

Liveability & Sustainable Development: Synergies & Conflicts

Summary Report – July 2004

Introduction

This report summarises the results of a research study conducted as part of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's New Horizons 2004 Programme.

The overall purpose of the research was to consider the relationship between liveability and sustainable development. The intention was to explore the extent to which these policy perspectives conflict with or complement one another, and to suggest policy interventions that would maximise synergies and minimise conflicts.

The research involved desk research, interviews with experts and other stakeholders, and a concluding discussion seminar among the interviewees to further develop ideas further in a collaborative and deliberative environment.

The research finds that liveability does not *necessarily* contribute towards sustainable development or sustainable communities. The range of measures that could be deployed in order for liveability to develop a stronger role are outlined in section VI of this report - under the headings *strengthening*, *deepening* and *broadening*.

I Context & Concepts

The origins of the idea of "sustainable development" are well known within the research and policy community and are not reprised here. However, it is noteworthy that - while in many ways the UK is leading the way in 'operationalising' the concept of sustainable development - it nonetheless remains a difficult concept to grasp and apply, and it remains the case that many and various definitions are used in practice.

"Liveability", on the other hand, has a more tangible appeal. Although the term has tended to be treated in a broad sense at international level (where it is intertwined with the concept of 'quality of life'), its interpretation in the UK - through the "cleaner, safer, greener" agenda - is much narrower. Indeed, it can be succinctly described as "*the things that people see when they walk out the front door*".

In terms of the interplay between the two agendas, our research suggests there is a general absence of discussion about the nature of the relationship. While each agenda is increasingly discussed in its own right, little attention is paid to whether they are mutually reinforcing or whether they potentially conflict. Indeed, in many instances we note that they are taken to be synonymous and interchangeable terms.

While there is an assumption that liveability is inherently contributing to sustainable development, there is little evidence this connection is real and/or valid. Our report considers a series of conceptual models to explore the nature of the relationship.

II Synergies & Conflicts

On the basis of our research we draw the following conclusions about the interaction between liveability and sustainable development:

- Liveability is, and can best be conceptualised as, a *necessary but not sufficient* component of sustainable development in the UK;
- Liveability as currently defined and practised makes an important contribution to the development of sustainable communities. A good quality local environment is one of the key building blocks of sustainable cities;
- A key strength of liveability is that it identifies *specific* actions that should be tackled. This strength of focus needs to be maintained moving forward;
- Liveability presents an important opportunity to engage local residents about the quality of their local environment. This is less true of sustainable development which, while *significant*, is not a *salient* issue among the public.
- Liveability can help people to take small steps towards making the environment matter, and has the potential to catalyse wider sustainable behaviours (but will not necessarily lead to wholesale buy-in to pro-environmental behaviour);
- The term liveability, and in particular its “cleaner, safer, greener” component parts, helps people, including politicians, to think about local environmental issues and to have a common language. This is less true of sustainable development, or even sustainable communities for that matter.

At the same time, however, there are a number of cautionary notes:

- Liveability is very much a ‘here and now’ perspective; while it addresses human *need*, it addresses human *impacts* on the environment only to a small degree, and issues of *carrying capacity* hardly at all. Instead, it focuses on “the good life”, and while it is *about* the environment is not explicitly *for* the environment;
- Whilst potentially increasing salience and deliverability, the progressive narrowing of the liveability agenda carries with it a risk that the term – and any associated policies – becomes detached from the wider pursuit of sustainable development;
- Liveability is predominantly “end of pipe” – that is to say, it does not automatically or necessarily always tackle the underlying *causes* of these phenomena. To borrow from the current debates in the domain of public health, liveability appears not to tackle “the determinants” of poor neighbourhood quality, concentrating instead on the results.
- There is already evidence of unintended consequences of policy. For example, EU directives regulating the disposal of fridges, for example, have led to an increase in illegal fly tipping. Similarly, security in the design of public space can lead to less usable public spaces and the exclusion of certain groups (e.g. teenagers).
- Liveability can be a victim of unsustainable lifestyles, where a good life for some undermines liveability of others. Indeed, there are some domains in which ‘bad’ habits and behaviours undermine both liveability (in the sense of a good life) and sustainability (in the sense of living within safe environmental limits);

- What is good for some may not be good for others. For example, there may be a tension between the competing desires of older and young people living in urban centres, each with their own conception of what makes life 'liveable' for them. In these circumstances, there is a need to consider whether liveability actually has an 'objective reality'. Research gaps are evident concerning the liveability needs of different groups and communities.

Significantly, we find that there is nothing inherent about the relationship between sustainable development and liveability; while it can potentially be a powerful catalyst for the reasons outlined above, addressing local environmental problems does not *automatically* promote sustainable development. Therefore, managing the relationship between the two agendas and, in particular, identifying the practical steps through which synergies can be achieved, is critical.

III Adjacent Policy Agendas of Relevance

There are a series of adjacent policy discourses with which both liveability and sustainable development share a series of common interests, and which necessarily require cross-agency collaborations. We highlight three issues in particular that ODPM should consider in relation to liveability as well as to sustainable communities:

- **Behavioural change & sustainable lifestyles** – there is a key issue about policy responses when people have aspirations or make choices which are not consistent with the pursuit of sustainable development. Our report considers several examples - for example, the rise of second homes, 'gated' communities, and the demand for unrestricted private car use - where the pursuit of personal 'liveability' directly conflicts with the liveability of the wider community, and more widely with that of sustainable development. There is therefore a need for ODPM and Defra to address behaviour change as a central tenet of liveability;
- **Choice** – the debate is conditional upon two distinct types of choice: those we make as individuals and those we make as a society. The two do not – and cannot – exist in isolation. Society's decisions to tax, subsidise or even leave activities alone, shape the framework in which individual choices are made. This is referred to by the OECD as the "infrastructure of consumption". The choice debate – already evident across other policy domains in health and education – also needs to be considered in relation to liveability and sustainable communities.
- **New localism** - there is a fundamental question regarding the balance between local decision making on the one hand – characterised by the so-called "New Localism" agenda - and 'top down' control on the other. This raises a potential tension: between the liveability agenda on the one hand, which responds to the legitimate priorities of local residents; and sustainable development on the other, which requires a strategic and long term approach. Key questions are therefore raised about the extent to which authority and responsibility can be devolved, the appropriate distribution of power across spatial levels, and the balance between leadership and community control.

IV Recommendations

In the light of our analysis – and in particular the recognition that liveability does not *necessarily* contribute towards sustainable development - we recommend a series of measures that would enable liveability to develop a greater role in the pursuit of sustainable development. We present these under three broad headings:

- *Strengthening* - using liveability as a focus for capturing social sustainability gains and building strong communities;
- *Deepening* - making existing action work harder for sustainable development;
- *Broadening* - extending the reach of the current definition.

Strengthening Liveability

The links between community issues and local environmental quality offer the potential for liveability to move towards a more integrated setting for the relationship between *physical* issues and their underlying *social* context. Five potential synergies are outlined below to illustrate the nature of the links:

- **The social context for 'physical' liveability concerns** – recent research by MORI contends that "*a positive way to promote liveability may be to connect the physical with the idea of community*". Tackling litter, for example, means not only an immediate physical improvement in terms of cleanliness, but a sign that local agencies are effectively tackling the problem, that people care about the area, and that the space feels safe and 'in control'. The research also suggests that residents often blame liveability problems on 'outsiders' or 'other' communities, which is significant in terms of the pursuit of social integration across age, housing tenure, cultural and ethnic lines.
- **Creating stable neighbourhoods** - the UK Sustainable Development Commission notes that improved local environments in urban areas may reduce housing pressures by countering peoples' aspirations to move to low density suburban areas. The impact of liveability upon the quality of the neighbourhood could also have particular importance for both regeneration areas and the Market Renewal Pathfinder areas in Northern England.
- **Environmental equity/exclusion** - equity and fairness are key principles of sustainable development. Similarly, there is also a strong *equity* aspect to liveability, given increasing evidence that deprived areas disproportionately suffer a range of environmental 'bads', such as air pollution, litter, vandalism, and proximity to IPC sites. Therefore, a policy focus on the liveability of deprived areas would be entirely consistent with the pursuit of sustainable development.
- **Civil renewal & community engagement** – Brook Lyndhurst's research for the NRU suggests that local environmental issues are often one of the best ways of establishing initial forms of community action. Activities like street clean-ups and improvements to public space can often be the *catalyst* for civil renewal, particularly in areas of little or no history of taking collective or community action. There is therefore significant potential to coordinate policy between civil renewal, environmental equity and liveability.

- **Social enterprises** - the liveability agenda could potentially offer several opportunities to social enterprises - around community transport, local food provision, recycling, 'local clean up' services, and so on. In our work for the NRU we noted that social enterprises often tend to have a focus upon the quality of the local environment, and might be well placed to deliver significant aspects of the liveability agenda.

Deepening Liveability

Under this heading, we refer to the ways in which existing liveability actions could be made to work harder for sustainable development; that is, simply 'doing things better' rather than expanding the agenda. Our report identifies three such aspects for attention:

- **Managing liveability for sustainable development** - at the micro-level, liveability may or may not contribute towards sustainable development through the way in which local environmental problems are dealt with. For example, is graffiti cleaned with chemical agents that are environmentally benign or harmful? Is litter recycled or sent to landfill? This raises issues of *process* and *means* as opposed to outcomes, as well as the issue of green procurement.
- **Maximising economic benefits** – an often overlooked issue is the potential impact of liveability on the economy; that is, the way in which 'green infrastructure' can act as an economic asset through making an area a 'good place' to live and work (and, in turn, promoting business start ups, attracting inward investment and a high calibre workforce, etc.). CABE Space's recent Report *The Value of Public Space* (2004) has looked at this issue in an international setting. This area of enquiry should continue to be developed, for example in the evaluation of the impact of UK liveability projects.
- **A catalyst for wider sustainable behaviour** - there is a suggestion that, by taking small steps to improve their local environment, residents may *systemically* adopt more sustainable lifestyles. Among the limited evidence there is both support and rejection for this assertion. For example, there is evidence that in areas with high recycling rates, residents appear to become more aware of their impact on the environment. However, this is contradicted by other research which found that residents who recycle regularly are *less likely* than average to take steps to reduce the amount of household waste they produce.

Broadening Liveability

Whilst we believe that both strengthening and deepening liveability could be achieved in a relatively uncontentious fashion, we recognise that the issues involved in broadening its scope are more challenging. Nevertheless, we think that there is a case for extending the range of issues tackled by the liveability agenda.

We identify in our report three "adjacent" issues to illustrate opportunities for simultaneously managing negative environmental and/or social impacts for whole communities while providing liveability gains for individuals. The areas are:

- **Housing** - notably the issues of energy efficiency and renewable energy;
- **Health** – notably the public health agenda that is seeking to tackle the determinants of health and well-being;
- **Transport & access** – the concept of “sustainable mobility”, incorporating walking, cycling, public transport and reduced dependence on the car.

As the foregoing illustrates, there would appear to be a wide variety of ways in which the relationship between liveability and sustainable development can be strengthened, deepened and broadened. In fact, the main concern is not the potential for synergy, but whether or not these links are *systematically* being made and *fully utilised*. Therefore, more work may be required to assess to what extent these are being translated into both policy and practice on the ground.

V Cross-Agency Working

Given the adjacent policy agendas that are relevant to the pursuit of both liveability and sustainable development, there is a need to establish and/or enhance links with other programmes. We note that specific opportunities appear to include:

- with DoH on the relationship between local environmental quality and public health;
- with the Home Office on the links between liveability and the community engagement/civil renewal agenda;
- within ODPM on sustainable communities – both the proposed development in the South East and Housing Renewal Pathfinder areas in the North;
- with Defra on sustainable lifestyles;
- with NRU on environmental exclusion;
- within ODPM on the role of the planning system in respect of liveability and sustainable development;
- with the Strategy Unit on their work on behavioural theories of decision making;
- with Treasury on possible fiscal regimes that would be consistent with liveability and sustainable development.

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