

Local Agenda 21 and Planning Practice: Structural Transformation or Window Dressing?

*Joe Doak,
Centre of Planning Studies,
Department of Land Management and Development,
The University of Reading*

1. Local Agenda 21, Planning and New-Institutionalist Theory

The surge of interest and action focused on Local Agenda 21 (LA21) has added a refreshing dose of participatory democracy to planning interventions across Europe. Some countries and areas have moved more quickly and with greater vigour than others, but the overall process has energised 'progressive' planning authorities and professionals in all parts of the continent. The locally-generated debate and action-planning undertaken through LA21 has thrown a metaphorical gauntlet down at the feet of local, regional and central government planners and politicians asking them to join with stakeholder groups to facilitate the process and help deliver the subsequent 'agreements' reached. It has given renewed life to participatory planning techniques (e.g. the use of Fora; consensus-building; visioning; popular planning; village appraisals; planning for real; and citizens' juries) which many planners had locked away in their idealistic tool boxes or struggled to keep alive through earlier periods of political centralism.

The ideal model of LA21 seeks the meaningful involvement of a wide range of local groups and stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of public policy and a free flow of communication and discussion between them and their respective local authorities (and other areas and levels of decision-making). The underlying goal of this process is to develop consensus-based action plans which will engage with the global commitment to sustainable development established at the 1992 Earth Summit (UNCED 1992). This paper explores the reality of this process using case study evidence from local planning practice in Liverpool (in the north of England) and Reading (in the south of the country). It concentrates on the interaction between LA21 groups and local planning authorities around the preparation of local land use plans and other policy initiatives and the day-to-day regulation of development permits.

The focus of this paper draws on both practical experience and theoretical reflection. Involvement with LA21 activities at different levels (Doak 1998 and Doak et. al. 1998) has raised a number of practical concerns about the effectiveness of the LA21 process. These include:

- Difficulties in communication: the 'green ghetto' problem of preaching to the converted and the apathy of many;
- The limited range of interests often involved: often selected for their 'acceptability' or because of their level of existing activity;
- Conflicts of interest: some of which have not be resolved through consensus-building;

- The variable contribution of business organisations;
- ‘Sustaining’ the initiative beyond 1996, which was the deadline for the published products of the LA21 process;
- Integration of LA21 policy and action into the day to day policy and practices of a range of public sector authorities and agencies and other ‘stakeholder’ organisations; and
- Co-ordination and communication of the different LA21 initiatives between the various levels of decision-making; from the global to the local.

In order to place these ‘problems’ into a broader theoretical context it has proven useful to reflect on some recent ideas which have been developed to try and understand the nature of contemporary social, economic and political activity. Using the philosophical foundations of ‘communicative action’ and ‘structuration’ built by Jurgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens, Patsy Healey and others (Healey et al, 1995; and Healey, 1996) have explored the ways in which the rich tapestry of social relations structures and restructures the day to day opportunities available to people and organisations to shape their lives in particular places. This is important because underpinning LA21 is a belief that an important role for participation is to facilitate the restructuring of day-to-day decision-making according to the principles of SD. How this can be done in practice requires us to theorise and reflect on the social, economic and political processes through which it can be achieved.

Healey and the other ‘new institutionalists’ emphasise a number of key dimensions of contemporary society including:

- The important role of *individual action and interpretation* in social and political processes, albeit worked-out in relation to other individuals and often leading to ‘*cultural communities*’ of shared meanings and understandings;
- The construction of *discourses* within and between groups and organisations which build, consolidate, challenge and modified those shared meanings and understandings;
- The *dynamic* nature of social, economic and political change in which knowledge, experience and images are exchanged between people and communities in a series of inter-connected *networks* and ‘*nodes of activity*’ (e.g. households, leisure activities, firms, community organisations and government agencies);
- The exercise and negotiation of *power relations* within and between communities which can develop into *structural driving forces* which shape, and are shaped by, the relevant communities over periods of time;
- The *contingent* nature of the inter-play of these facets as they work themselves out in different places and social milieu with varying *institutional capacities*;
- The increasingly fragmented and partial contribution of *formal governmental* organisations to urban management strategies; and
- The subsequent struggle of government agencies to adapt to these new conditions by restructuring themselves in terms of organisational structure and responsibility; accountability; and *policy processes* or ‘ways of doing things’.

From the perspective of LA21 this means that consideration should be given to how the participation processes and policy discourses are constructed through LA21 and what

impact they then have on the political, economic and cultural relations and 'structures' which have evolved in the particular places under scrutiny. LA21 provides an important relational web that has the potential to generate new policy discourses directed at the restructuring of social relations between 'cultural communities' and between them and their natural environment.

2. Local Agenda 21 and the UK Planning Process

The UK has been one of the leading nations in developing LA21 (Sharwood and Russell 1997; UNA-UK 1995; ICLEI 1997). Indeed there are environmental fora and action plans operating at all levels of the political and organisational system. At the central state a UK Roundtable of key stakeholders has been established. It has produced advisory reports on transport, housing capacity, energy, and various other issues. Below this consultative body there is a range of other, often more participatory, fora working on LA21 initiatives.

This burgeoning area of environmental participation has attempted to make linkages with various strategic and local planning practices in an attempt to influence decision-making on land-use and development issues (see for example Doak et al 1998; Selman 1996). The experience from Liverpool and Reading provide evidence of contrasting fortunes in terms of the success of Local Agenda 21 in shaping local planning policy and practice.

a) Liverpool: Professional Culture as Structural Constraint

The City of Liverpool is located at the centre of the Merseyside Conurbation with a resident population of about 500,000 people. It has been governed by a unitary authority (Liverpool City Council) since the strategic Merseyside County Council was abolished in 1986. It has a diverse social and ethnic population and the City has suffered from many years of urban deprivation. It has long been a 'laboratory' for various urban policy initiatives, the most recent being the UK Government's Single Regeneration Budget. The City Council's important roles as a major employer and provider of services are central features of Council policy. This has sometimes led to the traditional Labourite concern for 'defending jobs and services' becoming the dominant priority in City budget setting, possibly at the expense of other areas such as planning and the environment. More recently the emphasis given in the SRB to 'community-based partnerships' has given a greater voice to interests other than organised labour, including environmental groups.

The LA21 process in Liverpool started well, but relatively late, in 1993 with the establishment of an Environmental Forum (of local environmental groups) and, in the following year, with the appointment of Terry Jones at the head of a ten-person Environmental Strategy Team within the City Council. The production of a 'corporate' Environmental Strategy in mid-1995 was, on retrospect, the high point of the process, as within six months Jones had left and the consultation process on the Strategy had ground to a halt. A real corporate commitment to the Strategy was hard to find and Jones had been unable to push through the organisational changes or environmental initiatives he had hoped

for. In March 1996 the (heavily reduced) Environmental Strategy Team were transferred to the Planning and Transportation Service which marginalised their corporate influence, although increased the potential for inputting into planning policy and practice.

The main vehicle for progressing recent planning policy in the City has been the Unitary Development Plan that has been prepared and taken forward over the 1993-98 period. In terms of policy-formulation and consultation processes, LA21 groups have had a limited but quite influential input. The draft plan was drawn-up by officers with some guidance coming from elected Members. During the formal consultation period (September 1995 to March 1996) a collection of environmental groups took issue with the relatively poor information base used to support the Plan's environmental policies. The UDP Team acknowledged this and opened up a dialogue with these groups to revise policies and to examine how the data gap could be plugged. These meetings led to the commissioning of a major habitat survey of the Plan area by the Council and the development of a comprehensive Nature Conservation Strategy.

There was broad support for the Council's policies on public transport, cycling and pedestrian planning issues by environmental and community groups. However, the same groups were critical of new road proposals within the Draft UDP. From within the Council however, there was very little comment on the Draft Plan from the then newly established Environmental Strategy Group.

The Deposit version of the UDP (which contained an Environmental Appraisal of the policies) received strong support from the environmental groups mentioned above. However, the road proposals contained in the plan (especially the proposed New Russell Street Road, within the City Centre) resulted in objections on sustainability grounds, as did a peripheral housing allocation. Although other 'environmental' objections were negotiated away prior to the Public Inquiry into the Plan, these two were taken through and debated at the Inquiry earlier this year, with the Inspectors Report expected late in 1998.

Whereas planning policy debates, and some other areas of policy implementation like SRB, have engaged with LA21 groups, the same cannot be said of development control decision-making. There has been no significant effort to consult LA21 groups when considering planning applications and a strong 'traditionalist' physical planning culture within the Council's DC Section has resisted attempts (by Terry Jones, in particular) to introduce 'sustainability criteria' into all committee reports on planning applications. They have also been very cautious in responding to calls from the SRB Partnerships for more flexibility in planning standards in order to enable higher density housing schemes with innovative designs.

The experience from Liverpool finds an almost exact opposite in the review of the LA21/planning relationship in Reading. Here policy has not had much opportunity to integrate with a very active LA21 process, whereas development control decision-making has had a few significant encounters with local LA21 groups.

b) Reading: A Difficult Process of Transformation

Reading is a large town of about 250,000 people located in the prosperous Thames Valley about 60 km. from London. Historically it had an industrial economy based on the '3 B's' (biscuits, beer and bulbs), but more recently it has become one of the centres for high technology industry and financial and business services. The Council is dominated by the Labour Party, very much in the 'New Labour' mode. It became a unitary authority with the abolition of Berkshire County Council on April 1st 1998.

The approach to LA21 in Reading has been proactive and committed. The Borough Council quickly produced an Environmental Strategy (RBC 1991) which it has built on and expanded during subsequent years. Its approach to LA21 has been to facilitate and draw together three strands of activity:

- Involving the community in environmental decisions (a set of Neighbourhood Agenda's);
- Engaging businesses in environmental discussions (a Business Agenda); and
- Managing the Council's own environmental performance and integrating SD into its own policies and activities (a Local Authority Agenda).

The Council has made use of nationally available resources to pilot these initiatives. For instance, the Neighbourhood Agenda 21 approach has been part-funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Business Agenda 21 has been supported by the NatWest Bank and the WWF.

The Council have recently published the Local Agenda 21 statement for Reading (RBC 1997) which outlines the Council's approach and reports on the achievements so far. The statement reports on:

- A range of environmental projects undertaken by the eight neighbourhood GLOBE (Go Local On a Better Environment) groups so far established;
- Various environmental management initiatives within the Borough Council, including a fledgling corporate environmental management system;
- The establishment of an Environment Centre to support school and community initiatives;
- Energy efficiency programmes with local businesses;
- Developing sustainable transport plans for large local businesses; and
- Successfully bidding for grants from central government and the EU to undertake 'sustainable urban regeneration' programmes in the most deprived areas of the town.

However, less attention (inevitably) is paid in the LA21 Statement to the difficulties in the process. Earlier work (Doak 1998) identified a number of problems that have slowed down or hindered the process:

- relatively low levels of participation in the Neighbourhood and Business agendas;
- lack of confidence, awareness and skills amongst the neighbourhood forums, often leading to very tentative and conservative action programmes focused on very localised issues;

- lack of direction amongst the Neighbourhood fora, partly due to the Borough Council's unwillingness to 'lead' the process;
- limited business interest in neighbourhood agendas, 'solved' by the establishment of a separate Business Agenda forum. However, this creates danger of 'fragmented' debate and action-planning; and
- difficulties in taking forward initiatives in the Local Authority Agenda due to reluctance of officers and some councillors to change established practices.

These issues have been explored in subsequent (preliminary) research examining the impact of LA21 on local planning practice in Reading. With regard to planning policy, the Local (Borough) Plan which was prepared in the late 1980s and early 1990s was almost completely bypassed by the LA21 process as the local Neighbourhood GLOBE Groups had not been established at that time. There is, however, a strong commitment by the officers and members of the Council to 'plug-in' to the LA21 groups now in existence when the plan is reviewed in the next few years. Indeed the Council is already preparing a moderately thorough consultation exercise for the imminent Regional Planning Strategy for the South East Region (which is based on the core principles of sustainable development, see Doak et. al. 1998) and an internal review of consultation and participation procedures and processes is being instigated right across the Council.

Ironically this review was due, in part, to failings in recent consultation exercises undertaken for new transport policies and proposals in Reading (which were initiated by the Council and the strategic transportation authority, Berkshire County Council, subsequent to the Deposit of the Borough Plan). These exercises have applied rather 'standard' techniques (e.g. delivering leaflets which offer a narrow choice of 'options') to areas in which the Borough Council have spent many years carefully nurturing local community involvement through LA21 or the SRB partnerships. The hostile reception these have received has forced the Council to undertake the corporate review and it is hoped that the new approach will prevent such embarrassments in the future.

Interestingly, transport policy is one area where the Council's planning service has attempted to engage in debate with the GLOBE groups. A Community Transport Group has been established which brings officers and the GLOBE groups together to discuss transport issues and policies. Although it is early days, there is little evidence of the GLOBE groups taking their eyes off very local practical issues into broader debates about the sustainability of strategic urban and sub-regional transport networks and development patterns.

If Reading's policy planners look to the future for a more integrated relationship with LA21 groups, the experience in development control is more 'here-and-now'. There is now a growing collection of cases where local GLOBE groups have been involved in consultations and, possibly more important, negotiations on planning applications.

The Oxford Road area of West Reading has probably seen most action, mainly because there are a number of major planning applications being dealt with at the present time, as well as a major SRB regeneration initiative. The local GLOBE group has slowly been maturing in confidence as it has responded positively to participation exercises on the SRB

proposal (albeit belatedly); and redevelopment proposals for Reading's second major (Battle) hospital and the town's football stadium (Elm Park). They have also been drawn into negotiations over the development of a Drive-Thru MacDonalDs Restaurant which provided a community garden as part of the scheme. However, this last example illustrates the tensions involved in day-to-day decision-making on planning applications. The GLOBE group, whilst welcoming the community garden, were concerned about the traffic and pollution likely to be generated by this 'car-friendly' land use. However, it was left to the less community-orientated environmental group Friends of the Earth to make the link to the global objectives of sustainable development.

The GLOBE groups' increasing (but still 'limited') input into development control decision-making has been aided by a number of organisational changes initiated by the Council.

These include:

- Committee reports now require the 'sustainability implications' of decisions to be stated;
- the GLOBE groups are sent the weekly list of planning applications relevant to their areas;
- they are also included on the list of 'consultees' for major planning applications and planning briefs;
- they can feed back comments and concerns direct to officers and members through a special Agenda 21 Forum (which acts as a Sub-Committee of the Council's Community Action Committee); and
- GLOBE groups are now given relatively high status in the list of regular consultees for all Council policy initiatives and projects (despite the unfortunate experiences alluded to above!)

3. Structural Transformation, Window Dressing or What?

The case study examples outlined above illustrate the range of issues that have been encountered by attempts to develop LA21 activities and their integration with the day-to-day practices of local government planning. The 'acid-test' of all this activity is whether it can lead to a fundamental shift in perspective, which might, in turn, lead to significant transformations in social, political and economic 'structures' or 'ways of doing things'.

In the two cases reported above there is evidence of mixed success in communicating the principles of SD and the outcomes of LA21 into policy formulation and development control decision-making. The main points of note are:

- The existence of organisational cultures (or 'policy processes') which are difficult to shift, but once 'transformed' can open the door for greater penetration of sustainability approaches into service delivery;
- The difficulty LA21 groups face in raising their sights from a purely 'environmental' (Liverpool) or 'local' (Reading) focus in order to develop a critical discourse which links the local to the global;
- The need for a long-term approach to consultation and participation that builds consensus and understanding slowly and, most importantly, carefully. The 'big-push',

witnessed in the early days at Liverpool, can rarely be sustained and is more likely to lead to frustration and disappointment;

- The challenge of how to turn the green roots of LA21 (still, at best, heard about by less than 30% of local people in Reading) into a wider and more radical force for cultural change.

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