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Alexander Lord; Stephen Hincks

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ARTICLE

Making Plans: The Role of Evidence in England's Reformed Spatial Planning System

ALEXANDER LORD & STEPHEN HINCKS

Abstract

This paper explores the use of evidence in the making of local development frameworks in England, introduced as part of the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act. The reforms dictate that for a plan to be considered 'sound', the policy choices it contains must be justified through the compilation and use of an appropriate evidence base. The paper draws on research undertaken as part of the UK government-sponsored Spatial Plans in Practice (SPiP) project looking into the operation of the reformed spatial planning system in England. It draws on the findings of a number of reports produced as part of this research on the use of evidence in the making of local development frameworks in England as well as wider components of the SPiP project including interviews with local authority planning officers, documentary review of adopted planning documents (core strategies and area action plans) and a longitudinal suite of case studies covering a number of local planning authorities using both qualitative semi-structured interviews and a strategic survey. The paper finds grounds to believe that, although local planning authorities are collecting more evidence than ever before, the culture of using evidence to inform policy-making is far from a well-established or uniform practice.

Introduction

Underpinning the ongoing transition from land use to spatial planning is the idea that the latter, constructed as an overtly collaborative exercise, should be premised on an evidence-based approach around which cohesion, both of institutions and policies, could be engineered (Communities and Local Government [CLG], 2007). For some commentators it is this focus on evidence that represents the central distinction between the reformed planning system and its antecedent (Davoudi, 2006; Nadin, 2006). But what are the origins of the evidence-based concept and what can spatial planning learn from other spheres of public policy where this approach is more long-standing? Furthermore, how are spatial planners making use of evidence in the plan-making process?

Drawing on findings from the Spatial Plans in Practice (SPiP) project, a major 3-year study of the new local planning system in England sponsored by UK central government, this paper aims to explore the use of evidence in the

Alexander Lord, School of Environmental Sciences, Gordon Stephenson Building, University of Liverpool, Liverpool L69 7ZQ, UK. Email: a.d.lord@liverpool.ac.uk

construction of local development frameworks (LDFs): the portfolio of planning documents that now comprise the suite of locally devised planning policies. In doing so, it first seeks to trace the origins of evidence-based policy and explain how it has come to be embraced in the reformed spatial planning system in England. The paper then goes on to consider the use of evidence in the construction of place-specific plans, such as area action plans, and in the development of overarching core strategies. Finally, some lessons are presented to inform our understanding of how the culture of using evidence might become more embedded in planning practice.

Evidence-based Policy

Whilst the capacity for public policy to be influenced by research, and scientific knowledge more generally, has been traced back to the Enlightenment (Sanderson, 2003) and, more distantly, to Plato's philosopher kings (Plato, 2003) its more recent history in the UK has been seen as emerging in the 1950s and 1960s (for a review, see Nutley et al., 2002; see also Lindblom, 1959) before being displaced by the conviction politics of the 1970s and 1980s. In the UK its subsequent reinvigoration by New Labour as part of the well-documented 'modernisation agenda' (Cabinet Office, 1999a, 1999b; Strategic Policy Making Team, 1999; National Audit Office, 2001; Solesbury, 2001) has given rise to a vast corpus of academic literature that variously views evidence-based policy as either a progressive activity associated with the New Public Management movement (Newman, 2001; Nutley & Davies, 2000; Nutley et al., 2000; Pawson, 2002a, 2002b) or as constituting the elision of independent research with policy activism that potentially compromises the integrity of the former (Bridges, 1998; Harris, 2002; Solesbury, 2001). For many authors, the political impulse behind this drive to connect policy with evidence has been understood as part of a 'post-ideological' (Painter & Clarence, 2001, p. 1215) strain in the New Labour project neatly summarized by the mantra 'what matters is what works' (Southern, 2001, p. 264; see also Blunkett, 2000; Davies et al., 2000; Perri 6, 2002).

For advocates (Newman, 2001), evidence-based policy is inextricably bound up with the transition from government to governance (for instance, Rhodes, 1997) and the corresponding predilection of national government for the formulation and delivery of policy to be devised and delivered in and through partnerships (Pawson, 2006). In areas as diverse as education policy (Pirrie, 2001; Simons et al., 2003), healthcare (El Ansari et al., 2001), social work (Humphries, 2003) and urban policy (Dobbs & Moore, 2002), the incumbency of partnership-based governance on evidence-based policy has been identified (see also Young et al., 2002; Nutley et al., 2003). It is from this standpoint that other treatments (Butler, 2000; Robinson, 2000; Bonoli & Powell, 2002; Glendinning et al., 2002) have made the connection between a centrally orchestrated drive to infuse public policy at large with an evidence-based ethos and the Giddens-inspired (Giddens 1994, 1998) perspective of New Labour. For example, Powell and Moon (2001, p. 48) refer explicitly to the Third Way narrative in formulating the view that evidence-based policy exists primarily as a necessary prerequisite for collaboration, or 'an evidence base for partnership'.

For others, the move towards public policy supported by 'impartial' evidence is a response to a loss of public confidence in politics and policy-making over recent years. The corresponding need to justify public spending has seen pressure exerted from funding bodies to see a return on investments made in research programmes in the shape of 'useful' and 'relevant' outputs (Solesbury, 2002). Perhaps unsurprisingly, as a result the drive to develop and deliver evidence-based policy has been most keenly felt in those areas where government spending has been greatest; in the UK most significantly in healthcare (Evidence-based Medicine Working Group, 1992; Davidoff et al., 1995; Hadorn et al., 1996; Sackett et al., 1996; Kunz & Oxman, 1998; Davies and Nutley, 1999; NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 1999; Dopson et al., 2002, 2003), where evidence-based policy now has an established history. However it is in this field where the most significant obstacles to realizing the perceived benefits of evidence-based policy have been identified. For instance, referring to the potential for evidence-based policy to inform healthcare provision, Marmot (2007, p. 906; see also Sanderson, 2003) notes that: 'the relation between science and policy is ... complicated. Scientific findings do not fall on blank minds that get made up as a result. Science engages with busy minds that have strong views about how things are and ought to be'.

In a similar vein, Healy questions the extent to which evidence-based policy-making truly enhances relevant knowledge given that it is 'no longer enough to initiate a new policy or initiative ... there is now a strong requirement to assess whether it works or not' (Healy, 2002, p. 97). While the author acknowledges that there may be a desire to learn and understand what works as a basis for fine-tuning policies, he also argues that evaluation is often treated as an obligation when implementing policies and initiatives rather than as a way of enhancing knowledge largely because 'the evaluation is seen as a means of justifying decisions after the event' (Healy, 2002, p. 98).

Elsewhere, additional concerns have been articulated relating to the difficulty of establishing coherent and widely applicable evidence bases where the variables under consideration are inherently complex such as in the social sciences (Martin & Sanderson, 1999). This is said to be particularly problematic for the evaluation of one possible evidence base over others (Pawson, 2002a, 2002b, 2006): a core activity for planners under the terms of the reformed system, particularly in the identification of planning issues and arbitration between possible policy options (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister [ODPM], 2004). Moreover, longstanding fears (see Schön, 1973) regarding the manner in which evidence may be misinterpreted, misrepresented and/or distorted in the practice of policy-making remain a concern for many, characterized by Parsons (2002, p. 43)—echoing Lindblom (1959)—as 'from muddling through to muddling up' (see also Solesbury, 2001; Harris, 2002; Young et al., 2002). Further general misgivings have been said to exist regarding the shelf-life of evidence—the process by which evidence ages; potentially losing its utility for policy-makers—and the extent to which divergence between cycles of evidence gathering and policy implementation may inhibit a truly evidence-driven approach (see, for example, Pawson, 2002a, 2002b).

Despite these misgivings about the nature and role of evidence-based policy-making, the compulsion by central government to encourage its infusion into

public policy and particularly the construction of shared evidential repositories—reiterating the importance of evidence to the development of partnership—has continued unabated (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, 2001). This facet of the evidence-based policy concept—the development of an evidence-based platform upon which consensus between agencies, actors and institutions could be fostered with the ultimate goal of inculcating a shared purpose within partnerships (Solesbury, 2002)—has been understood to be a fundamental rationale for the evidence-based policy approach. For instance, Nutley et al. (2002, p. 4) advise that:

gaining consensus or even widespread agreement will not be easy. The need to secure some common ground between diverse stakeholders does, however, point the way to more positive approaches. The traditional separation between the policy arena, practitioners, communities and the research community has largely proven unhelpful. Much of the more recent thinking in this area now emphasises the need for partnerships if common ground is to be found. (See also Laycock, 2000; Nutley et al., 2000)

Evidence-based Policy and the Reform of English Planning

It is against this backdrop that the reform of planning in England has taken place, resulting in what is intended to be a collaborative, communicative, and evidence-based spatial planning system. Although evidence-based planning both as a concept and as a practice is not new, ‘the context within which and the purposes for which evidence is being collected has changed from the purpose of the Roman tax collection to the self-assessment of performance’ (Faludi & Waterhout, 2006a, p. 11). In the UK, the reforms seek to create the conditions for plans that set out to achieve specified outcomes justified through the compilation and use of an appropriate evidence base (Nadin, 2007). In this respect, evidence is seen as a way of justifying the depiction of the existing character of an area, indicating possible future scenarios to explore, linking actions and outcomes, and providing a way of monitoring changes in the area covered by the plan (Baker Associates et al., 2008). Consequently, a recent definition of Spatial Planning suggested by CLG (2007, p. 9; original emphasis) maintains that ‘The new *spatial planning* system is tasked to deliver positive social, economic and environmental outcomes, and requires planners to actively collaborate with the wide range of stakeholders and agencies that help to shape local areas and deliver local services’. Fundamentally, however, the construction of such a joined-up approach is held to be in large measure dependent upon the presentation of an evidence base around which consensus could be engineered. It is from this first premise that research conducted for the Royal Town Planning Institute by University College London and Deloitte asserts:

Spatial planning is the practice of place shaping and delivery at the local and regional levels that aims to enable a vision for the future of regions and places that is based on evidence, local distinctiveness and

community derived objectives. (University College London/Deloitte, 2007, p. 7)

Similarly an earlier report by the Planning Officers Society (2005, p. 16) anticipated the centrality of an evidence-centred approach to the shift from land use to spatial planning when it was remarked that 'maintaining an up-to-date and reliable evidence base will be a vital part of spatial planning. Identifying, generating and adapting ideas for spatial planning policies will provide more opportunities for dialogue with the public, other professions and organisations'. The evidence-based approach is elsewhere (Baker Associates et al., 2007; see also Nadin, 2006) referred to explicitly as the mechanism through which the LDF is envisaged as finding conformity with other local strategies:

The development of both the LDF, and the preparation of the SCS [Sustainable Community Strategy], can be aided by a collaborative approach to data and spatial analysis. Their common vision of place requires a common evidence base. Robust local data analysis and a shared understanding of its spatial implications are vital for both planning and service delivery. (CLG, 2009, p. 19)

A clear analogy can be drawn here between the importance of evidence to new style spatial planning as an exercise rooted in fostering policy integration through partnership and the corresponding logic under which central government has previously introduced the evidence-based policy concept to other policy spheres. Nevertheless, for those with an interest in planning history this may be best understood as the latest in a long line of previous experiments designed to re-brand the planning system but with the underlying activities largely unaltered: as Houghton et al. (2010, p. 2) comment:

... there has been some diminution of the possibility of spatial planning providing radical alternatives to mainstream planning, not least as most features of the previous approaches to planning have been in effect re-inscribed as part of an expansionary vision of spatial planning.

In a similar vein some commentators have traced data-informed planning back to Geddes (Faludi & Waterhout, 2006a). Simultaneously, however, in providing a conceptual account of the shift from land-use to spatial planning others (for example, Davoudi, 2006) have contended that the infusion of evidence-based policy into planning under New Labour can be understood as distinct and differentiable from previous uses of *information* in planning. This distinction between 'evidence' and 'information' that underpins this historical debate is a critical one as it is indicative of an analogous conundrum expressed in many other fields (Harris, 2002; Young et al., 2002; Humphries, 2003) regarding what precisely is admissible as 'evidence' in pursuing evidence-based policy. In planning, this continues to be a contentious issue exemplified in the experiences of the first submitted LDF documents that were deemed inappropriate for adoption partly as a result of including policies premised on an incomplete or incredible evidence base.

In reflecting on this, Nadin (2006) challenges the narrow definition of evidence adopted for the reformed system—particularly in the original 2004 version of *Planning Policy Statement 12—Local Development Frameworks* (PPS12) (ODPM, 2004), which emphasized the importance of evidence gained through local studies and topic papers for meeting the requirements of the test of soundness:

The finding that responses from community consultation are sometimes referred to as ‘evidence’ deserves further comment. Material arising from community and stakeholder engagement is different from what is indicated in PPS12 as ‘evidence’ or implied by the references to an ‘evidence base’ or to ‘evidence being gathered in a pre-production stage’. Its use in developing and evaluating alternatives and as part of the justification of choices that are made is normal and appropriate however. The material that emerges from the engagement of stakeholders and the community can add real knowledge about the place and the community, because of the authoritative bodies involved and because of the familiarity with the area. Any material used in this way must be capable of being tested since the local planning authority should not rely upon anything that is unable to withstand scrutiny ...

... There is a reciprocal relationship between other types of evidence and community responses however. Information provided to those engaging in the process – through the issues and options consultation stage for instance – enables people to understand better what the local development framework is seeking to do or needs to do. This enables them to make informed representations that are likely to be more useful to the local planning authority, or more effective in influencing the emerging plan. (Nadin, 2006, p. 21)

The undercurrent in this narrative is a distinction between evidence gathered through the participation of stakeholders and communities in consultation processes, and evidence in the form of pieces of in-house or commissioned research. On this account, best practice is constructed as a range of locally-derived evidence that is used to inform place-based policies, which in turn supports the pursuit of meta-range goals and objectives specified within the core strategy. To reinforce this point, Nadin (2006, p. 21) concludes that:

A wide and inclusive view needs to be taken of what constitutes evidence. Anything which assists in understanding a place and a community, and which is used in deciding what should be part of the plan should be seen as evidence and hence needs to be able to withstand scrutiny.

The infusion of this logic into government thinking can be seen in the revised version of PPS12, which states that Development Plan Documents (DPDs) ‘... must be founded on a robust and credible evidence base’ (CLG, 2008, p. 15) and that the evidence base should contain two elements:

- *participation*—evidence of the views of the local community and others who have a stake in the future of the area; and
- *research/fact finding*—evidence that the choices made by the plan are backed up by the background facts.

But how have local planning authorities responded to this challenge of ensuring their plans are thoroughly supported by evidence of various types? The remainder of this paper reports on the findings of empirical research, the UK government-sponsored SPiP project, to explore these questions and ultimately reflect on the extent to which planning practice in England could genuinely be referred to as evidence based.

Spatial Plans in Practice: Methodology and Research Design

The SPiP project was a major, 3-year study of the new local plan-making system that commenced in April 2005 before being officially launched on 14 June of the same year. Intended to both critically assess the attributes of the new planning system and share knowledge between academics, policy-makers and practitioners at various spatial scales (national, regional and local), the project sought to draw on a mixed method to both evaluate and support the transition to the new system of spatial planning.

The legislative basis for this transition, the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act and 2008 Planning Act, clearly placed evidence firmly at the heart of the plan-making process in England. This is reflected in the fact that the credibility of the evidence base on which a plan is premised is a core aspect of the ‘tests of soundness’ introduced as part of the 2004 reforms. These criteria—effectively a nine-step measure of the robustness of a plan or policy and reproduced in Table 1—inform the basis for the examination of plans by the Planning Inspectorate.

Subsequently revised by an amended version of the policy statement (CLG, 2008), these nine criteria were subsequently abbreviated to three broad categories: post 2008, for a planning document in the LDF to be considered ‘sound’ it must be *justified*, *effective* and *consistent*. As can be seen, the role of evidence in sustaining the principle of justification is central to the test of soundness:

To be ‘sound’ a DPD should be JUSTIFIED, EFFECTIVE and consistent with NATIONAL POLICY.

Justified means that the document must be:

- Founded on a robust and credible evidence base; and
- The most appropriate strategy when considered against the reasonable alternatives.

Effective means that the document must be:

- Deliverable;
- Flexible; and
- Able to be monitored. (CLG, 2008, p. 24; original emphasis)

TABLE 1. Nine tests of soundness under the original PPS12

- i. It [the plan] has been prepared in accordance with the local development scheme
 - ii. It has been prepared in compliance with the statement of community involvement
 - iii. The plan and its policies have been subjected to sustainability appraisal
 - iv. It is a spatial plan that is consistent with national planning policy and in general conformity with the regional spatial strategy for the region or, in London, the spatial development strategy, and it has properly had regard to any other relevant plans, policies and strategies relating to the area or to adjoining areas
 - v. It has had regard to the authority's community strategy
 - vi. The strategies/policies/allocations in the plan are coherent and consistent within and between development plan documents prepared by the authority and by neighbouring authorities, where cross-boundary issues are relevant
 - vii. The strategies/policies/allocations represent the most appropriate in all the circumstances, having considered the relevant alternatives, and they are founded on a robust and credible evidence base
 - viii. There are clear mechanisms for implementation and monitoring
 - ix. The plan is reasonably flexible to enable it to deal with changing circumstances
-

Establishing the degree to which this evolving conception of evidence had infused the practice of spatial planning was a central aim of the SPiP research. Moreover, in pursuing this aim an additional overarching academic question would be confronted on the extent to which the evidence-based approach to planning described by the legislative reform represented genuine change from the previous system. In turn, it was intended that this would add an empirical dimension to the ongoing debate between those who have sought to trace continuity and contrast between different periods of spatial planning (for a review, see Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2010); whilst it is clear that planning has, to varying extents, been evidence-informed in the past, it has also been argued that the current focus on the use of evidence to underpin the notion of 'soundness' differentiates post-2004 spatial planning from previous periods (see Davoudi, 2006; Faludi & Waterhout, 2006a, 2006b; Nadin, 2006).

To confront these questions, the SPiP project took three core questions to provide a structure for the methodological design of the research:

- (i) How is evidence being collected and used to underpin plan-making in the reformed system in England within LDFs?
- (ii) What is the range and scope of evidence being collected and used to underpin the making of LDFs in England?
- (iii) What are the implications of the research findings for the future practice of evidence-based spatial planning in England?

In relation to question (i), the use of evidence in the case-study authorities was explored through a documentary review of Development Plan Documents at various stages of development within 25 case-study locations. The case-study authorities were identified during the inception of the SPiP project to reflect a range of factors that satisfied both academic concerns about generalization and the

funder's objective of gathering data that would be of use and interest to policy-makers. To this end, case studies were selected to ensure geographical spread as well as differing economic and social circumstances, settlement types, planning contexts, and experience of producing plans under the previous land-use planning system. As part of this study, only DPDs that had reached the 'preferred options' stage or beyond were reviewed as this ensured the strategy and proposals articulated in these documents was of an advanced nature. This resulted in the review of 19 DPDs drawn from across the range of case-study authorities (Table 2).¹ An evaluation framework was used to capture criteria related to the use of evidence that a spatial plan would be anticipated to demonstrate.

The second component of the research design of SPiP, relating primarily to question (ii), was a strategic survey sent to all local planning authorities in England (including minerals and waste and national park authorities). Conducted in 2007 as the penultimate element of the empirical component of the study, the survey was used to map and benchmark the progress of LDFs across every local planning authority in England with the intention of identifying similarity and difference in how plan-making was being managed in various local planning authorities and to highlight potential questions that would benefit from more detailed qualitative exploration in the final stage of the research. The survey elicited a 46% response rate having been sent to a senior representative of each planning authority in England.

Finally a series of semi-structured interviews with a range of local authority officers and stakeholders involved in the spatial planning process were undertaken. Whilst this was the principal method of gathering data against question (iii), it also

TABLE 2. Reviewed Development Plan Documents

DPD	Progress
Brentford Area Action Plan	Submission document, July 2007
Carrick Core Strategy	Submission draft, September 2006
Finsbury Park Area Action Plan	Preferred Options, October 2005
Corby Town Centre Area Action Plan	Preferred Options, 2006
Essex Minerals DPD	Issues and Options, March 2005
Hambleton Core Strategy	Adopted, April 2007
Horsham Core Strategy	Adopted, 2007
Liverpool Core Strategy	Preferred Options, September 2007
Islington Core Strategy	Submission draft, March 2007
Longbridge Area Action Plan	Preferred Options, February 2007
North Northamptonshire Core Strategy	Submission document, February 2007
North Plymouth Area Action Plan	Adopted, 2007
North Sherford Area Action Plan	Submission draft, June 2006
North Staffordshire Core Strategy	Draft preferred Options, March 2007
Plymouth Core Strategy	Adopted, 2007
Reading Borough Council Core Strategy	Submission draft, January 2007
St Helens Core Strategy	Preferred Options, September 2007
South Hams Core Strategy	Adopted, December 2006
West Berkshire Core Strategy	Submission draft, September 2006

allowed the research to include a longitudinal, qualitative reflection on all three research questions. In each of the case studies, semi-structured interviews were conducted with those intimately involved with the construction of the Local Development Framework (LDF): the LDF team leader and team members, the lead officer for sustainability appraisal and monitoring, development management and representatives of the regional government office. In addition, representatives of other agencies both within the local authority, such as economic development, transport, community development, and housing, and those outside the local authority, including community organizations, the health sector, private consultants and the Environment Agency, were also interviewed. The interviews took a semi-structured format and explored the experiences of stakeholders in collecting and using evidence in the plan-making process.

Results: Collection and Use of Evidence in the Making of LDFs in England

The overarching impression of the research is that the use of evidence has been a feature of the reformed planning system to which planning authorities had found it difficult to adapt (Table 3). The evaluation found that over one-half of the evaluated DPDs did not make effective use of evidence. The requirement for local authorities to base their decision-making and planning practices on evidence is recognized as being a significant shift from the way that local plans were made under the previous land-use planning system (Shaw, 2006; Shaw & Lord, 2007). Nevertheless, several plans have been found to be unsound or have been withdrawn from examination because of an inadequate connection between their underpinning evidence base and the content of the plan. For example, the Lichfield core strategy, which failed the test of soundness at the Independent Examination stage, was found to have ‘... two areas in which the plan is seriously defective’, the second of these being ‘the inadequacy of the evidence base’ largely because of

TABLE 3. Evaluation of content of LDF documents against ‘evidence’ criteria

Criterion	Rating				
	Very good (%)	Good (%)	Adequate (%)	Poor (%)	Not evident (%)
Uses and makes reference to different types of evidence	3 (16)	6 (32)	5 (26)	4 (21)	1 (5)
Evidence includes a spatial dimension (e.g. examination of spatial impact of policies and trends and use of functional areas)	3 (16)	5 (26)	4 (21)	5 (26)	2 (11)
Explanation of how evidence has led to the spatial strategy	2 (11)	5 (26)	8 (42)	2 (11)	2 (11)
Evidence includes information from other sectors	3 (16)	6 (32)	3 (16)	5 (26)	2 (11)

time lags between the collection and use of the evidence. The Inspector's Report states:

In some instances the evidence is dated because the evidence was gathered in support of a local plan review some 3 to 4 years ago. In other cases, 'evidence' has only been presented to support the DPD policies during the examination itself or ... was not available. The inadequacy of the evidence base is a fundamental failing under test [of soundness] 10. (Planning Inspectorate, 2006, para. 2.90)

Furthermore, subsequent plans such as the core strategies submitted by Carrick District Council (submitted in 2006), Teignbridge District Council (submitted in 2006), and Sheffield City Council (submitted in 2007) failed to fulfil the criteria established in the test of soundness, owing in part to serious deficiencies in their evidence bases. What this suggests is that the lack of a robust evidence base was not only confined to the first development plan documents to fail the tests of soundness. Although the 2004 reforms introduced 'a spatial planning approach which goes beyond traditional land use planning to bring together and integrate policies for the development and use of land with other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they can function' (ODPM, 2005, para. 30), the evaluation found that 58% of the reviewed DPDs did not include evidence of a contextually specific, spatial dimension in their policies or proposals.

Interviews with LDF team leaders revealed that, for many practicing planners, the lack of an evidence-based approach was a function of a more fundamental issue pertaining to the demands of the new spatial planning system. For example, a number of interviewees suggested that the failure to embed policies in a robust, spatially-grounded evidence base exposed a misunderstanding over the degree of change instituted by the new system. As one interviewee suggested, 'spatial planning is just so different to what we did in the past ... it's just been tough to make sense of it' (LDF team leader, interviewed in 2007).

By relation, the lack of a spatial dimension in a number of the reviewed DPDs reflects the underdeveloped nature of the evidence employed by many local planning authorities to characterize the functional social and economic geography of their local planning authority area. Indeed, the evidence bases of over one-third of Development Plan Documents assessed in the evaluation exercise were judged to have had an inadequate (poor or not evident) spatial dimension. A potential reason for this was a general trend for local planning authorities to report a lack of staff capacity and resources needed to compile an evidence base of sufficient scope to support the demands of the new system regarding policy choices. As one junior local authority planner stated: 'I'm involved in getting the evidence base together for our housing allocations DPD ... [but] ... finding the time to do it on top of everything else is hard' (interviewed in 2007). Similarly, a senior local authority planner reported: 'we just don't have the finances or staff time to do what we're being asked to do ...' (interviewed in 2007). As a result, a number of LDF team leaders conceded that they have compromised evidence requirements and in some cases have tried to use evidence that had been compiled initially to inform plan-making under the pre-2004 system. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the

evaluation found that over-two thirds of DPDs reviewed were only adequate or less than adequate in explaining how the evidence base had been used to inform the spatial strategy, while in a further one-third of the documents reviewed there was little or no indication that evidence from other spheres had been used to inform the plan-making process.

Clearly, the evaluation raises significant questions about the extent to which evidence is being used to inform the making of Local Development Frameworks in England. In drawing this conclusion, however, it is important to remember that the evaluation considered DPDs that were prepared immediately following the introduction of the 2004 reforms, some as little as 18 months later. As such, the plans considered were early attempts at engaging with the new system. In interviews with local authority officers conducted toward the end of the project it would appear that, since the earliest documents were submitted, the local planning authorities have become more experienced and, as the system has become more established, understanding of the value of evidence and its potential uses in local plan-making has improved. The SPiP Strategic Survey of local authorities found that nearly three-quarters of local planning authorities agreed that the evidence-based approach would ultimately lead to more robust and better grounded plans when compared with the old-style local plans. Indeed this endorsement was reflected in the fact that in 2007 over 80% of local planning authorities were found to be giving greater consideration to developing robust evidence bases compared with 2006, and over 70% were directing more resources to the development of evidence (Baker Associates et al., 2007).

Furthermore, there are indications that the way evidence is being collected is beginning to change. The strategic survey found that 75% of local planning authorities were collaborating with other departments in developing their evidence base for their LDFs. According to the findings of the SPiP Lessons Report on the use of evidence (Baker Associates et al., 2007), this collaborative approach to the collection of evidence is leading to more integrated evidence bases for local plans and policies largely as a result of the emerging dialogue between planners and other local authority departments (Planning Officers Society, 2005; Nadin, 2006). The report also found evidence of a growing level of collaboration in obtaining evidence with neighbouring local authorities. Indeed, 50% of respondents to the Strategic Survey reported working jointly with neighbouring authorities to develop an evidence base and 80% of respondents were working with adjoining authorities to share information. The most common areas for collaboration were on strategic housing market assessments (to define housing market areas), and the preparation of Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments. However, the Strategic Survey found that the joint collection of evidence is far more common than collaboration on the content of plans themselves.

Perhaps of most interest to practicing planners, the Strategic Survey found that the area in which collaboration is growing most strongly is between local planning authorities and development stakeholders and service providers. A possible reason for this is the need to demonstrate that plans are feasible, in the sense that they are capable of implementation, and particularly that there is a realistic prospect that supporting infrastructure, and corresponding funding, will be integrated with development. A recent study on the delivery of infrastructure and the

implementation of LDFs in England found that greater involvement of the property development industry in plan-making will be important in providing confidence that plans are deliverable (Baker & Hincks, 2009). The most developed examples of partnership working in this respect have been in major development areas, such as urban extensions. In these situations, planning authorities and stakeholders appear to be consulting with developers who have well-defined objectives and a clear understanding of the scale and location of development that can be delivered. Some local planning authorities have also recognized the potential of engaging the development industry in plan-making more generally, especially in constructing the strategic framework for core strategies (Baker Associates et al., 2007). In many other cases, however, it would appear that developers are proving difficult to engage in the early stages of the plan-making process (Baker & Hincks, 2009).

What Constitutes Evidence in Spatial Planning?

The research would suggest that by far the most common type of evidence employed to inform Development Plan Documents were studies on specific topics, such as housing and employment. Topic studies are identified in central government guidance through the suite of Planning Policy Statements as a useful way of compiling an evidence base on a specific issue, which can then be used to support a particular option or policy proposal. Local authority officers tended to agree that topic studies are useful for identifying the issues facing an area, for prompting consideration of what might be possible and for providing direction for strategy implementation. For example, Baker and Hincks (2009) found that local planning authorities have begun to use infrastructure topic studies to determine infrastructure needs for the purpose of demonstrating from an infrastructure perspective the deliverability of a Development Plan. Baker Associates et al. (2007) also found that local planning authorities regard topic studies as a source of useful geographical information and can serve as a way of spatially situating strategic objectives, therefore offering scope for the development of more spatially aware plans and policies.

The Annual Monitoring Report has also emerged as an important source of evidence for informing the process by which Local Development Frameworks are constructed. Although most planning authorities acknowledged that monitoring of some sort had taken place in the past, it was recognized that the requirement to develop a more rigorous monitoring framework driven by the Annual Monitoring Report is a new challenge for many local planning authorities. A recent study undertaken for CLG and the Royal Town Planning Institute found that the Annual Monitoring Report process is still evolving, with planners' understanding of what has to be included in the document far from consistent (University of Manchester & University of Sheffield, 2008). However, local authority officers were aware that the collection of evidence could be rationalized by more effectively allocating resources to develop a process of continuous evidence gathering for plan preparation that informs the continued development of the Annual Monitoring Report, on the basis that the document should be seen as a tool for ensuring that

the plans and policies contained within the LDF remain realistic, deliverable, and relevant after adoption (Baker Associates et al., 2007).

Local planning authorities are also beginning to draw on a much wider range of existing evidence collected nationally; for example, by central government, in-house by other local authority departments, and through the commissioning of local surveys. As the University of Manchester and University of Sheffield (2008) study found, local planning authorities are beginning to collect increasingly detailed local information on biodiversity and environmental quality, which in the past has been overlooked. Baker Associates et al. (2007) found that access to detailed and more diverse information is providing planners with much greater scope for identifying and addressing cross-cutting policy issues at a strategic level in the core strategy as well as in more locally specific area action plans.

The SPiP research also found that what local authority planners understand to constitute 'evidence' is beginning to evolve and many local planning authorities are now using responses from community consultation exercises as evidence. Indeed, PPS12 recognizes responses gathered through this channel as an increasingly important source of evidence that may historically have been under-represented. The research would suggest that local authorities are increasingly coming to regard the results of grassroots participation in the planning process as extremely useful both in developing and evaluating alternatives and as part of the justification for the identification of 'preferred options'. However, whilst outputs from engagement exercises are a useful source of local knowledge, as Baker Associates et al. (2007) highlight, many local planning authorities are aware that they are only useful if outputs attributable to that engagement can be tested and verified. To ensure that community consultation remains a valid type of evidence, local planning authorities are increasingly using alternative sources in conjunction with community consultation exercises to corroborate and triangulate a 'view of the community'.

However, although the scope and range of evidence being collected appears to be improving and there is an increasing appreciation of the role of evidence in the plan-making process, there appears to have been only a modest improvement in the way that this expanded range of evidence is being *used* in many of the SPiP case-study authorities (Baker Associates et al., 2008). While many of the case-study authorities were able to demonstrate that appropriate evidence is being used to inform policy options and to select the preferred spatial strategy, the rationale was not always evident in the documents produced (Baker Associates et al., 2007). Furthermore the SPiP Lessons Report on the use of evidence also found that very few of the case studies made a connection between policies pertaining to issues such as accessibility, the environment, culture, health, crime and design and a locally-generated evidence base. One possible reason for this may be the identification by Baker Associates et al. (2007) of a lack of in-house analytical skills available in planning departments to make the most of the evidence bases being compiled (also see University of Manchester & University of Sheffield, 2008). Indeed, the 2007 Strategic Survey found that only one-fifth of respondents believed that members of staff are sufficiently trained in the analytical techniques needed to make effective use of evidence bases to inform the plan-making process.

Discussion and Conclusion: Making the Transition to Evidence-based Spatial Planning in England

The transition from land-use regulation to spatial planning has been seen in recent years as being of fundamental importance for the UK government in implementing its sustainable communities agenda (ODPM, 2003). Furthermore, in order to achieve the far-reaching reforms set out in the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act and extended in the 2008 Planning Act, there is an expectation that there will need to be a step change in planning practice in terms of redefining its scope, performance and widespread acceptance of what the planning system is expected to deliver (Nadin, 2007). However, commentators have recognized that these aspirations can only be realized if all those involved in the planning process adapt to the terms of the new system and relax preconceived ideas about the purpose of planning:

Culture change permeates every single aspect of our approach to planning reform. We have to reform the way we go about planning as well as reforming the system itself. Planning is a vehicle which cannot be fixed by only looking at the engine. You need to change the way the machine is driven (McNulty, Speech to the Local Government Association Conference, 2003, quoted in Shaw, 2006, p. 4)

A central component of this culture change is the requirement under the terms of the new system for practicing planners to devise Development Plan Documents that display a clear connection to an appropriate evidence base that is contextually specific (for example, Baker Associates et al., 2007). Under such a system a wide and inclusive view of what constitutes evidence is necessitated in order to withstand scrutiny as part of the 'test of soundness'. Although there are indications to suggest that culture change is slowly beginning to occur in the way that evidence is being collected and used in plan-making in England, brought about by the requirements of the 2004 and 2008 reforms, the research undertaken as part of the SPIP project found that there is still a long way to go in embedding the use of evidence in the culture and practice of spatial planning.

A key issue emerging from the evaluation of the early DPDs was that the use of evidence was not always explicit in the documents that were produced. It was this lack of a clear evidence base that contributed to the two early core strategies from Lichfield and Stafford failing the test of soundness. Whilst there are grounds to suggest that practices are improving, local planning authorities need to be more explicit in connecting policy choices to a supporting evidence base, particularly in relation to the identification of issues and options and the subsequent selection of a preferred developmental trajectory.

If the new system is to be successful, stakeholders involved in the spatial planning process also need to recognize that the collection of evidence is not a self-contained activity and certainly cannot be isolated from the plan-making process itself. The original version of PPS12 recommended that local planning authorities undertake an evidence gathering exercise at the pre-production stage (ODPM, 2004). However, this clearly undermines the importance of having a

monitoring framework in place that permits the ongoing refinement of policies and strategies as new policy challenges arise during the production and lifespan of the plan. The SPiP lessons report on the use of evidence demonstrates that the development of a functional monitoring framework, underpinned by a robust evidence base, will only be possible if a practice of continuous evidence collection is more widely adopted by local planning authorities. The revised version of PPS12 is less prescriptive about the stage at which evidence should be collected, stating that: 'Evidence gathered should be proportionate to the job being undertaken by the plan, relevant to the place in question and as up-to-date as practical having regard to what may have changed since the evidence was collected' (CLG, 2008, para. 4.37). This should provide greater latitude for planners to devise context-specific frameworks within which continuous monitoring can take place throughout the life of the plan.

Elsewhere, collaboration between other local authority departments, neighbouring authorities and external stakeholders has been recognized as a particularly effective method of assembling an evidence base (Terrance O'Rourke & University of West of England, 2008). Given the resource constraints identified as facing local planning authorities, such partnership working is perhaps a logical method for a cost-effective and efficient evidence base to be constructed, and is now recognized in other spheres as an established part of developing shared intelligence (for example, Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, 2001; Solesbury, 2002). Existing joint research and information arrangements perform a number of functions, including assembling data for monitoring purposes, developing common methods for policy appraisal, and identifying gaps in the evidence base. This rationale, together with the weakened role of County Councils in the planning process following the 2004 reforms (see Marshall, 2007), make it more likely that joint research and information arrangements will emerge to fill the resource and skills gap facing many planning authorities (Planning Advisory Service, 2008).

The evidence being collected by local planning authorities also appears to have expanded beyond the traditional types and range of sources that were used to inform land-use plans. Topic studies dealing with matters such as housing, employment and retail have become a standard part of the evidence, base but there are indications that individual topic studies are beginning to be designed in a more integrated way across local authority boundaries, particularly where neighbouring authorities share common issues and where users compete for the same land (Baker Associates et al., 2007). The SPiP study also points to the fact that monitoring, particularly through the Annual Monitoring Report, should be seen as an essential and integral part not only of the plan-making process, but also of planning authority culture more generally. The recent University of Manchester and University of Sheffield (2008) study suggests that the monitoring of spatial policies could benefit from a shift away from the current preoccupation with the monitoring of the socio-economic and environmental characteristics of areas to reporting the impact and outcomes of policies. The ability to report on the changing nature of an area means that the monitoring process potentially has value beyond LDF preparation in widening the influence of spatial planning to other local authority departments and even the corporate management of the local

authority (Baker Associates et al., 2007; University of Manchester & University of Sheffield, 2008).

Finally, it is perhaps worth restating the case for evidence-based spatial planning in the context of the research findings reported here. Whilst it is clear from government guidance that, unless the evidence base of a Development Plan Document is clear and robust, the plan is likely to fail the test of soundness, a preoccupation with meeting the expectations of this procedural test potentially masks the ultimate objective of devising contextually specific policies and proposals that might be successfully implemented. There are certainly deficiencies in the way that evidence-based planning has been practiced to date, and whilst it is true that the value and scope of evidence-based policy-making has been questioned in other policy areas (for example, Schön, 1973; Parsons, 2002), we hope to have presented the case that such an evidence-based approach to spatial planning, although still in its infancy in many respects, is appropriate in relation to planning practice and is likely to grow in importance as the transition from land-use regulation to spatial planning becomes more embedded—almost regardless of the political stripe of government. Indeed, since this research was conducted there have been clear and deliberate attempts—by, for example, the Planning Advisory Service through their ‘evidence base support’ guidance—to demystify the practice of evidence-based planning and the ‘Communities of Practice’ developed by the Improvement and Development Agency to encourage the establishment of fora within which best practice on strategies for the collection and use of evidence within planning might be shared. The findings of this research suggest that these innovations in public sector management are needed and may prove vital in supporting the collection and *use* of evidence upon which the transition from land-use regulation to spatial planning is incumbent.

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Note

1. The exception is the Essex Minerals DPD, which was at the issues and options stage, for the reason of including a minerals and waste LDF in the research.

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