

What future for Local Agenda 21?

Last month in *EGextra*, Graham Pinfield and Jamie Saunders explored how community planning and LA21 planning could be brought together. Here, in a follow up, MARK FISHER explains his concern that the commitment of LA21 to sustainable development may not be matched by its new partner – and that LA21 itself may be under threat.

WHILE LOCAL AGENDA 21 (LA21) has captured the imagination of many, the less well known technique of 'community planning' seems to be the government's preferred approach for the promotion of the 'wellbeing' of communities (see *EGextra*, April 99). This is confusing, and a cause for concern - community planning has arrived with little explanation, and it is unclear as to who is the driving force. Are LA21 and community planning complementary or will they prove to be mutually exclusive?

Some LA21 background

The unique value of LA21 comes from its universal nature. Agenda 21 provided a global action plan for sustainability, but for it to succeed there needed to be local action plans for the level of government nearest communities. Thus what was designed to be a universal process at international and national level also became a universal process at local level, a uniqueness that probably does not extend to any other global phenomenon.

There was a lack of detailed information on LA21 when it came into being in 1992 after the Rio Earth Summit. This was probably deliberate since communities are experts on where they live and know best how things can work for them. There was, though, early recognition that LA21 should be regarded as a long term process that builds enduring structures for participation, and that has sustainability at its core. Thus local areas created visions of their common future and set up voluntary networks and stakeholder forums. The latter provide: commentary on local issues; help to identify priorities in action plans; a willingness to take responsibility to deliver where they can on those plans; and help to monitor progress. This is partnership in action - it has taken sustainability away from single

issues, away from party politics, and has allowed people to work together for a self-sustaining future.

Once information was available on LA21 in the UK, it was published by the then Local Government Management Board (now Improvement and Development Agency - IDA) with their series of roundtable guidance notes, case studies and conferences. Giving backbone to local processes, they were in effect reporting on the good ideas and practice as it evolved. Their role in championing LA21 culminated last year in two documents, issued jointly with Government, that many feel cemented LA21 into the fabric of UK society. *Sustainable local communities for the 21st century*¹ was notable for its emphasis on the participation of stakeholders alongside that of local authorities, while *Sustainable local communities: some model approaches to strategy development*² was directed at the thirty per cent of local authority areas still to embark on an LA21 process. The Government's consultation document on sustainable development - *Opportunities for Change*³ - also recognised the value of LA21 since the draft asked how it could be given a higher profile in communities. Do you need to be deafened by any more good news on LA21?

Enter community planning

By contrast, there is little public information on community planning. The twenty or so councils that have undertaken a community planning process were probably first made aware of it in a report in 1995 from the Labour party (then in opposition) called *Growth from the roots*⁴. This report stated that economic activity could be compatible with high environmental standards, and that partnership at all levels would be the way to achieve this unity. This premise also lies at the heart of Agenda 21, however the Labour report concluded that many local authorities had been unable to rise to this

challenge because they did not have sufficient powers and resources. This may sound like a premature judgement considering LA21 was less than three years old in 1995. But instead of setting out measures that could strengthen the ability of local authorities to promote the wellbeing of communities by facilitating more successful LA21 processes, the report detailed a requirement for councils to produce an annual Community Plan for consultation, setting out the council's objectives and priorities for each of its services.

The *annual* nature of Community Plans has set up a pattern of short-termism. Consultation takes place after a draft plan has been written, rather than **participation** by the community from the outset in drawing up the objectives and priorities - this is a reason to mistrust this process. Also, why is there no integration of the community planning process into an overall long-term vision of a self-sustaining future for the locality? This is not quibbling - in one locality, a Community Plan was written by council officers without stakeholder participation (thus prepared unbeknownst to those involved in the existing LA21 process, including the authority's LA21 Unit), and was launched with the council saying that the Plan was the area's response to Agenda 21. A council officer later said there was no need for an LA21 process now that the area had a Community Plan.

LA21 under threat?

Fears for the future of LA21 prompted a direct inquiry to Hilary Armstrong MP, Minister for Local Government. Last month's **EGextra** by Graham Pinfield and Jamie Saunders made reference to attempts by the Minister to clarify the role of LA21s given the community planning remit now imposed on councils. She outlined that community planning was an initiative to develop a shared vision of a local area's needs using partnership as the approach - it is supposed to be more than just an agreement of performance plans for a variety of services. However she went on to say that 'the specific proposals in a community plan need to **complement** (my emphasis) and take account of the aims and requirements for sustainable development that are the focus of LA21'. What did this mean for LA21 strategies and planning?

This advice was contradicted by the release of the Government's consultation paper on local government in 1997⁵. The document outlined the Prime Minister's target for all local authorities in the UK to have an LA21 strategy in place by the year 2000. But it then went on to urge councils to undertake community planning to improve delivery of services. The White Paper that followed last year⁶ was also confusing. The Government talked of a new statutory duty on councils to promote the wellbeing of their areas, and of strengthening

councils' powers to enter into partnerships. It noted that many councils had made good progress in developing LA21 strategies and that these would complement (!) the development of a strategy for promoting community wellbeing. The Government did say that it would not impose any particular approach as to how this strategy was developed, but the game was given away by the sub-heading in the White Paper: 'developing a strategy for the area - community planning'. Two further documents have arrived since then. *Community leadership and community planning*⁷ was honest enough to say that there is no definition of community planning, but avoided exploring the specific relationship between LA21 and community planning (although that word complementary is in there!). *Local leadership, local choice*⁸ only mentions community planning - thus probably signalling the end of LA21.

A policy of wait and see?

I am a committed enthusiast of Local Agenda 21 and I would be reluctant to lose it. It allows me the opportunity to work within an ethos in a co-ordinated way but, equally as important, in an individual way to improve the quality of life of where I live. I like the fact that there is a **universal process** and that my local actions have a global significance. The government, however, seems to believe there is a better way for local communities to work towards sustainability even though it is unclear whether their chosen approach has sustainability as its informing principle. The relationship between community planning and LA21 (an existing process which does have sustainability at its core) has not been explained. The Government must clarify whether community planning is grounded by sustainability, and if it is, be more clear in its advocacy rather than what appears to be its current policy which is standing back and seeing what arises.

Notes

- 1 *Sustainable local communities for the 21st century* (1998) DETR/LGA
- 2 *Sustainable local communities: some model approaches to strategy* (1998) LGMB
- 3 *Opportunities for change* (1998) DETR
- 4 *Growth from the roots* (1995) Labour Party
- 5 *Modernising local government: local democracy and community leadership* (1998) DETR
- 6 *Modern local government: in touch with the people* (1998) DETR
- 7 *Community leadership and community planning* (1998) LGA
- 8 *Local leadership, local choice* (1999) DETR

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