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KEY MESSAGES

- **'Just sustainability'** should be embedded in planning policy
- **Planning guidance** should be reformed to support a community-based approach
- **Regulation** should be reformed to promote planning permission for community-based approaches
- **Land ownership** should be reformed to promote community management and development
- **Fiscal measures** designed to encourage the reuse of empty property, energy efficiency, and community development should be adopted
- **Community engagement processes** should be reformed so that they are genuinely effective

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:

- o new planning guidance;
- o new planning tools; and
- o 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*.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'JUST SUSTAINABILITY?'

Just sustainability involves recognising the importance of addressing local inequality and meeting the needs of low-income households in ways that also contribute to longer-term environmental protection. The environmental justice movement, particularly in USA, has shown how justice can become a core planning concern; this needs to be expanded to encompass social and well as environmental aspects of sustainability.

Specific reforms to planning guidance

As well as embedding the fundamental principle of just sustainability in planning policy, a range of more specific measures can be identified that will support community-based approaches.

For example, planning guidance should give support for exceptions policies where planning permission can be exceptionally given, provided that it can be demonstrated that the development would meet the needs, particularly housing needs, of lower income communities. Planning guidance should also offer support for area improvement plans for both residential and town centre areas with particular emphasis on improved energy efficiency and other features that improve wellbeing and environmental sustainability but are less valued by the market.

Further reforms which should be made to planning guidance include:

- Allocation of sites specifically for community-based development, such as through Community Land Trusts or self-build;
- More emphasis on policies for higher density development and mixed use developments where these can help create low value premises;
- Recognition of the importance of secondary and tertiary shopping areas, SME spaces and markets;
- Recognition of the value of temporary uses and the need to make use of vacant land and property; and
- Policies supporting meanwhile uses and the flexible application of planning regulation in such cases.

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
- Linking planning consents with specific classes of occupier by 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.

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

The future of planning: Beyond growth dependence by Yvonne Rydin is published by Policy Press on 11 September 2013.

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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.