysing the political rationalities of government (Murdoch, 2000; Painter, 2002). Foucault's notion of governmentality centred on how individual and collective actions are conducted, involving "a concern with institutions, apparatuses and knowledges, which constitute, regulate and survey the political domain" (Ashenden, 1999, p. 152). Governmentality is a term which is intended to embrace a much wider range of actors than simply the state, though in his later work Foucault did begin to place more emphasis on the role of the state in establishing or legitimating systems and rules of conduct (Jessop, 1990; Murdoch, 2000). As he put it himself: "governmentality is at once internal and external to the state, since it is the tactics of the government itself which make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not" (Foucault, 1991, p. 103). There is a link here to Jessop's (1990) work on the strategic selectivity of the state, in which he emphasises the crucial role of the state in selecting and giving legitimacy to institutions involved in new governance structures, dictating the policy remit of different institutions, their need to work with others and not least their level of resourcing.

In contrast to Jessop's emphasis on state selectivities, however, Foucault's approach suggests a concern with identifying the wider ranges of practices by which we are governed and govern ourselves. The art of government in this sense is not so much the way in which the state enforces its rules, but rather the more generalised construction of rationalities, knowledges and norms which influence people's behaviour and practices. This approach involves examining the critiques deployed in identifying failures of approach, how the objects of control are identified, and the instruments and technologies initiated in pursuit of objectives (Dean, 1999). This suggests an analytical focus on how the political subjectivities of actors are influenced such that they in effect internalise the goals of the state. Governmentality emphasises how governments exert control at arms-length through various mechanisms for shaping the behaviour of others, and that typically the state, and the actors incorporated into the routines it sanctions, derive legitimacy from each other.

This approach is helpful in thinking about how governments and others involved in contemporary governance structures construct dominant political and administrative rationalities (Murdoch, 2000), drawing on particular 'scientific' knowledges and discourses. In particular it prompts consideration of the devices, mechanisms and technologies of government itself in pursuing its political ends, including how these are devised and deployed in ways which draw on particular understandings of the scope, type and inter-connectedness of the issues which they are seeking to address.

Our starting point is that both 'integration' and 'sustainable development' are contestable ideas, whose adoption and definition will lead to particular policies each with distinctive sets of winners and losers. But it is not enough simply to regard these issues as contested—rather we need to examine how they are argued over and then deployed tactically. For instance, it is possible to argue that 'policy integration' and 'sustainable development' have been absorbed into the dominant discourses of RPGs in ways which have reinforced rather than upset the status quo (Haughton and Counsell, 2004b), in a similar pattern to how equal opportunities issues came to be absorbed into, and rendered uncontroversial within, regional economic strategies (Painter, 2002). More critically, we want to argue that governmentality work needs to be made more sensitive to issues of 'agency.' In particular our analysis questions whether it is helpful to simply assert that the 'technology' of sustainability appraisal allows the state to govern at

arms length through shaping how others behave, a classic governmentality interpretation, when in practice actors actively resist and shape how the technique is defined and utilised.

Taking a slightly different perspective, Murdoch (2000) argues that plans themselves represent a particular form of technology which can become the sites of challenge over opposing rationalities. Developing this further, arguments about the adoption of particular planning techniques can also be seen as being about how to ensure that decisions are taken in line with prevailing rationalities. Debates over the choice of planning techniques can present an appearance of professional objectivity but they represent more than this since the techniques also help in "actually constituting the domains that are to be governed" (Murdoch, 2000, p. 513). In the case of sustainability appraisal, for instance, it can be seen not simply as a means of policing whether the preferred view of sustainable development was incorporated into regional planning documents, but also as part of a wider rethinking of how to deal with social and economic issues in regional plans. It was not simply an enforcement technique for the pre-existing planning system in other words, it was part of the whole apparatus of rethinking the boundaries of what constitutes the legitimate domain of regional planning at a particular moment in time. This may mean that when we witness debates ostensibly about the legitimacy of sustainability appraisal, they may also be about the legitimacy of planning expanding its boundaries to take on a greater role in social and economic issues.

3. Planning tools for engaging with sustainable development

So far we have argued that by defining the parameters in which a tool is used, those responsible for developing, adapting and adopting it are drawing boundaries on what constitutes legitimate policy concern. Put simply, a tool which only looks at environmental issues, without attention to social and economic considerations, is taking a particular view which assumes that environmental issues can be understood in isolation of their wider socio-economic context. Likewise, an approach which measures economic growth without taking account of environmental implications such as depletion of the environmental asset base, is adopting a particular set of assumptions about what constitutes 'sustainable' growth. Seen from this perspective, debates over the adoption and adaptation of planning techniques should be seen for what they are, not simply a dry discussion about 'neutral' mechanisms or technologies, but rather manifestations of how planning is constituted as a political domain. As such debates about technical developments can help reveal how political objectives become incorporated within planning techniques.

The renewed interest in developing new planning techniques as a response to the emerging agenda of sustainable development has resulted in planners from both central and local government drawing on concepts and techniques from other disciplines. Carrying capacity, for example, was borrowed from the biological sciences. The hope was that new techniques would emerge which would help rationalise often subjective deliberations about issues such as 'thresholds' and 'criticality' in defining which aspects of nature should be protected and which aspects could be traded against economic and social gains (Owens, 1994; Jacobs, 1997; Rydin, 1998). Throughout the 1990s, both in public and in private, planners were engaged in some intensive debates about concepts such as carrying capacity, environmental capital and environmental assessment. Despite considerable development work and attempts to use them in plan preparation, the effective operationalisation of these techniques often floundered because of basic definitional problems. For instance, the concept of 'critical natural capital' (CNC) can be readily understood and accepted, namely that there are aspects of nature which are so important that they should be inviolable in the face of society's needs for development. However, it is an entirely more contentious matter to decide precisely *which* aspects of nature should be classified as CNC (Gillespie and Shepherd, 1995). It has proven equally difficult to identify how much development can take place without altering the essential character of a locality or destroying the biodiversity value of a habitat. These difficulties led to doubts being expressed about whether CNC and thresholds actually exist in nature, and even if they do whether they can be defined through the application of supposedly 'objective' techniques. The increasingly prevalent view is that the definition of which aspects of nature should be protected ultimately requires political processes involving a variety of value judgements (Healey and Shaw, 1994; Jacobs, 1997).

Some of the more radical attempts to operationalise new environmental techniques have been abandoned, partly because of these difficulties and also because sustainable development was itself redefined by central government (see above). The government preference for an 'integrated' approach to sustainable development has seen a major reconsideration of the preferred tools for examining sustainable development in planning. Under pressure to conform to the official definition of sustainable development we have seen environmental capital becoming subsumed into the more broadly constituted concept of 'quality of life capital' (CAG Consultants and LUC, 1997, 2001) and environmental appraisal into sustainability appraisal.

This process is not without its critics, something which is particularly evident in debates about the government's approach to strategic environmental assessment (SEA). The technique of environmental appraisal or assessment has been used by planners for over ten years, but has risen in importance since the European Commission made SEA a mandatory process for those plans and programmes likely to have a significant effect on the environment. The SEA Directive came into force in 2004 in the UK, and since then, plans for land use, transport, energy, economic development and other areas must be scrutinised through a process of SEA (Short et al., 2004). As its name suggests,

SEA is largely environmental in its remit, although not exclusively. But for the UK government with its preference for an integrated approach to sustainable development the SEA process raised some real concerns that it would lead to environmental issues being dominant in plan considerations, unless the status of economic and social issues could be raised by using SEA in tandem with an enhanced form of the government's preferred evaluation technique, sustainability appraisal (Benson and Jordan, 2004). So shortly after the SEA Directive came into force, draft guidance was issued by the government on incorporating SEA into the broader process of sustainability appraisal, initially for Regional Spatial Strategies (and Local Development Frameworks) (ODPM, 2004). In an article in *The Guardian* newspaper at the same time, the lobby group Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) argued that:

> In England ministers have been keen to turn the directive into a sustainability appraisal that examines economic, social and environmental considerations together. The language of politicians is of "balance" between these priorities, which traditionally has meant that the environment almost always loses out (Hamblin, 2004, p. 13).

So whilst the adoption of sustainability appraisal has found widespread support within planning circles precisely because it ensures social and economic considerations are not residualised, there are also concerns amongst some key agencies that it can lead to environmental issues being deprivileged relative to other techniques.

4. Sustainability appraisal as process

As we noted earlier, there has been a long-standing concern within the planning theory literature about technical-rational approaches to planning implementation, with its focus on the deployment of expert knowledge and the use of expert systems within planning decision-making (Owens et al., 2004). More recently there has been a turn to examining deliberative forms of planning, involving greater attention to creating the conditions for more productive engagement between planners and a wider range of stakeholders, bringing a range of alternative knowledges to bear in arriving at planning decisions. We do not intend to go over this fairly well-worn set of debates here, rather we simply wish to emphasise that they represent an on-going academic and practitioner concern with how planning tools are devised, adopted and adapted, and with who wins and who loses when different tools are chosen. Drawing on the work of Owens et al. (2004), we structure our discussion of the early application of sustainability appraisal here first in terms of process, second in terms of outcomes.

Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) documents were produced for each of the eight standard regions in England from the early 1990s until they were subsumed into Regional Spatial Strategies in 2004. Each regional document was intended to provide a strategic framework for the development of policies in structure and local plans. In a substantial revision of the arrangements introduced in 1998 (DETR, 2000a), some of the criticisms of the first round of the system (see Baker, 1998; Baker et al., 1999; Kitchen, 1999; Roberts and Lloyd, 1999) were addressed. In particular the second round of RPG preparation (post-1998) sought to make the process more transparent, involving a wider range of regional stakeholders and subjecting contested matters in the draft documents to a formal public examination before a panel of inspectors. This new approach to RPG preparation also incorporated a commitment to securing sustainable development, specifically involving a requirement to undertake sustainability appraisal of RPG, plus detailed guidance on how this should be carried out (DETR, 2000b). The aim of sustainability appraisal, according to central government advice, is to ensure that consideration of sustainable development objectives is ingrained into the strategy-making process, influencing it at all stages (DETR, 2000a; see also ODPM, 2004).

Sustainability appraisal enjoyed a lot of support from central government planners, one of whom told us that for him sustainability appraisal was important because it "should stop Regional Planning Bodies ducking the difficult issues". In this view the role of sustainability appraisal was to bring 'discipline' to regional planning negotiations, but in the benign sense of requiring those involved to move on from the previous round of RPGs which had widely been criticised as bland and avoiding confronting difficult choices. The early experience of sustainability appraisal by civil servants in regional government offices tended to be rather unsatisfactory, though our later interviews reveal a growing support for the technique. So one official early on told us that they felt the approach was still "wallpaper covering the cracks" (interview SE4).[2] In another region an official told us that "It felt like we had to do one [sustainability appraisal]. So we did one. Ticked it off! But it had only a marginal influence" (EM10).

These were perhaps not unexpected comments from regions which had been early in the process of using sustainability appraisal and were struggling to find ways of making it work. This was especially so since several regions did not have access to the Government's 'Good Practice Guide' (DETR, 2000b) when their first sustainability appraisals were carried out, simply because they were already well advanced in the process of RPG preparation and did not wish to be held back. In consequence the methodologies used and the stages at which they were undertaken varied considerably across the regions.

It is worth noting here that the experience of sustainability appraisal in planning has been expanding throughout

[2] Interviews are coded by regional initials and a number for each interview. Thus SE4 refers to our 4th interview in the South East region. Fuller details of the sectoral background and timing of interviews can be found in Appendix in Haughton and Counsell (2004b).

the last decade, with a survey in 2001 suggesting that 91% of local authorities in the UK had carried out at least one environmental or sustainability appraisal (Therival and Minas, 2002). Eighteen sustainability appraisals related to regional planning in England had been formally published in the period up to March 2004 (Fig. 1).

Stakeholder unhappiness with sustainability appraisal practice was also generally strongest in those regions where RPG preparation had progressed to an advanced stage before the government's guidance on sustainability appraisal was issued. In these 'pioneer' regions the sustainability appraisal process was coming in at the latter stages of the plan-making process and therefore appeared to be being used to justify retrospectively some of the major decisions on strategic 'options'. For instance one environmental campaigner commented "My feeling is that it was produced almost as an afterthought anticipating the criticism that it was going to get… It wasn't integral to the process" (interview EM4). This was fairly typical of a strand of thinking which saw the early phase of sustainability appraisal in particular as representing a political tactic as much as an objective planning tool, a process for buying some goodwill by at least going through the motions of ensuring sustainability was taken into account in decision-making.

As we might have expected given the long tradition of technical-rational thinking in planning, several stakeholders were concerned about the lack of scientific rigour in sustainability appraisals. Distinctive among these voices were those planners and environmentalists who hoped that sustainability appraisal offered the prospect of developing politically neutral, scientifically objective methodologies which would make planning decisions more 'rational'. According to a planner working for a national lobby group for instance "These appraisals are just tick boxes and lack critical rigour" (SE8). In similar vein a government conservation agency bemoaned that they were concerned about sustainability appraisal in part because "It's a weak science… the science is still very crude and it needs a lot of refinement" (SE11). An environmental NGO in the North West went further than this, arguing that "Quantification is the next step. At the moment sustainability appraisal still involves a finger in the air approach…" (NW1).

By contrast, and perhaps not too surprisingly, pro-development lobby groups felt that sustainability appraisal had a very clear political objective, and it was for this reason that they wanted a clearer scientific basis. One group told us that it presented a world through 'green coloured' spectacles" (WM5). Another argued that: "No one seems to know where they are going on this, there is no science, it's just best guess" (EM8). Perhaps most forlornly, one lobby group representative told us that "I characterise… trying to get to grips with it as wrestling with jelly" (YH10). What we can begin to see here is evidence of how debates ostensibly about sustainability appraisal seem to be rooted in much deeper concerns about how it was being used to address the underlying politics, and whether it was indeed breaking down prejudices by providing impartial information. This links to the technique's slippery qualities, as being both partly 'expert' and 'participative' and also being neither. It is not a technique which requires a scientific qualification necessarily, unlike say environmental impact assessment, nor is it truly open and participative. Rather it is dependent on the interplay between the 'experts' who undertake the appraisal and those involved in setting the terms of reference and also in responding to its findings. Sustainability appraisal then lies at the interface of planners, politicians and various groups claiming to represent 'public opinion.'

Region	Stage(s) at which Sustainability Appraisal published	Date published
North East	– Draft RPG	Dec. 1999
	– Proposed Changes to RPG	May 2001
East Anglia/ East of England	– Draft RPG*	Dec. 1997
	– Panel Report	Sept. 1999
	– Draft Review	Jan. 2003 (draft)
East Midlands	– Draft RPG	Sept. 1999
	– Proposed Changes to RPG	Feb. 2001
	– Draft Review	June 2003
South East	– Draft RPG	Dec. 1998
	– Proposed changes to RPG	May 2000
South West	– Draft RPG**	0ct. 1999
	– Proposed Changes to RPG	Feb. 2001
West Midlands	– Pre-consultation draft RPG	May 2001
Yorkshire and the Humber	– Draft RPG**	Oct. 1999
	– Proposed changes to RPG	Mar. 2001
	– Draft Review	June 2003
North West	– Draft RPG**	July 2000
	– Proposed Changes to RPG	Jan. 2003

* Produced as a Environmental Appraisal (EA) under the previous arrangements for RPG.
** Produced in two or more stages

Fig. 1. Sustainability appraisals within RPG, 1997–March 2004. Source up: up-dated from Counsell and Haughton (2002).

Whilst recognising some of the weakness, those involved in commissioning or carrying out the sustainability appraisals tended to be more positive about its contribution. We interviewed one of the main consultants involved in the early stages of devising and applying sustainability appraisal techniques, who felt strongly that it was important to be realistic in assessing progress with the technique:

> Sustainability appraisal is not going to change the world… it's about keeping on poking people in the right direction… In this round of RPG it's been like we've doing it with of sticking plaster and twigs. It's been make do and mend hasn't it (SW9)?

Similar sentiments were aired by those working for the regional planning team in the East Midlands: "It's a tool to an end. It was used to improve the draft RPG which came out, and that's what it was there for (EM9)." In Yorkshire and the Humber sustainability appraisal was interesting in that it was undertaken using the same approach and the same consultants for both RPG and the RES. Recognizing that the process still needed refining, it was nonetheless stoutly defended by one of those involved: "My point is that it's not perfect, it needs revision, but the process is a good one (YH3)". Another official from Government Office for Yorkshire and Humber went further and told us that sustainability appraisal "has done more than anything else for practical sustainability, in terms of showing where the weaknesses and strengths were… It was all heading for the 'too hard to solve' shelf (YH5)."

There are important questions too about who should carry out sustainability appraisals and who they report to. In essence these are questions about the independence of the process and the overt and more subliminal pressures brought to bear in setting the terms of study and reporting mechanisms. As three people involved in regional planning in different regions told us

> There are some cases where [the consultants] have come to a view on what the effect of a policy will be which may not be everybody's view (NW2).

> [On the consultants' report] There's a lot of value judgements. But the question at the end of the day is who makes the value judgements (YH17).

> Some of the Round Table didn't agree with what [the consultants] did. FoE for example were pro new settlements whilst CPRE wouldn't touch them with a barge pole (SW8).

Undertaking sustainability appraisal in-house also attracted criticism, for instance in the West Midlands one business lobby group forcibly argued that "Sustainability appraisal is an absolute joke, just three officers doing it on a part time basis… Lots of good intentions but shallow as hell (WM5)." Calls for more public participation in the appraisal process tended to attract concern from those most closely involved that it would slow the process up and leave it as a surrogate for participation in RPG itself rather than as a separate input to the process. One consultant for instance felt that "I am not sure that you can have consultation on an appraisal. I think it would be unending (SW9)," whilst a Government Office official told us that "What you want is to get it right rather than making sure everyone feels they have had a say (SW7)." This said, there has been a growing trend towards public engagement in sustainability appraisal over time, for instance in Yorkshire and the Humber where different groups have the opportunity to help steer sustainability appraisal and members of the Regional Assembly's various Commissions get invited to comment on drafts.

What we can begin to see from these diverse viewpoints and experiences is how misguided it was to expect planning techniques such as sustainability appraisal to provide an 'objective' or 'scientific' approach. Clearly there is scope for techniques to introduce an element of transparency and objectivity, but ultimately there are limits to this since planning decisions always result from social and political choices over the choice of technique and also the regard paid to the outputs of these techniques (Jacobs, 1997). What we can see in the discussion so far is some of the teething pains of sustainability appraisal, an approach which represents a hybrid form of planning technique, somewhere between the technical-rational and deliberative planning approaches, and perhaps therefore something which proponents of both are having to come to terms with.

At one level, sustainability appraisal did reflect some of the governmentality thesis' concerns with how particular techniques can be used to define the terms of particular debates—in this case by normalising the government's definition of sustainable development and its four main objectives. But it only did this to a certain degree. Sustainability appraisal directed discussion into areas which fitted the government's agenda, but it did not prove to be straightforwardly either a 'self-policing' or indeed a 'disciplining' governmentality tool. Rather, it was inserted into already highly politicised debates and seen for what it was, a way of seeking to flush out political disagreements. But as we will see in the next section, sustainability appraisal was rarely used to impose a solution or even to suggest solutions, something which frustrated some stakeholders.

5. How sustainability appraisal influences outcomes

At we noted earlier Owens et al. (2004) argue that it is essential to examine how appraisal influences policy outcomes. In some respects, it is too early to begin to do this, since regional strategies need to feed into local planning documents in order to achieve many of their goals, and this takes time. But it is possible to examine whether the process of sustainability appraisal was perceived by planning stakeholders as leading to better strategy documents and better policies, in terms of highlighting and addressing key tensions.

The results of our interviews suggest that whilst sustainability appraisal has succeeded in ensuring that effects on

all four of the Government's objectives for sustainable development were considered within RPG, many tensions between objectives remained unresolved. In this respect the interviews revealed widespread concerns that sustainability appraisal was proving more successful in identifying conflicts than in leading policy makers towards resolving them. An environmental NGO in the East Midlands for instance felt that whilst "They did go through the process… some of the key findings, which were real, were totally brushed aside (EM3).

In the North East three major environmental NGOs all argued that in various ways sustainability appraisal had raised important issues but that they had been disappointed with the response. So one group expressed concern that "It highlighted conflicts between policies in RPG but there is no attempt to take things forward and resolve those conflicts" (NE12). In similar vein the second group argued that "There is no sign that it actually made any difference (NE8)". The third group were unsurprisingly adamant that

> We weren't the only organisation querying the fact that the sustainability appraisal actually suggested that parts of RPG were unsustainable… There was never any commitment from [Regional Planning Body] that in the light of the sustainability appraisal they were going to change RPG, they were still trying to defend it (NE10).

There were particular concerns expressed by some people we interviewed about the reluctance in sustainability appraisals to make strong recommendations on any environment versus employment conflicts that had been identified between policies in RPG. Whilst it was recognised that it is not the intended role of sustainability appraisal to resolve such issues it was nevertheless felt that they could have given a stronger direction to policy makers about the potential effects of these conflicts. This led to a concern that sometimes it was not clear what the implications of particular findings were. One bemused government agency in the North West for instance told us that the regional development agency and regional planning body "have both been quoting it at each other to defend opposite positions. So I am not sure it has actually clarified the situation (NW8)."

This relates to another set of considerations about whether the methodology itself provided enough clear information to be helpful for those wanting to advocate specific changes to RPG. The early sustainability appraisals in particular tended to be a form of tick box approach for checking whether a particular policy promoted some aspect of sustainable development, ran counter to it or was broadly neutral. Responding to criticisms of the limited information provided, later appraisals tended to give fuller textual information justifying most judgements. But even when this was done, as one person succinctly put it "It's how you weight the ticks and crosses in the matrix that's the problem" (SW12).

There was a concern too with a perceived lack of transparency when it came to how or whether the conflicts identified by sustainability appraisal were subsequently dealt with. In the East Midlands for instance one Government Agency argued that "they just came up with some phrases that allowed them to leave things as they were because overall it was not too bad" (EM5).

Some of these concerns about transparency can be usefully illustrated from the early experience of the Yorkshire and the Humber region, where sustainability appraisal followed the national guidance more closely than elsewhere. Transparency in draft RPG for Yorkshire and the Humber was addressed by listing the changes made in response to the appraisal at the end of each chapter. These chapter end notes refer, for example, to an extensive *re-writing* of the Regional Spatial Strategy chapter of RPG to address a number of issues raised in the appraisal. On the other hand the chapter on employment land was *edited* to reflect the sustainability appraisal; the housing chapter was *not significantly altered* as it was endorsed by the sustainability appraisal; and the appraisal was *taken into account* in drafting the chapter on heritage and natural resources (the chapter was incomplete at the time of the original sustainability appraisal). These changes were criticised with some justification as being superficial by some stakeholders, as for the most part they were changes in wording rather than intent:

> I saw no significant change to RPG before and after the initial appraisal… Well perhaps no change is too strong, but there was no material change. The big issues were side-stepped! (YH11).

As an example, the sustainability appraisal identified a conflict between attracting inward investment and improving environmental quality, suggesting that the demands of large investors may result in the development of sensitive greenfield or car-based sites. The response in the draft RPG was "to stress the sequential approach: urban and brown field sites have preference, and new sites identified only if the need for a balanced portfolio cannot be met from existing allocations" (Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Assembly, 1999, p. 35). This technocratic response perhaps served to deal with the conflict at a superficial level, but did little towards resolving the real tension between policies identified in the appraisal. Tensions were flagged-up in successive iterations of the sustainability appraisal between possible greenfield employment sites, in parts of the South Yorkshire Objective 1 (EU regeneration priority) area and around the Humber Estuary (the Humber Trade Zone), and policies on biodiversity and conservation. However these tensions still remain largely unresolved, to the continuing concern of environmental bodies in the region. Indeed it is difficult to see how they could be completely resolved, without a reassessment of political priorities in Yorkshire and the Humber, something way beyond the scope of a sustainability appraisal.

Sustainability appraisal has perhaps succeeded more in highlighting the political nature of planning decisions, rather than de-politicising decisions through its supposed objectivity. And whilst fine at one level, it left the value of

the whole process open to some dispute. For instance in Yorkshire and the Humber one Government Agency official felt that "There has been a tendency for politicians in south and west Yorkshire… to regard anything that smacks of environmental assessment or restraints as being a bar on jobs (YH16)." Backing this up, a local government planner in West Yorkshire argued that political input meant that "Some of the sustainability work…went down like a lead balloon. People were saying 'it's alright getting into all this academic theory, but we want to know precisely what you mean and what the solutions are (YH14)." In this sense, sustainability appraisal may have helped flush tensions out and place them in the political arena, but this does not necessarily appear to have made things any easier for the political process.

6. Conclusions

Sustainability appraisal has now been assimilated into the core of regional planning processes and practices, reflecting the concerns of a government keen to regulate planning according to its own view of sustainable development. We have sought to analyse this in terms of debates on governmentality and its associated 'technologies'. Focusing on this emerging technique, we have examined how debates about its adoption have embodied competing underlying philosophies and professional and scientific knowledges, notably involving selectivities in choosing the sustainability approach rather than alternatives such as strategic environmental assessment. This approach allowed us to examine a complex rewriting of the policy architecture of planning in ways which normalised a particular definition of sustainable development, involving a rewriting of the national strategy for sustainable development, the creation of Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks, the requirements to integrate policies across different sectoral strategies and their respective stakeholders, plus the development of the sustainability appraisal technique as a way of tying all these together.

The analysis has interrogated the complex nature of some of the disputes over the general principles of sustainability appraisal, and identified some early operational difficulties in implementing the approach. Of these difficulties perhaps the most important is that sustainability appraisal has not developed as a 'neutral', 'scientific' or more 'objective' technique, and instead actually returned decision making to the political process. What it has achieved, alternatively, is a greater transparency in the decision-making process and, where sustainability appraisal has been run in conjunction with stakeholders groups, it has increased the legitimacy of the resulting findings. In governmentality terms then we can see that the combination of the new metrics of sustainability and the way in which key groups have bought into the process, has worked to enhance the capacity of the state to 'govern' sustainability within both the planning process and those policy spheres tied into it through processes of 'policy integration'. The participants in effect could be said to be reinforcing the legitimacy of the government's approach to sustainable development as well as the technique itself, whilst simultaneously enhancing their own political status in relation to the state. Yet as we have seen, the key actors are not passive in how they have engaged with sustainability appraisal and have sought to variously, shape, contest and selectively utilise the technique in ways which suit their particular purposes.

As part of this early experience of sustainability appraisal there appears to be a growing awareness of the problems about assuming neutrality and objectivity in technical approaches, not least as problems are exposed during public examinations and the like. Or to put it another way, the subjects of 'governmentality' are not perhaps the unwitting dupes that naïve readings of the theory might suggest. Indeed, governmentality is weak in its treatment of 'agency', which is problematic given that, as we have seen here, those who are involved with sustainability appraisal argue vehemently about its underlying philosophies and biases, and seek to unpack and expose them in the form of continuing critique. As part of this critique they are also contesting the tool's use in redefining the boundaries of the planning system itself, as it seeks to become more integrated with other decision-making processes. Stakeholders engage with sustainability appraisal so far as it either has independent value as an addition to the pool of knowledge on a subject, or in so far as they feel they can use it to further their own ends. Sustainability appraisal then exercises something of the disciplinary effects suggested by governmentality, but this should not be overestimated as it was also powerfully resisted, reworked and selectively coopted by some fairly sophisticated players in the planning process.

As a technique, sustainability appraisal ensures that particular processes are followed and that consideration is given to the effects of planning policies on the different facets of the sustainable development agenda. This is a major advance which should not be under-estimated, but as our analysis has sought to reveal, sustainability appraisal is not itself an objective technique. In fact it is pervaded with value judgments both in its process and also quite often in its content. In fact we would go further and argue that unlike many other planning techniques which have sought to *depoliticise* decision making by using more 'scientific' techniques, sustainability appraisal has instead *repoliticised* them, by highlighting where tensions exist but without offering to provide solutions. Sustainability appraisal then has institutionalised and channeled conflicts about sustainability, without necessarily resolving them. As a result of the processes involved it could be argued that the capacity of the state to govern and contain these conflicts is enhanced, as new subjectivities are formed and with them the legitimacy of the state is partly at least strengthened.

We can see evidence of these new subjectivities when we look carefully. At the outset we might have been able to predict criticisms of the new approach supporting the

government's weak market based approach towards sustainable development, with its related concern to avoid prioritizing any one of the pillars of sustainable development above the others. Yet intriguingly, for all the problems which people have pointed to during this research, sustainability appraisal has proved a fairly resilient technique, garnering widespread support, including from some environmental groups. For social interest groups in particular, the approach represents an important way of starting to re-orientate plan-making towards a greater awareness of the importance of social issues in relation to the environment. In conclusion then, we have perhaps only begun to see how sustainability appraisal is developing as a planning technique and we can already see that as people reflect on these early experiences new refinements, new subtleties and new ways of engaging with, or disengaging from, the technique are emerging. In short, as well as mediating between differing knowledges, preferences, priorities and philosophies, the process of sustainability appraisal is helping generate new knowledges and understandings of the issues being debated. As part of this we may be seeing a new faultline emerge within planning policy, as we come to terms with the fact that the new modes of deliberative engagement within the process of sustainability appraisal come under criticism for failing to result in major changes in policy direction or in concrete policy outcomes. So whilst sustainability appraisal has helped to achieve the planning system's goal of greater transparency and participation, the failure to generate an improved capacity to govern economic, social and environmental conflicts may yet undermine this achievement.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by ESRC grants R000238368 and RES000230756. We are extremely grateful to three reviewers of earlier versions of this paper for their helpful comments.

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