Constructions of Sustainability and Spatial Planning: the case of Dalton Flatts, Co. Durham, Planning Inquiry.

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Abstract

This paper explores the constructions of sustainability within a recent land-use planning event. The focus is upon the discursive processes employed by key actors and agents in constructing concepts of sustainability during a local planning inquiry of a retail and leisure development 'called-in' by the Secretary of State for the Environment. It reveals which discourses in particular were employed and discusses their implications. It concludes that sustainability is very much part of a wider political-economic game and that a high degree of social power lies with those actants who are able to utilise the appropriate discursive spaces and concepts. As a result of this the rhetoric of the concept of sustainability is generally not being played out within local level planning contexts.

Introduction

Sustainable development is a particularly popular, yet enigmatic, concept. It holds considerable public currency, advocating a wide variety of (in)actions towards the 'environment', 'economic growth' and numerous 'other' goals. It also has considerable global mobilisation. Yet it is rarely operationalised as a single coherent ideology (Adams, 1990). The concept lacks clear definition and, as such, is multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and highly contested (Redclift, 1992). Many international agencies, governments, multinational corporations, and so on, subscribe to the Brundtland Commission's definition, which is outlined in the report '*Our Common Future*', where sustainable development is seen as development that,

meets the needs of the present without compromising

the ability of future generations to meet their own

needs. (WCED, 1987:8)

Mainstream, hegemonic, discourses of sustainable development have tended to follow from this definition (Lélé, 1991), with a focus upon a 'triad' of concerns: basic needs, eco-development and sustainable use of resources (O'Riordan, 1988).

The Brundtland definition has, however, led to much 'heated' discussion and is often interpreted with considerable variety, to suit specific purposes. Sustainable development has been chastised for being a 'cliché'; 'terribly versatile'; 'a truism'; and 'beguiling in simplicity' (Holmberg & Sandbrook, 1992:20; Adams, 1990:3; Redclift, 1987:3; O'Riordan, 1988:29). It is prey to differing interpretations for the support of various interested parties (Blowers & Glasbergen, 1995). Yet the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' remain extremely popular in current policy discourses, and are often used synonymously. In many ways sustainability does not equal sustainable *plus* development. Sustainability is a far more complex concept than the mainstream interpretations of sustainable development. It addresses additional ethical features, such as the appropriate management of nature, reflecting the more traditional concerns of environmentalism (Adams,1995). 'Sustainability' in its strongest sense can be a highly biocentric and ethical endeavour. O'Riordan (1981) suggests that a continuum of environmental concern exists, which encompasses: technocentrism and ecocentrism.

It is difficult *not* to be in favour of sustainable development, as it seems to hold out the hope of 'development' with at least no further environmental degradation and an improved quality of life (Atkinson *et al*, 1997). It offers to bridge the gap between economic growth and environmental preservation, without significant changes to the capitalist market system

(Escobar,1996). It is not surprising then to find the terms appearing in a wide range of policy discourses, such as spatial planning.

Within this paper the constructions of sustainability, within a recent land-use planning event, are explored. The paper utilises evidence gathered for a recent PhD Thesis, which explores the social constructions of sustainability using the coalfield regeneration policies, practices and performances in East Durham as a focus (Smith, 2004). The paper focuses upon the discursive processes employed by key actors and agents in constructing concepts of sustainability during a local planning inquiry of a retail and leisure development 'called-in' by the Secretary of State for the Environment, to reveal which discourses in particular were employed and discuss their implications. Initially, the paper provides a theoretical context to the overall discussion. Secondly, a context to the operation of sustainability within policy and practice at the time of the case study (1999 – 2000) is provided, and more specifically land use planning in the UK. Thirdly, a background to East Durham and the District of Easington is outlined. The remainder of the paper is devoted to an examination of the two main constructions of sustainability that appeared throughout the inquiry, those surrounding sustainable transport and the notion that 'brown' land is better for development than 'greenfield' land, followed by a discussion of the key issues.

Social Constructionism

The social constructionist approach offers a contextual and theoretical framework for examining the discursive struggles of 'sustainability'. Indeed struggles over meaning are every bit as material as practical struggles (Gramsci, 1971). The commonality of constructionist theory and analysis is a concern with how people assign meaning to their world (Best, 1987). Social constructionists, generally, accept that;

- all ways of understanding are products of culture and history, and dependant upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in a culture at a particular time;

- our currently accepted ways of understanding the world are product not of the objective observation of the world, but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other; and

- these 'negotiated' understandings can take a variety of different forms, and we can therefore talk of numerous possible 'social constructions' of the world. However each construction can invite a different kind of action from human beings, thus some constructions of the world can help maintain some patterns of social action and exclude others (Burr,1995; Gergen, 1994)

In examining the uses of the constructionist metaphor, Sismondo (1993) has outlined four distinct purposes of which the 'mild' social constructionist approach accepts that 'distinctly social' processes are involved in the construction of institutions, knowledges and subjective realities; and draws attention to these social processes. He describes the 'mild' approach as the most common form of constructivism (he does not use the word 'mild' as a means of belittlement). This research agenda is also centred upon such a 'mild' approach. He claims that studies in the mild constructivist vein are useful and relatively uncontroversial, given their focus upon how 'social' reality is socially constructed. This approach can be used to highlight the extent to which discourses are a result of negotiation rather than reflecting independent and autonomous realities.

The literature on the sociology of scientific knowledge, for instance, highlights the nature of scientific 'truth' claims and suggests that scientific knowledge is not merely manufactured in a laboratory (Knorr-Cetina, 1995) but is malleable, open to debate and results from negotiations within the scientific community (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Haraway, 1991). As such, then, scientific knowledge, like all forms of understanding, is 'socially constructed' within context specific 'networks'. Such 'networks' can include numerous *actants:* human and in-human (Bingham, 1996).

Discourses of sustainability should, then, be analysed in terms of the claims themselves, the claims-makers, and the claims-making process (Best, 1987). If terms acquire meaning from their function within culture then the main questions to be asked of any 'truth' claims are,

> how do they function, in which rituals are they essential, what activities are facilitated and what impeded, who is harmed and who gains by such claims?
>
> (Gergen, 1994:53)

By examining the rhetoric of a truth claim it should be possible to explore the social power and legitimacy of that discourse. Thus by situating an exploration of the discursive processes and performances employed by key actants in constructing concepts of sustainability within a recent planning inquiry it is possible to explore the circuit of culture; tracking actions and rhetorical claims, thus revealing what discourses of sustainability were employed within the theory and practice of planning and comment upon some of the possible implications of these claims.

Sustainability and Policy

Many authors feel the greatest challenge for sustainability and sustainable development is not to provide definitions but to ensure the ideology is operationalised as an overarching goal or criterion for attitudes, practices, policy and more generally society (Blowers, 1993). Yet given the various interpretations of sustainability there will inevitably be variety (and confusion) in the implementation. All too often it can be observed that,

> Chambers of commerce and ministries of industry in the 1990s glibly adopt sustainable development discourse as their own: this dam, that factory, these highways, those power lines must be built to sustain, not nature, but job creation, population growth, industrial output or service delivery. (Luke, 1999:139)

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The concepts may be used by many for their own purposes. Little attention, however, has been given to the 'politics of policy' when engaging issues of 'the environment' within the policy forum (Hinchcliffe, 2001:186). The application of sustainability ideologies to policy requires policy makers to address some particularly difficult and sometimes controversial questions. Luke (1999:139-140), for instance, suggests that as a social goal sustainability is fraught with a number of unresolved questions, such as sustainable for how long, at what level, for whom and sustainable development of what? Answers to these questions will invariably be context specific, usually serving the interests of the economically powerful (Blowers & Glasbergen, 1995). The answers can be seen as cuts or incisions upon what matters, and consequently, what does not matter (Hinchcliffe, 2001). This paper focuses upon such *incisions* during the course of a public planning inquiry.

Sustainable Land Use Planning in the UK between 1999 and 2000

The UK planning system requires local planning authorities to pay attention to current planning policy guidance notes (PPG's) in preparing their development plans and in decisions on individual planning applications and appeals. *PPG 1: General Policy and Principles* sets out a strategic commentary on planning policy. It clearly highlights sustainable development, along with mixed use and design, as the main themes which underpin the Government's approach to the planning system. The contribution of the planning system to achieving sustainable development is outlined, as such;

A sustainable planning framework should:

- provide for the nation's needs for commercial and industrial development, food production, minerals extraction, new homes and other buildings, while respecting environmental objectives;

- use already developed areas in the most efficient way, while making them more attractive places in which to live and work;

- conserve both the cultural heritage and natural resources (including wildlife, landscape, water, soil and air quality) taking particular care to safeguard designations of national and international importance; and

- shape new development patterns in a way which minimises the need to travel to work.

(DOE, 1997: 5)

Throughout PPG1, local planning authorities are advised to integrate transport and land use policies to secure sustainable development, hence their policies should,

- reduce growth in the length and number of motorised journeys;

- encourage alternative means of travel which have less environmental impact; and hence

- reduce reliance on the private car.

The key objectives for the planning system are to:

- influence the location of different types of development relative to transport (and vice versa); and

- foster forms of development which encourage walking, cycling and public transport use.

(DOE, 1997: 23)

Overall PPG1 demonstrates the Government's developing commitment and approach to its Sustainable Development strategy, which centres upon containing the dispersal of development and hence reducing the need to travel and improving access to jobs, leisure and services.

In addition, the rhetorical claim that *'brownfield is better than greenfield'* for new developments has also become a stalwart within the UK's planning system. This is rooted in claims that the re-use of land is essential to the operation of sustainable development. *PPG2 Green Belts* suggests the ethos for including land in green belts is to,

> assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict land and
>
> other urban land. (DOE, 1995:2)

Yet in a review of issues in the coalfields, the Coalfield Taskforce Report (CTR) (1998) suggested that some relaxation of planning policy in this area was required. The report noted that strategic employment sites were urgently needed in coalfield areas yet such sites had encountered some policies (namely *PPG7 Countryside* and *PPG2 Green Belts*) as obstacles to development. The report argued that the pits had generally been sunk on 'virgin agricultural land' with most of the work being undertaken underground (*op cit*: 21). Now, however, in order to achieve 'sustainable regeneration' space must be found above ground for employment developments. As a result of this historical legacy, and unique circumstances, the report called for a more '*pragmatic approach to planning*' (*op cit: emphasis added*), noting that,

> in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, we advocate that
>
> the new approach should explicitly recognise that *the release of carefully selected*
>
> *sites* for employment development can be balanced throughout the coalfield areas
>
> as a whole by creation of new green land and the promotion of biodiversity (*op*
>
> *cit: emphasis added*)

The implicit suggestion here is that land can be reclaimed/re-made for a number of purposes, and that whilst the principles of sustainable development are important they should not be obstacles to economic growth.

Sustainable Transport and Planning in the UK

Another important claim towards sustainability is found within transport planning guidance. In July 1998 the Government outlined a long-term strategy to deliver sustainable transport within the White Paper on Transport: '*A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone*' (DETR, 1998). The paper described a framework for change, which included numerous objectives that essentially promoted the need for better planning in order to reduce the need to travel. In addition, it identified improving access to workplaces and facilities and promoting the use of public transport. Given that the land use planning system was integral to the

implementation of the White paper's strategies, *PPG 13 Transport* follows in a similar vein, and provides guidance to enable local authorities to carry out land-use policies that help to;

- reduce growth in the length and number of motorised journeys;

- encourage alternative means of travel which have less environmental impacts; and hence

- reduce reliance on the private car

(DOE/DOT, 1994)

The implication being that sustainability can be attained by reducing the need for journeys and the use of the private car. This *incision* in policy has come to play a major part in planning disputes, as the following case study illustrates.

East Durham

The District of Easington, which is the local authority ward for the former East Durham coalfield, was identified as the 4th most deprived district in the UK Indices of Deprivation 2000 (DETR, 2000). The area is experiencing a wide set of deep rooted social, cultural and economic problems, accompanied by a declining physical fabric, such as poorly maintained properties and environs. In addition to which the decline of the coal industry has left a number of physical 'scars' on the land, such as many coal spoil sites (some contaminated), blackened beaches, derelict sites and structures. For instance, the site in this particular case study was once the spoil location for Murton Colliery.

Many different initiatives have been launched to tackle these problems, and generally fall under the guise of the label 'regeneration'. Regeneration initiatives have generally been led by the local authorities, and specifically the East Durham Taskforce. However a considerable number of other organisations are involved ranging from the private sector to the voluntary sector and also including community groups. Such initiatives have snowballed since the final round of pit closures in the early 1990s. The case study under examination here has been regarded as a key aspect of the regeneration jigsaw for the district by the local planning

authority. Indeed, it has been particularly welcomed in some quarters given that it represents a substantial a private sector investment. Whilst other quarters have contested its impacts upon other regeneration initiates and the level of incompatibility with certain planning policies.

The Case of Dalton Flatts, Murton, East Durham

In June 1998 a development company submitted an application for planning permission for a mixed leisure and shopping development on a brownfield site (known as 'Dalton Flatts' throughout the planning process and 'Dalton Park' since development) adjacent to the village of Murton (see Figures 1 and 2). The application claimed that it would involve an investment of £36 million, and create approximately 1000 permanent and 550 temporary jobs (The Napper Partnership, 1998). The proposal involved a mixed leisure and retail development, including factory outlet shops, a cinema, bowling alley, hotel, restaurants, fitness centre, crèche and petrol station/car showroom.

Durham County Council formally objected to the development, arguing that it was contrary to planning policy, specifically sustainability policies. There were a number of other objectors to the development, such as other local authorities concerned about impacts upon their town centres; private operators concerned about impacts upon their businesses (in particular the owners of Peterlee Town Centre shopping precinct: Modus Properties Ltd) and members of the public concerned about impacts upon their locale.

In addition to which there were a number of supporters for the development, most notably the local planning authority (the District of Easington) and local supporters from the Murton area (some of whom formed a very active action group campaigning for the development- Dalton Flatts Action Group (DFAG)). In reaching a decision to grant planning permission the District Council highlighted the material planning considerations and government advice that had been taken into account. These are illustrated in Figure 3 and reflect a concern to frame the debate firmly within the boundaries of sustainability.

Insert Figure 1. roughly here
Insert Figure 2 roughly here

In granting planning permission the council acknowledged that much of the proposal did not accord with national, strategic nor local policy but used a number of claims to warrant their decision to grant planning application. Primarily their focus was upon the benefits of the proposed development in terms of regeneration, specifically citing job creation and the provision of facilities that did not exist within the district. They also claimed that the site was suitable in terms of sustainability, due to its nature as a brownfield site and its location, such that it would reduce the need for travel out of the area (District of Easington, 1998).

Insert figure 3 roughly here

The proposal was 'called in' by the Secretary of State, and a public inquiry was held in May, 1999 (see figure 4 for details). A number of actants, from a variety of backgrounds, exploited claims to sustainability in order to underpin their cases *either* in support or objection to the development. The following sections provide an analysis the two main constructions of sustainability utilised throughout the application process, public inquiry and subsequent decision, and the mechanisms via which they were enabled to operate.

Insert figure 4 roughly here

Sustainable Transport and Dalton Flatts

The greatest set of sustainability discourses in the Dalton Flatts case study derived from claims to sustainable transport. This is perhaps not surprising given the prominence of transport planning as a means of implementing sustainability within the UK planning system, as outlined above. The main parties involved made claims to sustainable transport that evolved around a set of binary opposites- sustainable versus un-sustainable consequences of the development. These binary claims, and the key actors using them, are illustrated in Figure 5. The following explores these binary claims and their rhetorical stances in detail.

Insert Figure 5. roughly here

The greatest claim for sustainability within the case of Dalton Flatts was made in the context of vehicle mileage and journey savings, or, conversely, increases. Proponents for the development claimed that the location of the development on Dalton Flatts would lead to fewer journeys out of the District. The developers employed a consultancy to undertake a Transport Impact Assessment (TIA), which calculated that the development, situated on Dalton Flatts, would result in a net reduction of 12.42 million miles per year (Ove Arup & Partners, 1998:15). There were numerous reasons given for this reduction; for instance the District Council claimed, in its submission document, that;

> in terms of simple logic a significant amount of trips by private car are being
>
> made because attractive retail and leisure facilities just do not exist in this
>
> District. (District of Easington, 1999:24)

The District Council provided an example of a resident from Peterlee (see figure 1) wanting to visit a cinema, and suggested that without the development the resident would need to make a round trip of between 27 and 40 miles, yet with the development this would drop to 11 miles. In the conclusions to the Districts' submission there are direct claims to sustainable transport practices as a result of the development;

> in terms of sustainability the District Council submit that, logically, the proposals
>
> will have the effect of reducing the length of motorised journeys and thus reduce
>
> the use of the private car. (*op cit*:33)

Other reasons for journey/mileage savings revolved around a similar context. During the inquiry, for instance, one of the witnesses for the developers suggested that the location of the development was 'sustainable' in that it would provide employment within the proximity of a settlement, thus employees could use 'sustainable' modes of transport.

On the other side of the debate, the opponents of the development suggested that Dalton Flatts represented an un-sustainable location with regards to transport. Opponents drew heavily upon PPG6 and PPG13 to illustrate that town centres are considered to be the most sustainable location, primarily in terms of transport. Durham County Council's submission document, for instance, used the guidance notes by directing the inspector to specific sections;

> PPG13, paragraph 3.10 states that travel for shopping has grown strongly, particularly in the non-food sector. In local plans, local authorities should: '…avoid sporadic citing of comparison goods shopping units out of centres or along road corridors.' The same message is reinforced in PPG6… 'Town centres are, and should remain the focus that generate a large number of trips. They typically act as the hub of public transport networks'. (Durham County Council, 1999a:24)

The crux of the argument being that town centres are better locations for such developments because they have better access and are, thus, more 'sustainable' than a location at Murton;

> Locating the facilities in Seaham or Peterlee town centres would equally result in any possible saving of journeys outside the District and would offer better opportunities to reduce vehicle mileage. These are the most sustainable locations for such a development in the District. (Durham County Council, 1999b:2)

The inspector of the public inquiry, in his report, accepted that a site in these towns would be much more accessible by foot (The Planning Inspectorate, 1999:44). The inspector also suggested that the estimates of vehicle mileage savings were unrealistic, due to the possibility of latent demand;

> since the application site is in an area remote from existing multiplex cinemas and factory outlet centres….there will be many people in the area who do not at present visit such places at all, but who would do so if the journey were shorter. (*Op cit*:38)

In addition to this issue, the report also questions the prospect of choice in regards to modes of transport. Supporters of Dalton Flatts claimed that the development would be accessible via a choice of modes of transport; such as bus, car, bicycle and foot. Indeed the conclusions to the TIA claim that;

> The development will lead to a reduction in….car trips….which will reduce environmental pollution. The development will therefore fully comply with national and local sustainable policies by limiting car use, improving public transport services and encouraging the use of other sustainable modes of transport. (Ove Arup & Partners, 1998:16)

This claim illustrates a number of sustainability discourses. Firstly, the claimant suggests sustainability as a direct consequence of fewer car trips, an environmental bonus. As Figure 5 suggests, however, the opponents challenged the notion of reduced car usage, for instance, the consultant for Modus suggested, in interview, that;

> with this location being so close to the A19 there's no getting away from the fact
>
> that the main mode of transport is always likely to be by private car.

During the inquiry much was made of the ability to restrict visitors using cars to travel to the development. The author of the TIA suggests that by limiting car parking spaces car use will be reduced (Ove Arup & Partners, 1998). Opponents, however, spent a considerable amount of inquiry time debating the numbers of parking spaces and the effectiveness of this mechanism for reducing car use. The inspector noted that research has shown that 90-95% of customers visiting out of town centres travel by car, compared to a figure of 51% for travel to town centres (The Planning Inspectorate, 1999). It was, however, noted during the inquiry, and throughout subsequent interviews, that one should consider the context of East Durham as a whole;

> You have to look at the backdrop…..very low levels of car ownership and very
>
> poor levels of public transport, particularly in rural areas.

Given these low levels of car ownership, and the nature of rurality it was suggested that fewer people would travel to the site by car. The inspector accepted this point but noted that car ownership would probably grow, in due course, to fall in line with the Durham average, such that the claim for low car ownership would no longer have pertinence (The Planning Inspectorate, 1999). Indeed, the inspector reiterates the point that less people live within walking distance (1km) of the site compared to the town centres of Peterlee and Seaham. He further questions the maintenance of bus routes after the initial three years of the commencement of the development; which strongly calls into question the second claim to which the TIA made: improved public transport.

Secondly, then, there is the claim, within the TIA, that sustainability will be achieved as a consequence of improved public transport. This debate was strongly framed by the discourses of social exclusion. For instance, during an interview with an officer for the County Council we discussed the issue of sustainability and land use planning, in the context of Dalton Flatts, and he noted that;

> a development of this nature out near somewhere like Dalton Flatts, away from
>
> the town centres, then you would actually exclude quite a large proportion of the
>
> population, particularly the more deprived, who don't have access to cars…. the
>
> social inclusive location for these developments is in town centres.

Conversely, an officer for the District Council felt that the development offered hope of improvements in the area of social exclusion,

> people are travelling out, if you've got a car…..As part of the proposal there's a
>
> green transport plan which might help to actual improve services within the
>
> district as well, not significantly but we would still see some improvements. So it

would give people the opportunity in our district who might not be able to travel

out to be able to go to, and have choice……we felt, on that basis it was a

sustainable sort of development.

Indeed the Green Transport Plan, as outlined in the TIA, offered, for example, financial support and promotion of improved bus services; a bus only link through the site; new bus stop facilities; cycle paths and pedestrian facilities, in support of a move away from cars to 'more sustainable modes of transport' (Ove Arup & Partners, 1998:11).

Whilst there were claims for improvements in the field of social exclusion, via improved public transport, there were also calls for inter-generational equity. During a focus group interview, with DFAG, one participant asked,

Why should we have to travel up to 20 miles in either direction to get the

facilities which we are asking for?

Whilst another participant added,

what's the difference between us travelling out of the district and people coming

into the district?

Other focus group interviews across the district reflected similar views. Some individuals, however, suggested that they would not be able to get to the site and that the development might undermine public transport that already exists; for instance, a focus group participant from the west of the district commented,

I can see the scenario with Dalton Flatts that it could kill Peterlee…..that makes

us worse off because we can get a bus straight to Peterlee. We….can't get to

Dalton Flatts. That's how ridiculous it is.

This research participant draws attention to another aspect of the constructions of sustainability utilised within the inquiry - that of sustaining and enhancing town centres, and

impacts out of town developments have on town centres, which are reflected in PPG6. These constructions exploit the adjectival uses of the terms sustainable, as discussed below.

Since the opening of Phase One of the development, which is only the retail element of the original proposal, on 10 April 2003 there have been a considerable number of visitors,

> Customers are coming from quite some distance….Blackpool, Yorkshire and Northumberland. (David Gosling, Dalton Park Centre Manager, as cited in: The Sunderland Echo, April 2003)

Indeed, traffic to and from the site is very heavy. The owners of the new development (ING Real Estate) suggest to prospective clients, via their website, that a catchment population of 2.6 million exists within a 60 minute (road) corridor of the site (see Figure 1). Since opening, the slip road from the A19 (see Figure 2) often has traffic queuing back onto this trunk road, prompting the police to place a warning sign on the A19 for motorists to be aware of queuing traffic. The car park has spaces for 1200 vehicles, and this is often well utilised on a weekend - on the opening day cars overflowed to parking along the entrance roads.

My recent observations of the site have been that people are using a mix of modes of transport. The car, however, is the most popular. Buses have been diverted into the centre, and on the opening weekend complimentary shuttle buses were provided from the centre of Murton (see Figure 2). Access to the site by foot is not as easy as one might expect. The landscaping scheme tends to prevent pedestrians from entering the centre (see figure 6). In addition, thus far I have seen no cyclists entering the site, despite adequate cycle parking facilities.

Insert figure 6. Roughly here

Development needed- even on Greenbelts!

The other key set of sustainability discourses drawn upon to argue that the site of Dalton Flatts was an appropriate (sustainable) location engaged with the perceived need to 'reclaim'

brownfield sites and the popular rhetoric that brownfield is better than greenfield, as outlined above. Indeed throughout the inquiry and interviews, key players on *both* sides accepted that the site was,

> not a greenfield site and…..in need of regeneration in that sense. It seems sustainable to reuse sites that have been worked before.

Thus the *need* to re-use the site is not really questioned- it is an *a-priori* requirement of the processes of regeneration. Those supporting the development, however, used sustainability discourses, drawn from the CTR, to suggest that if that report is suggesting that it might, in some cases, be appropriate to develop on greenfield sites in coalfield areas, then surely this brownfield site is highly appropriate. Indeed, a planning officer for the District noted in interview that,

> *greenbelts are supposed to be sacrosanct*….I mean this clearly was a brownfield site…and we felt that bearing in mind the significance of green belt you couldn't just apply that approach to that specific area. (*emphasis added*)

Although the brownfield status of the site was not the defining factor in the Secretary of State overturning the Inspector's decision it did have a role. By firmly placing the debates in the frames of the CTR, which asks the Government to be more pragmatic towards planning guidance in coalfield areas, even when the principles of sustainable development are at stake, it drew attention to the political and economic nature of the situation,

> In deciding this application, the Secretary of State considers that, on this particular occasion, the primary considerations are the exceptional economic and social characteristics of East Durham, and the consistency of the proposal with the government's commitment to the regeneration of the coalfields. He is of the view that they constitute very special circumstances which justify the grant of planning permission in this case. (GONE, 2000:para 26)

In this case, then, we see the ways in which discourses of sustainability were drawn upon to legitimate action on a piece of land, that may have un-sustainable consequences, either in terms of increased transport, the loss of trade in town centres or other factors. The land is materially and semiotically re-created into a space for discursive battle, at the heart of which, some claimed, lay the very future of regeneration, not only within the district but elsewhere. For instance, it was suggested during the inquiry that granting this development planning approval would set a precedent for other such developments in the wider coalfield communities.

The case of Dalton Flatts is particularly interesting in light of numerous claims made for the development with regards to sustainability. Sets of binary claims were made by the main parties involved, which essentially revolved around interpretations of PPGs 6 and 13. Cases were made for journey savings and countered with cases for journey increases, and so on. In the end the Secretary of State, in over-turning the Inspectors decision to deny planning permission, noted that,

> The proposal will produce a saving in vehicle mileage travelled, consistent with PPG13. Any disbenefits of the proposal, such as….its relative lack of accessibility by means other than the car, are substantially outweighed by the advantages. (GONE, 2000:para 26)

The final outcome of the inquiry reflected a pragmatic view: at the end of the day there were much wider issues. The political and economic aspects that construct, and distort, sustainability discourses provide a focus for the remainder of the paper.

The Implications of 'Constructing' Sustainability

Thus far this paper has outlined the main constructions of sustainability within the case of Dalton Flatts. It should be noted that there were other constructions but these tended to flow from adjectival usage of sustainability. For instance, much was made of the need to stop the

leakage of expenditure from the district. This was often framed by claims to sustainability. For example, a member of the local action group supporting the development suggested that,

> there was a £100 million leaking out of East Durham….Every year. People going to …. other shopping centres. So why should that money leak out of East Durham when it could be spent in our own community? You know *that's* sustainability to me. (*original emphasis*)

A number of actants suggested that sustainability was synonymous with 'lasting' or 'maintainable' economic development. There were also a number of instances where discourses of sustainability were failing to circulate. In this sense policy documents may highlight the need to address sustainability and/or sustainable development yet, some actants are not engaging with the concepts or are unable to articulate the issues. These are discussed below as the paper now widens out the debate and comments upon the implications for the ways in which sustainability has been constructed within this case.

Structure and Power in Legitimacy

This paper highlights a discursive battle in which actants draw upon constructions of sustainability. The actants have relied heavily upon public policy to legitimate their claims for (non)action. Many of these policies are set at the national level, such as PPGs, White Papers and so on, and interpretations at the local level will reflect these policies, in particular local plans are required to do so. During the Dalton Flatts public inquiry, actants drew upon selective parts of policy to legitimate their claims but, significantly, such claims could *only* be framed by 'policy'. Indeed, one interviewee found it confusing to be pressed to talk about sustainability issues that might have been missing during the public inquiry because he felt that, whilst there might be other sustainability points, he was guided by Government policy. He felt that using sustainability issues not grounded in policy would allow opposing council to counter claim,

if in a public inquiry forum if I was to go along and there were these other sustainability issues that would be countered by the other side by saying '*there's nothing in government policy which says…*' That's not to say one couldn't put those arguments but you've always got to nail it to some sort of independent authority really.

Alternative arguments could easily be subverted by reference to lack of attention within Government policy. Indeed, the referral to policy as 'independent authority' is particularly interesting given that policy is far from objective and independent - it is not derived in a vacuum, it too is socially constructed. Yet it has a distinct authority, and to draw upon claims from outside of policy would have been inappropriate.

In the case of Dalton Flatts, it was clear that actants could only draw upon constructs of sustainability in reference to transport or land reclamation, as these were the prevalent sustainability discourses within planning policy at the time. Discourses which engaged with the more social aspects of sustainability, such as equity and quality of life, were difficult to weave into 'legitimate' arguments, unless they appeared within some form of 'policy'. There were occasions, for instance, when the CTR was drawn upon to demonstrate 'need' for development, or discourses of social exclusion were drawn upon, such as access to the facilities not currently available in the district that Dalton Flatts would provide.

During the Dalton Flatts inquiry a number of 'experts' gave evidence. These people were consultants who had prepared impact assessments, such as the TIA. This evidence was costly to produce and funded by two private developers- Matthew Fox Ltd, who were proposing the development, and Modus Properties Ltd, who opposed the development. Essentially these are economic and market forces entwined in the production of knowledge in order to further particular (economic) interests. Not only did these market forces produce knowledge for formal consumption within the inquiry, but they also fuelled circulations of knowledge on a much less formal basis. During the evidence gathering process, it was clear that certain

'stories' were circulated, or rather selective information was fed, between the groups or individuals involved. Often less powerful groups, such as the local action group, were provided with stories or selective information in an attempt to fuel, dampen down or stop certain debates. For instance, during my informal meetings with members of the action group I was aware that they were obtaining 'stories' from somewhere that were fuelling suspicions over the County Council's decision to object to the development. Quite how these stories circulated was not revealed to me, but it was clear that less powerful groups were often being manipulated. Surely it was highly beneficial to the developers of Dalton Flatts if the DFAG campaigned *for* the development. It was never clear to me who funded the banners that lined the streets during the inquiry, the children's T-shirts and flags with pleas for '*a brighter future*', the balloon release or the hoarding on the side of the A19 advocating the development (see Figure 7 for instance). Indeed, one interviewee commented,

> I wasn't party to how the support was being orchestrated, and I'm not trying to suggest necessarily anything untoward was done, but clearly if one is in the game of PR there are ways of trying to ensure maximum support is got…. when the public were talking about swimming pools and leisure centres and those sorts of things…. *had they really understood exactly what the proposal was?* (*emphasis added*)

The circulation of knowledge was neither fluid nor without constraint. The stories of sustainability that were constructed by the actants were highly instrumental and performative.

Insert Figure 7. roughly here

Conclusions

Essentially the language(s) of sustainability are *privileged* discourses. They are used within discursive settings to legitimise a host of (in)actions. They are performed through a variety of formal and informal structures. Social power tends to lie with those actants who can use the

discursive spaces and concepts. This often results in a (dis)juncture of discourse whereby those not using the privileged discourses feel dis-empowered, and sometimes adopt resistant discourses to challenge these 'normalised' discourses. Hence we find discursive battles are occurring at this (dis)juncture and it becomes clear that sustainability is very much part of a wider political-economic game. A high degree of social power lies with those actants who are able to utilise the appropriate discursive spaces and concepts, and as a result of this the rhetoric of the concept of sustainability is generally not being played out within local level planning contexts. It is much more of a (wider) political-economic game, with distinct 'winners' and 'losers' as a result of certain 'incisions' of *what really matters in planning*.

In an ideal world sustainability would operate at all levels of planning policy and practice. This paper, however, illustrates that the concept operated far from its utopian ideal during the Dalton Flatts public inquiry. Indeed, in some instances the concept was 'missing-in-action', at times it was hard to find traces of sustainability where one would have anticipated the concept appearing. Conversely, there were instances where much was made of the concept in order to ground certain actions over others (particularly in regards to transport). In this paper it is clear that sustainability discourses were strategically, and tactically, drawn upon to guarantee planning permission. The processes employed have been *highly reformist*, whereby concepts of sustainability have easily been moulded to be 'fit-for-purpose'. They are far from the *radical changes* to political and economic structures (Adams, 1990) that proponents of holistic sustainability suggest are essential to achieve ecocentrically driven policy.

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To be added:
Figure 1. Suggested Catchment areas for Dalton Park. Source: http:www.dalton-park.co.uk/leasing.html (accessed March 2003)

Figure 2. Location of Dalton Park, in proximity to Murton . Source: http://www.dalton-park.co.uk/location.html (accessed March, 2003)

Figure 3. Material Planning Considerations in the Dalton Flatts Planning Application

Figure 4. Call-In Details

Figure 5. Constructions of Sustainability and Transport used within the case of Dalton Flatts

Figure 6. Access to Dalton Park

Figure 7. Banners greeting the Inspector on Day One of the Dalton Flatts Public Inquiry 1999