The Future of Planning: beyond growth dependence

Summary

The planning of our towns and cities has become too dependent on high rates of economic growth. Consequently, UK planning is largely powerless to improve local environments in circumstances where the pressure of market demand is not present.

A community-based approach offers an alternative to growth-dependent planning which looks to new ways of providing new development. A community-based approach to planning would encompass development land trusts and self-build, new modes of providing and managing community assets, and new ideas for protecting and improving areas.

Embedding this alternative approach within UK planning requires a set of reforms encompassing:

- new planning guidance;
- new planning tools; and
- new forms of community engagement.

Introduction

The planning of our towns and cities has become too dependent on high rates of economic growth. It predominantly works by encouraging market-led development and then negotiating for a share of the development profits to be used for local community and broader social benefits. This can work well in certain locations, where there is buoyant market demand and the local community are in agreement with the proposed project.

However, as events since 2008 have emphasised, this cannot be assured in all locations and at all times. This means that UK planning is largely powerless to improve local environments in circumstances where the pressure of market demand is not present.

When growth-dependent planning does not work, an alternative planning approach should be a community-based approach which looks to new ways of providing new development – through development land trusts and self-build, new modes of providing and managing community assets and new ideas for protecting and improving areas, especially low value areas.
Embedding community-based planning

Embedding this alternative approach within UK planning requires a set of reforms encompassing new planning guidance, planning tools and new forms of community engagement. The forms suggested below comprise a package of measures which should be considered as a whole; it is through the holistic implementation of this set of reforms that the greatest progress will be made in transforming UK planning to genuinely support a community-based approach.

Reform of planning guidance

Current planning policy guidance, particularly the 2012 National Planning Policy Framework, relies heavily on promoting market-led development. It sees low property-value, low household-income areas primarily as sites ripe for (re)development and fails to provide sufficient support for protecting and improving them to meet the needs and aspirations of existing local communities.

Recommendation: To rectify this, planning policy at national and local levels needs to embed the concept of just sustainability.

Reformed planning tools

Regulation

Planning policies need tools to be implemented. The primary tool currently available to the UK planning system is regulation through the planning permission process. Regulation and planning permissions can be reformed to support community-based approaches more effectively, via the following measures:

Supporting community land use:

• Implementation of exceptions policies as a means of releasing land for community-based development at existing use value
• Release of sites for community-based options such as self-build
• Designation of Community Assets supporting Justice and Sustainability to protect land uses which are valued by communities and promote equality and environmental sustainability

Promoting meanwhile uses

• Flexibility in development control for meanwhile uses
• Requiring provision for meanwhile uses in case of development being delayed through planning conditions attached to development consents

Supporting sustainability

• Relaxing the strict application of precedent in regulatory decision-making where the test of supporting wellbeing and just sustainability can be applied
• Flexibility with regard to the application of standard development control requirements for options such as eco-build that contribute to just sustainability

Additional regulatory reforms which should be made to planning include:

• Firm application of land allocation policies where market-led development is involved to avoid speculative planning applications and the creation of ‘hope value’ in land markets
• Ensuring that developer contributions to Area Improvement Plans and other schemes trigger obligations for public interest projects, such as specifying classes of occupier in individual planning consents and potentially supporting this with area-based policies
• Using policies that specify certain scales of development and land use to protect small-scale land uses from amalgamation on (re)development
• Policies to permit pop-up land uses and apply flexibility, in regulating such cases

Landownership

One planning tool that the UK planning system has failed to use to support anything other than market-led development is landownership. The following reforms to land ownership to support community-based approaches should be considered:

• Transferring public land to communities at existing use value;
• Using and enabling community land ownership structures;
• Using local authority powers to take over empty homes on a temporary or permanent basis;
• Using specific mortgages to transfer empty homes and other properties to local residents and community groups; and
• Using and enabling meanwhile leases.
Fiscal measures
In addition to transferring land and property rights, there will often be a need for financial resources to fulfil the aspirations of community-based approaches. There is a need for the following fiscal measures:

- Funding the purchase of land for community development and assets for community management;
- Considering innovative ways to raise such finance;
- Funding the reuse of empty homes, through both subsidies for necessary works and loans to enable their ownership to be transferred;
- Extending subsidies for energy efficiency measures for those in fuel poverty;
- Reinstating grants for area improvement under community guidance for existing residential and SME needs; and
- Considering changes to tax and grant regimes to incentivise the reuse of empty property, such as the removal of VAT on refurbishment; this may require specific investigation to identify the barriers posed by the complexities of current fiscal measures.

Reformed community engagement

All community-based approaches make considerable demands on local communities — to lead and even manage the processes of change — and also on local planners — to engage more effectively with local communities. Current community engagement processes are often unfit for any purpose other than tokenism in the face of market-led development. The following reforms to local community engagement are therefore needed:

- Ensuring that community engagement provides full, supported opportunities for the voices of lower-income and vulnerable communities to be heard, alongside those representing the just sustainability agenda;
- Utilising and supporting social capital to enable community-based development projects;
- Utilising existing social capital for the management of community assets, providing support through appropriate management structures for collective decision-making and conflict resolution; and
- Using social capital existing within local business communities to support town centre enhancement.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERING WHETHER GROWTH-DEPENDENT PLANNING IS APPROPRIATE:

- Are the economic conditions right for this mode to be effective?
- Are the social and environmental benefits that will be generated, sufficient to contribute to sustainability?
- Will these be equitably distributed?
- Does the proposed development, together with these benefits, command the support of the local communities?

If the answers to these questions are ‘no’ and if the more vulnerable groups in the area, who already have a lesser share of society’s benefits, losing out through the change that is occurring then an alternative, community-based approach to planning should be considered.

Conclusion: Creating the conditions for local choice

If these reforms were implemented, then local communities and politicians would have a real choice available to them. They could explore the options for market-led development to bring social benefits for local communities. But they could also consider the potential for accepting that low property-value areas play an important role within localities and that the focus should be on meeting local community needs with a range of small-scale and community-based actions and initiatives.

Rather than the major urban regeneration scheme that so often figures in our town centres, docklands and old railway lands, this would involve a patchwork of activities: self-build housing on this site; refurbishment of that old church for community uses and social housing; pocket parks and communal orchards; some seating here and funding for street improvements there; support for pop-up shops and markets; micro-businesses and social enterprises using those empty buildings; funding for street-scale energy efficiency measures; and so on.

Further information