

Chapter 37

SETTLEMENT, STRATEGY AND PLANNING

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Abstract

One answer to the question of viability of services considered in the previous chapter has been concentration of new housing and other development in so-called 'key settlements', or 'key service centres', where more jobs, services, etc. are located. Rationales for that approach include reducing the cost of public investment in service provision; creating a market for private enterprise by enabling communities of scale; and 'sustainability' – the latter suggesting that concentrating, rather than dispersing, development, has a lighter environmental footprint as the need for travel by private car should be reduced. But the approach of concentrating development in certain locations and rejecting it in others has been questioned in recent years – some have described the sustainability argument as a 'trap', whereby lack of development exacerbates loss of services in smaller settlements, making them less likely to be designated as 'key settlements' – a vicious circle. Some rural communities have therefore been seeking different spatial outcomes, often supported by direct community action, including devising their own plans and undertaking development themselves through a variety of means. This chapter will review these issues and consider the lessons they provide for rural planning.

INTRODUCTION: KEY SETTLEMENT POLICY

One answer to the question of viability of services considered in the previous chapter has been concentration of new housing and other development in so-called 'key settlements', or 'key

service centres'; as opposed to an alternative more dispersed pattern of development. These key settlements may already be centres of employment, service provision, etc., or the approach may be intended to ensure they develop in such a way through targeted investment. The corollary of this, of course, is that settlements which are not designated as 'key' see less development and investment – with the long term result being likely decline. Indeed, this is the explicit intention in some cases.

Perhaps the first, and certainly the most well-known example of the Key Settlement Policy (KSP), situated in a framework of strategic 'structure planning', is found in Great Britain. Great Britain's experience therefore provides the focus of this chapter. Firstly the history of that experience is discussed, from its origins in the 1940s in a context of strong centralised planning, through the use of KSPs in response to trends of counterurbanisation, to the more recent linking of the policy to the notion of 'sustainability'. Examples of similar policies from other international contexts, including China and several European cases, are then introduced. The chapter then returns to the contested concept of sustainability, highlighting the impacts of its application to rural settlements and illustrating alternative approaches that communities have tried to adopt to promote a different interpretation of what a sustainable rural community might be.

KEY SETTLEMENT POLICY IN GREAT BRITAIN

It has been argued that 'the key settlement policy may be regarded as the principal agent of planned change in post-war rural Britain' (Cloke, 1979: vii). Key Settlement Policies (henceforth KSPs) , have indeed been used across Great Britain, but are used more extensively, and more rigorously, in England than in Wales or Scotland, as with other policies which aim at achieving 'urban containment; (Hall et al., 1973), including green belts (Sturzaker and Mell, 2016). Much analysis of KSPs and similar policies focuses, therefore, on England, and this section does likewise.

The early days – efficiency of service provision?

Cloke (1979), in his landmark study of KSPs, traces their theory and practice in Great Britain back to the first half of the Twentieth Century, but they were formalised through interventions such as the wartime *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas* (Scott, 1942). At this time, and perhaps still today, the rural and the urban were dichotomised in Great Britain (see Chapter 2, this volume): rural land was to be preserved for agriculture and urban land was provide the location for housing and industry.

As urban areas were thus to be the focus of new development, the concern in rural areas was for the economic provision of services and infrastructure. The Ministry of Town and Country Planning in 1948 advised local planning authorities in 1950 that that ‘in certain extreme economic circumstances the only course open to planners was to demolish and clear the village and resettle the inhabitants in new centres’ (Cloke, 1979: 56). This advice was quickly acted upon in what has come to be seen as the zenith/nadir of the KSP, the infamous ‘Category D’ policy adopted in 1951 by Durham County Council in the north east of England, in response to a decline in mining activity. The policy is worth repeating in full here, as it includes the evidently socially reforming spirit behind it:

Many of the rows of houses which grew up around the pitheads have outlived their usefulness. As the uneconomic pits close and coal working is concentrated in more economic workings, a gradual regrouping of population should take place. Indeed the very reason for the existence of some of these small and isolated places will disappear completely and new development and redevelopment in some of the better placed settlements will not only be better adjusted to the future pattern of employment opportunity but will also offer better living conditions than ever before to many of the inhabitants (quoted in Pattison, 2004: 316).

All villages in the County were categorised as A, B, C or D. The former were considered likely to grow in population and thus receive considerable investment, whilst the latter were assumed likely to see population decline and thus receive no investment, with the people who lived there expected to move to other villages or towns. Very few villages were actually demolished, but the lack of investment, in a time when most infrastructure and housing was supplied by the state, meant that many people left the Category D villages between 1951 and 1977, when the policy was officially abandoned. The unsurprising opposition to the policy was one factor in its eventual abandonment, as was the lack of power held by the County Council to acquire privately owned houses, but Pattison (2004: 327) argued that most important was ‘the changing geography and circumstances of the villages themselves’, as suburbanisation and counterurbanisation meant that villages comparatively close to urban centres such as Durham City and Newcastle became more popular places to live. This change, aligned to factors such as hypermobility, was reflected all over Great Britain and subsequently led to a reconfiguration of the stated purpose of KSPs.

Later years – a response to counterurbanisation

Cloke (1979) observed that as more residential development began to occur in rural areas in the 1960s, planning authorities in closer proximity to urban areas became more likely to adopt KSPs. This was done for reasons including ‘[...] to permit the economic provision of public services and ensure that the selected communities are conveniently situated with regard to employment [...and] *local* environmental conditions and services’ (Cloke, 1979: 70-71, emphasis added). This approach quickly became the norm in more peri-urban rural authorities in the same way as it was near universal in more remote rural authorities, with justifications including those highlighted by Cloke, along with a broader ‘urban containment’ philosophy – by 1983, Cloke and Shaw (1983: 350) found that ‘pressured rural areas appear to be increasingly dominated by urban and regional planning objectives, rather than more localised rural needs’.

This approach, with KSPs justified in peri-urban areas on a similar basis to green belts, continued through the 1980s. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a new purpose for KSPs, and indeed planning policy more broadly, began to be conceptualised – the pursuit of ‘sustainable development’.

Popularised by the 1987 *Brundtland Report* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), the concept of sustainable development swiftly became ‘a principal, if not *the* principal, consideration in planning’ (Owen, 1996: 38) in Great Britain and elsewhere. As was equally swiftly noted, a problem with ‘sustainable development’ is that it is not well defined – and without such a definition, there is a risk that ‘some local planning authorities might use the term to justify restraint policies without fully examining the likely implications’ (Owen, 1996: 40). This is indeed what happened – sustainable development has become the dominant justification for KSPs in national and local policy. Sturzaker and Shucksmith (2011) tracked the discursive construction of sustainability through successive iterations of national policy in the 2000s, regional policy (now abolished), local policy and decision-making on planning applications.

The current national policy in England (current at the time of writing) continues to refer to sustainable development as regards rural housing: ‘To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities’ (DCLG, 2012: 14). Whilst the NPPF allows the possibility that ‘development in one village may support services in a village nearby’ (ibid.), in practice there is little evidence that there has been significant change in policy at the local authority level, with key settlement policies part of a continued overall policy of restraint in rural areas.

KEY SETTLEMENT POLICIES IN OTHER PLACES

The North and South of Ireland are different nations, but they share a connection with Great Britain (constitutional on the one hand and post-colonial on the other) yet a different attitude to

rural life, wherein 'a dispersed settlement pattern comprising single dwellings in the open countryside is a longstanding feature of rural areas' (Murray, 2010: 55). Despite this history, in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, attempts have been made to limit housing development to urban areas, for similar reasons as in Great Britain (Scott and Murray, 2009). Some have resisted the influence of this 'urban containment' orthodoxy on the grounds of 'colonialism' (Scott, 2012), but it can also be seen as reflective of broader trends at the European scale (Scott, 2006).

Countries which have adopted approaches which can be seen as being essentially those of the Key Settlement Policy include Romania, which in the 1980s adopted a similar policy to that of County Durham in England, whereby investment was channelled into 'key villages with the highest potential for growth' (Turnock, 1991: 251). Turnock notes that there was some logic for this, with many villages in Romania lacking services. As with County Durham, the effects of the policy in practice were not as radical as it was on paper, but a critical distinction is that under Ceausescu, Romania was a dictatorship, so the policy could be backed up with coercion. Some villages were destroyed in the late 1980s, with Turnock identifying some deaths amongst those opposing the policy.

A different approach, but one also involving strong top-down policy direction, is that found in China, perhaps the most extreme example of urbanisation at this point in the 21st century. Justification for attempts to focus activity in key settlements is most closely aligned to the early years of KSPs in Great Britain, though the nature of the policy differs. As China has urbanised, with consequent rural depopulation, some villages have been abandoned and others have seen significant depopulation and accompanying sparsity of active population. In response the Chinese state has begun experimenting with various forms of state-led rural settlement consolidation, in which 'rural collectives are encouraged or pushed (and sometimes even coerced) to relocate to newly built villages of a higher density at another location' (Guo and

Zhong, 2016: 20). In some cases these experiments have led to opposition and resistance from disenfranchised local communities (Sturzaker and Verdini,, 2017).

In many other contexts which may have urbanised earlier than China, in both developing (Geyer and Geyer, 2017) and developed (Stockdale et al. 2000) countries, some degree of counterurbanisation has been found, with planners consequently developing policies to control it, and/or to manage the impact of it on rural areas. In the Netherlands, the preservation of the countryside for agriculture remains a prominent discourse, with housing supply tightly controlled 'in the open country as well as in villages' (van Dam et al., 2002: 473) – instead of a KSP approach, the Netherlands is exploring 'creating rural residential environment in urban or suburban areas (ibid.:468) to meet the demands of aspirant counter-urbanisers. National policy in Finland is to move towards a key settlement policy, as opposed to the existing pattern of dispersal, for similar reasons to those espoused in Great Britain and elsewhere – the Finnish Ministry of the Environment claiming 'Climate change will mainly be curbed by reducing the volume of traffic, which is the aim of creating a more coherent urban structure' (cited in Sireni 2016: 193). However, unlike in Great Britain, this approach is being strongly resisted by local politicians so has yet to enter local policy discourse or exert a strong role in decision-making. But what are the reasons for resisting and questioning the key settlement approach?

RESISTANCE AND OPPOSITION TO KEY SETTLEMENTS

In most cases, beyond the extremes of Romania or China, KSPs and similar policies do not actively seek to relocate the residents of non-key settlements, an approach which tends to cause an unsurprising degree of resistance. Yet even in non-coercive examples of KSPs, there remains a backlash against them, both because the outcomes of the policies can be regressive and exclusionary; and because the logic behind them is, some argue, flawed.

Back in 1979, Paul Cloke studied key settlement policies in England in some depth, in both more pressured parts of the country (tending to be closer to major urban centres) and more remote areas. He found that in both cases KSPs had to some extent worked – in more pressured areas settlements had been conserved, with their ‘rural’ character protected (see Woods, 2005 for a discussion of conservation and rural character in Britain); whilst in remoter areas there had been a reduction in depopulation to an extent. However, likewise in both cases the policies had led to problems – in more pressured areas viable settlements which had been designated non-key had been prevented from growing, and house price rises had forced out some ‘local’ people at the expense of in-migrants; and in remoter areas rural depopulation had been replaced by migration from hinterland to key settlements, ‘thus exacerbating the crises in outlying small settlements’ (Cloke, 1979: 200).

Despite these mixed outcomes, the KSP approach continued (and continues) to dominate rural planning policy in England. In 1996, Stephen Owen highlighted the findings of a series of reports looking at the problems of rural areas, including a lack of employment, reduction in (affordable) housing supply and a reduction in availability of services, and argued that KSPs and similar urban containment policies had contributed to these problems (Owen, 1996). Ten years later the problems, and their alleged causes, remained or had worsened (ARHC, 2006; Best and Shucksmith, 2006). Sturzaker and others have argued that the failure of policy-makers to address these issues suggests a fundamental problem with how planning for rural areas in England – and indeed elsewhere – is conceptualised (Sturzaker, 2010), and that this problem has been a feature of the English planning system since its inception in the 1940s (Hall et al., 1973).

As discussed above, the justification for KSPs has changed over the years, and is currently predicated on the notion that it is contrary to the principles of sustainable development to allow development in rural areas in all but a small number of tightly bound places. As Owens (1996) noted, the problem with concepts such as sustainable development is that, whilst they are

sufficiently broad to be hard to disagree with, they are also sufficiently vague to allow particular perspectives to be privileged over others (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010). A number of authors have argued that the definition of sustainable development as it applies to rural areas has increasingly narrowed, moving from the balancing of social, economic and environmental facets to an almost exclusive focus on the environment, and in turn an increasingly narrow focus on one aspect of the environment – the need to reduce CO₂ emissions by reducing private car use, and consequently not allowing housing in places with no public transport provision (see amongst others Owen, 1996; Scott and Murray, 2009; Sturzaker and Shucksmith, 2011). What this can result in is what has been termed the ‘sustainability trap’, wherein ‘otherwise beneficial development can only be approved if the settlement is considered sustainable in the first place. Failure to overcome this hurdle essentially stagnates the settlement – freezing it in time [...] it makes such communities less, not more, sustainable’ (Taylor, 2008: 45).

What Taylor (in a report commissioned by the then Prime Minister) and others argue is needed is a more balanced and nuanced understanding of sustainability, that: firstly, questions whether those living in rural areas *do* make more use of private cars than their urban counterparts (Champion, 2009); secondly, considers other ways in which the environmental sustainability of communities can be conceptualised (Breheny, 1993); and thirdly, brings back the considerations of equity and social justice which have been argued to be at the heart of the Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainability (Sturzaker and Shucksmith, 2011).

As noted above, until very recently national planning policy in England stubbornly stuck to the now dominant definition of sustainable development, which has also been taken up by planners and policy-makers in other contexts including Ireland and Finland. In March 2018, however, a draft revision to English national policy was published. This appeared to suggest a different position, including as it did the instruction that “Plans should identify opportunities for villages to grow and thrive, especially where this will support local services” (MHCLG, 2018: 21) – i.e. suggesting a way out of the ‘sustainability trap’. At the time of writing the finalised policy is yet to

be published, and the test of any change will be how it is reflected in local decision-making. In the next section existing examples of different practice at the local and community level are introduced to illustrate the possible results of such decision-making. These approaches can broadly be regarded as attempting to work within the formal structures of planning and development policy, or deliberately challenging/ignoring formal 'rules'.

Formal approaches

Some local planning authorities in England have, in the wake of the Taylor Review (see above), reflected more deeply on the role and purpose of KSPs. Winchester District Council, in the south east of England, is one example. They made efforts to develop a more sophisticated KSP policy which did not rule settlements as inherently unsustainable and considered other factors including the desire of residents to see their villages grow. Ultimately they concluded that 'Small communities should not be regarded as unsustainable simply because of their size or location' (Winchester District Council, 2013: 59), and adopted a policy that would allow development in most settlements in the district –albeit in many cases for 'local needs' only.

Without a comprehensive survey of all rural local authorities it is hard to know how common this more sophisticated approach is, but evidence from Cumbria in the north west of England suggests frustration on the part of some local communities, resulting in direct action. Such action in plan-making and implementation was made substantially easier by the 2011 Localism Act, a piece of legislation which according to the Government that introduced it would offer communities unprecedented power to produce their own *Neighbourhood Plans* and carry out development which met community needs (DCLG, 2011). The Upper Eden Neighbourhood Plan was the first to be 'made', i.e. brought into use as planning policy. The Upper Eden Community Plan (UECP) group, formed in 2002, had been attempting to influence the local and regional planning policy which covered their area for a number of years in an attempt to avoid the 'sustainability trap'

which they found various settlements in their area had fallen into as a result of the KSP promoted by the North West Regional Spatial Strategy and adopted in the Eden District Local Plan.

In the words of a local activist, the process through which such policy was derived was 'a fairly closed shop [...] those at the top of the profession have a lot invested in the extant system [...] It felt like a closing of ranks by the Regional Planning Body and Local Planning Authority when offered an alternative view of, say, 'sustainability' (Sturzaker and Shaw, 2015: 601). The opportunities offered by the 2011 Localism Act were seized by the UECP group, who subsequently produced a Neighbourhood Plan which permitted single homes to be built outside of key settlements and within settlements which had formerly been designated as key but had lost an important service and so had been de-designated by Eden District Council (EDC). The latter was apparently a real fear for the UECP group, the key settlements in their area containing shops, pubs, etc. which were of questionable viability (UECP, 2013).

A similar approach has subsequently been adopted in the Neighbourhood Plan produced for the community of Matterdale, also within EDC but, due to the complexity of the English planning system, under the planning jurisdiction of a different local planning authority, the Lake District National Park (LDNP). The KSP adopted by the LDNP categorises Matterdale as 'open countryside' because of its dispersed settlement character, which is the lowest category of settlement in the KSP and means housing can only be permitted in Matterdale 'in limited circumstances' (Matterdale Parish Council, 2015: 7). The Matterdale Neighbourhood Plan is permissive of housing in a wider range of situations, including for conversions of buildings and for employees of existing businesses.

These examples, small in scale as they are, demonstrate that it is possible, albeit not easy, for communities to successfully establish an alternative to the mainstream discourse around sustainable development within English planning policy. This approach, however, does require a considerable amount of social capital within the community, and a local authority that is not

actively hostile to the idea. In other locations, including outside England and its unique Neighbourhood Planning system, a different, more radical, approach may be required.

More radical alternatives

The KSP approach discussed in this chapter tends to mean that outside of key settlements, and particularly in what is often termed the *open countryside*, local authorities will not permit new housing. There are many instances of individuals or groups building, or attempting to build, housing or other forms of development without first obtaining planning permission for them, including in relation to agriculture. If such transgressions of planning law are identified by the local authority, then they are likely to pursue enforcement action, requiring those responsible to apply for planning permission, and ultimately demolish the construction if permission is not granted, directly by the local authority or subsequently on appeal. There are several instances where the discourse of sustainable development discussed above has been challenged as part of the application and appeal process.

Scott (2001) discusses two such developments in Pembrokeshire (Wales) and Somerset (south west England). In both cases the developments which had taken place were described as 'low impact', with the groups involved arguing that in fact they exemplify sustainable development, in contrast to the conventional forms of development which the mainstream discourse promotes. Low impact development goes beyond the built form and incorporates 'subsistence-based development managed, as far as practicable, in order to maximize environmental and community benefits and produce self-sufficiency in food' (Scott, 2001: 276). Whether or not one subscribes to the lifestyle thus described, this form of low impact development does appear to accord with the broader definitions of sustainability advocated by Owen (1996) and Taylor (2008). However, in these cases and others local planning officers and politicians have historically strongly resisted developments of this sort, citing primarily that as their location beyond key settlements has been defined as unsustainable, the detail of the development is irrelevant. It is hard to avoid returning

to one author's description of County Durham's persistence with their Category D for over 20 years and reflect upon its similarity with today's approach in England and elsewhere: '[it is] an approach to planning that pursued a single line of thought at the expense of other possibilities' (Pattison, 2004: 328). So what hope for change and a different approach?

CONCLUSION

Much as in the preceding section, we can consider informal and formal approaches to challenging the KSP, or more specifically the single-minded interpretation of sustainability which currently underlies it. We could, as some advocate, encourage more radical, community-led approaches that challenge the status quo. Such 'guerrilla warfare' (Adams et al., 2013) against the mainstream planning system is likely, however, to be an option for only a minority of communities, comfortable with the sort of antagonism towards authority it implies, and with the skills and social capital to pursue it. Change at the structural level, in terms of how planning policy is developed from the national to the local level, would be required for a wider range and number of communities to benefit. The Welsh case is an example of how this might happen, with current planning policy in Wales now supportive of 'One Planet Development' (Welsh Government, 2012) – a form of radically low impact development which can be permitted in the open countryside in Wales, subject to strict monitoring. The complexity of this monitoring, which includes scrutiny of records of food and water consumed, household income and trips to and from the development site, has led some to question its practicality (Harris, 2017).

An alternative approach might be as part of a move from discourses of 'sustainability' to 'resilience' in planning theory and practice. This shift, identified by Davoudi (2012) as being widespread, implies a concomitant change in approach to consider how resilient communities are – resilience in this sense being in some way about adaptability, for example to climate change. Scott and Gkartzios (2014) make use of the concept in a powerful way to consider how rural housing beyond key settlements (specifically in Ireland, but the lessons are transferable) may or

may not be resilient. They specify a range of factors which must be part of any such consideration, which they conclude will require housing policy to become better integrated with community development policy, amongst other things and, crucially, a more sophisticated approach to determining whether particular forms of development, settlements, or individual family homes are resilient or can be made more so. There is a great deal to commend this approach. However, unfortunate as it is to finish this chapter on a pessimistic note, whilst resilience may be a more advanced concept than sustainability, the prescriptions Scott and Gkartzios identify are very similar to those put forward by Owens in 1996 and, indeed, Cloke in 1979. They may have more success in instigating a shift in approach in Ireland, with its distinctive history and pattern of land ownership, but experience suggests that in Great Britain, the discourse of 'urban good, rural bad' when it comes to the location of new housing will remain a powerful one, and may continue to exert a strong influence in other places in Europe and farther afield.

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