

The concept of 'Sustainable Communities' and its application in the United Kingdom's Social Housing stock – is it successful?

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Abstract

The principles behind Sustainable Communities are far from new. However, The concept of Sustainable Communities as a holistic discipline, subject area and all encompassing aspiration is much younger and less entrenched in the psyche.

The emergence of academic degrees on this subject area is proof that the base principles have transcended into something more formal. Based in general on common sense principles it presents a semi-utopian vision that is considered the ideal for shaping the places we inhabit. It is therefore perhaps the key factor in influencing planning and development policy and public funding decisions.

The principles of Sustainable Communities are that they remain healthy and strong, without continued dependence on external elements or great reliance on the limited resources of the Earth. When it comes to practicalities however there does not seem to be concurrence.

The research looked at what is meant by a Sustainable Community within the United Kingdom's Social Housing sector and how effectively it operates. It drew conclusions on the success of the concept utilising case studies and primary data capture whilst investigating the theory, policy and environmental performance and acceptance of sustainable technology.

An overriding conclusion from the data collected is that currently Sustainable Communities as a concept is not yet successful within this Social Housing sector. It recommends implementing and monitoring fewer elements of sustainability and monitoring over a longer period of time to assess viability rather than many short-term, high profile aspirational visions of the future.

Keywords

Sustainable Communities, Sustainable Development, Social Housing, Self Sufficiency, Politics, Practitioner Policy.

1. Introduction

This paper briefly looks at what is meant by a sustainable community, and how it exists within Social Housing, a key mode of tenure in the residential stock of the United Kingdom. It hopes to draw some conclusions on the success of the concept utilising case studies and primary data capture whilst investigating the theory, policy and role of technology.

In order to make conclusions on success the paper first tries to clarify the aim/vision that is aspired too. Initially therefore it looks at defining sustainability and the principles of community. Then the Social Housing context is explained along with the current political back-drop and influences in the United Kingdom.

The topic of Sustainability in housing is a poorly defined one, with no clear acknowledged parameters for measurement or uniform state for success or failure. Even the relatively quantifiable area of sustainable technologies, with their cost and volume indicators, has a lack of base evidence over a period substantial enough to provide high quality output data. The general paucity of empirical data and indeed common understanding of the subject matter, means many of the sources of information will themselves be working from a position of opinion and assumption.

The methodology of research that underpins this paper utilised a three-fold approach. Firstly the gathering of literature on the subject and its evaluation. Alongside this, a review of existing case study Social Housing schemes that claim to be the home of Sustainability. Finally informal interviews of people who are directly linked to Social Housing were used to gauge opinion on the subject and to abstract qualitative information.

2. Definitions

Sustainability

In terms of a 'Dictionary' definition *sustainability* means: to keep alive; going continuously; endure without giving away; and to uphold validity. (Mini Dictionary, 1991)

Some people use the term 'Sustainability' interchangeably with the term 'validity'.

Others use the term 'sustainability' purely in the environmental sense, for example: A sustainable building project may be one where efforts are made to reduce its ecological footprint, to use recycled materials and to minimise energy consumption.

(Academy for Sustainable Communities, 2007)

Megahey (1999) wrote that the term 'sustainable development' was first introduced in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development in its report, '*Our Common Future*'. This is often referred to as the Brundtland Report after its chairwoman Gro Harlem Brundtland.

The reports definition of Sustainable Development was;

'meeting the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'

Blewitt (2008) writes in *Understanding Sustainable Development* that one of the main reasons why 'Sustainable development' and 'Sustainability' have generated so much discussion is because they tend to reflect the political and philosophical value base of those articulating a given definition or preferred perspective.

In *Understanding Sustainable Development*, Blewitt quotes Robinson (2004) as having an unambiguous scientific, technical, discipline specific and/or operational definition:

"Diplomats are familiar with the need to leave Key terms undefined in negotiation processes, and in much the same way the term sustainable development may profit from what might be called constructive ambiguity. Certainly the plethora of competing definitions in the literature suggests that any attempt to define the concept precisely, even if it were possible, would have the effect of excluding those whose views were not expressed in that definition"

Community

Similar to trying to define Sustainability, 'Community' is a notion that has many meanings, and is therefore problematic to define. Just looking at the dictionary definition of community will show a number of different variances (5 in the Oxford Mini Dictionary, 9 at Dictionary.com)

If you live in an urban city, you may feel you are part of and relate to several communities, for example: your workplace community, your neighbourhood, and your social community. There are a number of competing definitions of community, some focused on community as a geographical area; some on a group of people living in a particular place; and others which look to community as an area of common life.

It is also possible to see that a single person will belong to a number of different communities, and indeed that communities themselves can be part of larger communities.

Community here is on a national scale, and it does not stop there as the European Community is testament to and in many ways there can be a global nature to community.

3. The Principles of a Sustainable Community

What do mean by a Sustainable Community?

In *Achieving Building for Life* (2008) successful communities are described as: "Successful communities depend on easy access to the rest of the neighbourhood, town and city and local facilities which are close to home. The homes provided cannot be just a housing estate; there must be shops, schools, health facilities and other amenities within easy reach for all residents if the area is to thrive"

Building for the Future (2003) sets out some of the most important requirements of sustainable communities, some are listed here:

- *A flourishing local economy to provide jobs and wealth*
- *Strong leadership to respond positively to change*
- *Effective engagement and participation by local people, groups and businesses.*
- *A safe and healthy local environment with well-designed public and green space.*
- *A well integrated mix of decent homes of different types and tenures to support a range of household sizes, ages and incomes.*
- *A "sense of place"*

These requirements appear idealistic and naïve, especially in today's economic climate, where unemployment is high, and levels of Anti-Social behaviour is commonplace. It would seem that a single breakdown in the requirements would have a negative effect on the ethos of a sustainable community.

Sir John Egan said in 2006:

"Sustainable communities meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users. They contribute to high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that make effective use of natural resources, enhance the environment, promote social cohesion and inclusion and strengthen economic prosperity"

(The Academy for Sustainable Communities, 2007)

There is a wealth of information about the principles of sustainable communities. The importance of the concept however does lead to a great number of explanations and definitions and from this it is possible to get an idea of the nature and content of Sustainable Communities.

The communities in question are small geographic ones, neighbourhoods based and represented by the built form of estates. Indeed the idea of 'Place' is one that is common within the theory. The sustainability strived for is broad, social, economic and ecological. It has a particular focus on the environmental factors, and a tendency towards self-sufficiency on a micro scale.

Despite this focus, the broad component terms hint at a concept that may prove difficult to deliver, as misinterpretation, enforced parameters and the gap between theory and practice become stumbling blocks to progress.

4. The U.K. Social Housing Context

Social Housing was born out of the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919 and driven by the desire to produce 'Homes Fit for Heroes'. The 'Addison Act' (named after its author Dr. Christopher Addison the then Minister for Housing) marked the start of a long tradition of state-owned housing which has over the best part of a century since evolved in its form whilst remaining close to its general principles.

The majority tenure for property in Britain is, slightly unusually, owner-occupation but social housing accounts for a substantial proportion of the national housing stock, and is the second most common, outnumbering the private-rented sector.

There are around 4.5million social housing properties in the United Kingdom as at Quarter 2 2009.

In general the Social Housing stock in this country has been increasing until the Housing Act of 1980 produced perhaps the defining policy of Thatcherism giving over 5 million council house tenants the Right-To-Buy their home from the Local Authority. Since then the take up of this incentive based scheme has outstripped additional new build growth in the sector seeing a net decline in stock level.

The purpose of state-intervention in the housing sector is as usual to provide for the population where the free market economy does not. Social Housing attempts to produce good quality, affordable housing for those whose financial circumstances do not enable them to access accommodation to meet their needs within the open market.

Although in theory targeted at a specific demographic group in terms of income and employment, Social Housing has always been key in shaping the community landscape of the United Kingdom, with the ubiquitous Council estates and tower blocks now giving way to a key role in the creation or regeneration of modern day communities.

The element of state control in the sector has led to it being used, not just as a means to the end of meeting housing need, but as a tool in driving up standards and in enforcing long-term ideals within the housing industry as a whole, as well as in maintaining build rates and a healthy construction industry in times of economic crisis.

Although the stock level represents less than a fifth of the property in the country, Social Housing influence on new and existing communities exceeds its numbers.

At the time of writing the social housing world exists in the context of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008, which represented a major shift in focus, regulation and policy.

The fact that much of the history of Social Housing is defined by Act's of Parliament is a marker of the political influence in the sector. The rise in importance of the principle of Sustainable Communities in Social Housing is therefore directly linked to its inclusion in policy, regulation and the importance placed on it through the Government created and driven agencies.

The objectives of the current funding and enabling body, the Homes and Communities Agency focus on elements of Sustainable Communities.

- *improve the supply and quality of housing in England*
- *secure the regeneration or development of land or infrastructure in England*
- *support in other ways the creation, regeneration or development of communities in England or their continued well-being*
- *contribute to the achievement of sustainable development and good design in England, with a view to meeting the needs of people living in England.*

(Homes and Communities Agency, no date)

Social Housing is the crucible where ideas are tested, where the concept is developed, where the state aspect through funding and standards can fully engage the sector. The tenure therefore provides the perfect context in which to investigate the success and effectiveness of the concept of Sustainable Communities.

5. Politics

Currently the United Kingdom Government is led under a Coalition Party following the 2010 General Election in May. The Conservative Party led by David Cameron and the Liberal Democrats led by Nick Clegg entered into discussions which culminated in the coalition agreement setting out a program for government until the next general election in May 2015. The newly formed government's main aims are to introduce widespread reform, and a programme of budgetary cuts in public spending as its response to the budget deficit accumulated by the last Labour led Government that was attributed to thirteen years of overspending and the ongoing global financial crisis. This is the first formal coalition since the National Government that existed during the Second World War.

Taken from the Business Plan 2011-2015 from the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Coalition's priorities are to:

Decentralise power as far as possible

- Free local government from central and regional control; decentralise power; provide greater freedom and flexibilities to local government so that they can genuinely lead their communities; and simplify and deregulate local government finance.

Reinvigorate accountability, democracy and participation

- Trust people to take control of the decisions that affect them by devolving power closer to neighbourhoods, increasing citizen participation, promoting community ownership, lifting inspection burdens on councils and unnecessary regional administration

Increase transparency by letting people see how their money is being spent

- Publishing financial and performance data online – ‘show me the money’

Meet people's housing aspirations

- Including providing local authorities with strong and transparent incentives to facilitate housing growth, as well as making the provision of social housing more flexible.

Put communities in charge of planning

- Give local people and communities far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which they live by radically reforming the planning system

Other major responsibilities highlighted in the Business Plan include:

Supporting Local Government

- Transforming local government, freeing it from central regulation and regional control, so that elected councils are free to deliver essential services according to local needs.

Communities and neighbourhoods

- We aim to ensure that citizens are able to make the best of their communities, removing barriers so that they are able to take action to overcome difficulties such as community conflict, extremism and deprivation, with neighbourhoods as the building blocks for action.

Housing

- We oversee housing and homelessness policy in England to meet the aspirations of a growing and ageing population and support the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in communities.

Planning

- We are responsible for planning policy and building regulations in England. We are ensuring that the planning system, building regulations, the building control system and energy performance certificate regimes support our ambitions for a low-carbon and eco-friendly economy.

6. Data Capture Results

Interview Response

The understanding of the concept of Sustainable Communities varied throughout the Social Housing sample group, as did their individual focus on the aspects they felt were most important or affected them to the greatest extent.

The experience of the delivery of the various aspects of funding conditions and regulations was that they were focused on ticking a box rather than really providing a positive outcome. Investment in Sustainable Communities was seen to be very fragmented and not truly based on a long-term objective. There was a belief that it is not possible to get the multiple stakeholders and partners to work effectively together, with a requirement for more of a focus on the commonality of individual 'places' to tailor the offering to the circumstances

Some subjects felt that it is a mistake to think that people have a real desire to be empowered. They describe an impetus to become involved to deal with specific issues, but a tendency to prefer if possible to have adequate service provided for them and not to any particular extent by them. The greater importance was placed on just a reliable and efficient delivery of the basics by the landlord.

A key element of the feedback from practitioners in the sector related to the community members, the customers themselves. It was felt they are an obstacle to effective Sustainable Communities measures, that rather than being an integral part of the framework of the vision, they are actually a reason it cannot be successful.

In general the interview responses did not identify successful Sustainable Communities. They raised queries about the implementation at all stages, and in some cases challenged the theory itself as impractical and naïve. They highlighted the importance of the human factor and identified a potential dislocation between the theory, concept and policy making, and the desires and needs of the public themselves.

Case Studies

The case studies are of differing scopes and represent a diverse set of approaches and priorities within the general aim of producing Sustainable Communities. They are generally seen as exemplar in certain aspects of their development.

They include examples of design standards set at a very high level, within holistic mixed use developments. Community facilities are often integral to the layout of the scheme with award winning use of energy generation technologies and building materials.

Throughout all the case studies compromise was self evident. Often commercial and financial aspects have limited the inclusion of true mixed tenures. Technology and design quality has if anything produced

long-term inefficiencies in management and maintenance. Where a level of self-sufficiency was successfully attempted in was in a unique localised form that could not be replicated. Perhaps most importantly the case studies highlighted the large dependence on the members of the community buying into the ideals of the designer/instigators. For example, cleaning (at no cost) grey water recycling installations on a regular basis so that they work efficiently.

7. Conclusions

The definitions of the terms that make up Sustainable Communities set the complex and broad background of the concept. There is a significant amount of depth that can be applied often producing slightly differing end interpretations. This grand scope to the concept is replicated in the theory within academic literature and policy. The success of the concept is therefore a challenging aim and it shouldn't be a great surprise if it has not been achieved.

Social Housing provides a good window into the working of Sustainable Communities methods in practice as many are requirements for Affordable Housing development. It could be argued that success will be achieved in this sector first and that the trend of trailing many standards and models through a grant funding mechanism and with the social sector as test beds gives the best environment to critique the concept's implementation. It is clear however that a key factor in many of the measures is cost and that by the nature of the tenure itself, social housing struggles to play a part in many examples due to financial pressures.

This has produced two types of sustainable development. An idealised one based on specific circumstances and mostly privately owned and exclusive and a policy led one, based on requirements and guidelines, but without necessarily the reasoning based on the 'place' itself, or the community members. The wealth of policy and guidance regarding Sustainable Communities is testimony to the impact it has on the Social Housing world. It is a key influencing factor in work on new development, and existing stock.

By virtue of searching for the correct methodology for research on this subject it became clear that there is little quality data about the outputs of this high volume of resource being expended on Sustainable Community production. There is thus currently no bank of statistics for quantitative support of the concepts success. It is hard to find an example in the UK of a Sustainable Community developed through the working of the concept. From a practical point of view in terms of improving the delivery of the concept, the general message seems to be one of concentrating on getting the simple things right before moving on to more aspirational projects. An overriding view is that Sustainable Communities as a concept is not yet successful within the UK's Social Housing stock. An underlying question is also raised about the suitability of the concept itself.

8. Recommendations

There are many benefits of a holistic approach; of ensuring all factors are evaluated as a whole and that elements can be complimentary in order to minimise waste and in-efficiency and maximise the outputs and achievements. That said, it is hard to not feel that were the Sustainable Communities concept to be a little more focused and its scope a little narrower, it would be far easier to truly judge success and indeed to deliver the key objectives of economic, social and environmental harmony.

The research suggests that political influence is a key factor to success. The cycle of politics does not engender a tendency for truly long-term planning; the emphasis being on producing good headlines and a mixture of many short-term, high profile successes and aspirational visions of the future. In order to properly develop sustainable communities it is suggested that this approach needs to be counter balanced

by implementing and monitoring fewer elements, such as areas of renewable technology, over a longer period of time to assess viability.

This would allow more importance to be placed on the medium term objectives and hopefully produce the right balance between a view that takes into account the value of elements throughout their life and in the long-term, whilst still having an accountability horizon in terms of evaluation and outputs that will see the policy makers judged on their decisions.

8. Summary

This paper has shown that there is a significant need for more resource and focus to be put on the outputs of Sustainable Communities measures. It suggests that political influence is a key factor to success. There seems to be a large imbalance between the work on theory and policy, and the evidence base captured to feed back into and influence the next phase of such. Until this position changes it will be hard for anyone to argue, the Sustainable Communities concept, is being delivered successfully in UK Social Housing.

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