Adapting Adaptation: 
A Critical Governance Analysis of the English Eco-town Initiative

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Abstract

Adaptation for climate change has become a key policy driver in the UK under the guidance of both the Department of Climate Change, and the Department of Communities and Local Government. Among the various practical initiatives, the proposed ten new ‘eco-towns’ for England (four of which are currently under development) are particularly emblematic of current climate change adaptation strategies. This paper critically analyses the evolution of the eco-town initiative from a governance perspective by focusing on the following two interrelated aspects: first, the evolving governance structures and resulting dynamics arising from the development of the eco-town initiative between the two UK government departments involved, and the subsequent partial devolution to local stakeholders – including local authorities and non-governmental actors – under the new ‘localism’ agenda; and second, the effect of these governance dynamics on the conceptual and practical approach to adaptation through the four emerging eco-town projects. As such, the paper problematises the impact of multi-level governance agency – and competing governance strategies and leadership – on shaping adaptation strategies and practice.

Keywords: English eco-towns, UK climate change adaptation, multi-level governance agency

Introduction

The English eco-town programme was launched by the UK’s Labour government in 2007, in order to address the twin challenges of growing urbanization and climate change. The two policy objectives were highlighted at each stage of the programme as the English eco-towns were meant to “help to relieve the shortage of affordable homes to rent and buy, and minimize the effects of climate change on a major scale” (Gordon Brown, 2009). Since its launch, the programme has undergone several political and policy transformations; in turn, this has affected both the governance structures within which it is being delivered, and the conceptual balance between socio-economic and environmental sustainability. As a model of adaptation for climate change, the English eco-towns provide rich insights into the policy dynamics, conceptual tensions and delivery mechanisms involved in such complex governance projects.

The concept of the eco-city, eco-town or eco-region has been adopted and adapted by national and regional governing bodies throughout the world (for an overview, see Joss, 2011). From the original vision by Richard Registrar (Ecocity Berkeley, 1987), the concept has been transformed and modified in a variety of geographical, ecological, social and economic contexts. According to a recent survey, in 2011 no less than 178 diverse eco-developments
have been implemented or are underway around the world (Joss et al., 2011). This research also reveals the relevance of context specificity and, thus, overall diversity concerning both conceptual dimensions and practical approaches informing contemporary eco-city initiatives. Analytically, it is useful to distinguish between three main types of eco-city developments: ‘retro-fits’ (eco-innovation applied to existing urban areas), as exemplified by Freiburg (Germany) and Vancouver (Canada); ‘urban expansion’ or ‘in-fill’, such as Treasure Island (USA) or Nieuw Terbregge (The Netherlands); and ‘new-build’ (entirely new, city-scale developments) such as Masdar (UAE) and Tangshan Caofeidian (China). Each of these types has particular physical, socio-technical and governance characteristics. However, they also share several commonalities, such as an emphasis on greenhouse gas reduction, renewable energy technologies and systems, socio-economic regeneration, and the use of ‘urban sustainability’ as cultural brand. The combination of global climate change, urbanisation/urban regeneration and ‘green growth’ policy discourses has significantly contributed to the recent global growth in eco-city initiatives. Not surprisingly, the ‘triple bottom line’ of sustainability serves as frequent, conceptual reference within these initiatives, although there is also often a tension – sometimes creative, sometimes problematic – at work between the economic, social and environmental dimensions.

The English eco-towns represent something of a cross-over between ‘new build’ and ‘urban expansion’: they were originally defined by the government as new settlements, to be built as new towns mainly on greenfield sites. However, subsequently during the consultation and selection process several initiatives (such as Whitehill-Bordon and North West Bicester) came through based on the regeneration of brownfield sites within, or on the outskirts of, existing towns. Furthermore, the English eco-towns – as concept, policy and practical initiatives – have struggled to combine effectively, and reconcile the tension between, the three sustainability dimensions, as shall be explored in more detail below. As a major new town development programme, the UK then government saw the eco-towns as a solution to the dual challenge of addressing the shortage of affordable homes, particularly in the South-East of England and mitigating climate change. Since the launch of the programme in 2007, of the ten originally selected sites only four have proceeded to development stage following the approval of planning permission, and only one of them, NW Bicester, is to be built based on the governmental Eco-Town Planning Policy Statement (ET-PPS).

The aim of this article, then, is to critically analyse the evolution of the English eco-town initiative from its inception to the current implementation stage. It does so by using a governance perspective. The analysis reveals two interactive governance tensions at work: one, a horizontal tension between national government agencies involved; and the other, a vertical tension between national policy and local implementation. It further points to the impact of these governance tensions on conceptual evolution – in terms of the balance between the three dimensions of sustainability – of the eco-town policy.

**Governance and sustainability: conceptual perspectives**

The relation between governance and sustainability is a close yet complex one, each shaping, feeding off and mutually reinforcing the other (for an overview, see Jordan 2008, 2009; Adger and Jordan, 2009; Griffin, 2010; Joss, 2010; Rydin, 2010). As a concept, sustainability
engages with the economic, social and environmental dimensions at various levels, from the local to the global. This engagement requires a clear governance approach, in order to identify the best modes of delivering sustainability. However, research has shown that in practice governance, particularly when dealing with ‘tricky’ and mutually competing issues, is often complex and occasionally contradictory (see, for example, Cochrane, 2010).

As highlighted by Joss (2011: 333), the “governance problématique can also be expected to be a feature of recent eco-city initiatives”. This is particularly so in the case of ‘new-builds’ and ‘in-fills’, as these are often dependent on the creation of new actor coalitions. In the case of the English eco-town initiative, too, new governance processes have had to be put in place, in order to facilitate its delivery. Investigating the governance structures, processes and resulting dynamics is essential, therefore, to be able to analyse properly eco-cities – of one form or another – as a mechanism of climate change adaptation. In the UK context of multi-tier government and recent devolution processes, of particular relevance is to analyse both horizontal governance dimensions – relating to the interaction between government agencies at national level – and vertical ones relating to the various tiers of government and governance, from the UK national to the local. National and local policies on housing and urban sustainability – including the English eco-town initiative – are right at the centre of this complex interaction. Analysing how the UK governance system deals with the delivery of new sustainable housing and towns should shed some light on the relative effectiveness of recent climate change mitigation and adaptation policy.

This paper sets out to identify and analyse key features, patterns and tensions that have appeared in the delivery of the English eco-towns due to the tension between socio-economic and ecological sustainability for example, and between local and national governance discourses. Public and private interests are taken into consideration when analysing the interaction between the various actors. The new and existing governance relations are accounted for, as well as the transformations undergone by the main players. These relations and interactions shape urban sustainability in the case of the English eco-towns, both conceptually and in terms of practical implementation. As the English eco-towns are still at an early stage of development, comprising at the moment only model-houses at most, the paper necessarily engages with the initial governance processes, relating to the development of the concept, selection of locations, initial driving factors and the impact of the double devolution agenda. The eventual outcomes of the English eco-towns initiative will be an equally fascinating topic, as they should highlight some of the ramifications of the chosen governance modes and structures. However, this is for future research.

The focus of analysis in this paper is on the interaction between the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) in shaping the agenda and priorities of the English eco-town initiative. This is done using official policy documents, such as Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003), Planning Policy Statement (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005), Best Practice in Urban Extensions and New Settlements (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007), Planning Policy Statement: eco-towns (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009) as well as a number of
interventions in parliament by the representatives of the various departments. At the same time, the paper engages with the vertical governance dimension concerning the eco-towns by looking at the interaction between the national and the local levels, particularly following the implementation of the new governments 'localism' policy agenda. Finally the conceptual impact, in terms of the three sustainability dimensions, of the policy structures and processes on the English eco-towns is discussed.

Short historical note: UK urban planning 1980s-2000s

It is essential, first, to provide a brief historical sketch of UK urban planning policy since the 1980s, in order to be able to appreciate the current context within which the English eco-town initiative has evolved. Several of the governance systems put in place for the English eco-towns stem from, or were created as a reaction to, urban planning practices in Britain in the 1980s. The relevance of different governance systems for the current paper is two-fold. On one hand, it details the evolution and development in British urban planning, affected by successive governments and regulations. On the other hand, the new ‘localism’ policy agenda put forward by the current Conservative government brings back a number of governance features introduced to urban planning in the 1980s under the Thatcher – and to a lesser extent, the Major – government. By analysing the impact past government policies had on urban planning, one can hypothesise about the possible implications of the current devolution agenda.

As discussed by Imrie and Thomas, the flagship urban policy of the period was the creation of Urban Development Corporations (UDCs), which were established in 1980. UDCs were aimed at promoting property-led regeneration (Imrie and Thomas, 1993). Allmendiger and Thomas describe how the performance of the newly created UDCs was to be measured against their ability to create attractive conditions for private investment. This dependency on private investors and finance led to an approach focused on finding local solutions, without the implementation of an overall strategy (Allmendiger and Thomas, 1998). There is only one example, Cardiff Bay Development Corporation (CBDF) that actually put forward a year-long strategic planning process. All the other UDGs worked on an ad hoc basis, reacting to the interest of the developers (Allmendiger and Thomas, 1998). Based on financial criteria, developers tended to favour office development and business parks more than housing schemes as the need for amenities was limited and the returns more substantial (Allmendiger and Thomas, 1998).

The English eco-town initiative: an evolving story

The Labour government that came to power in 1997 had to address two major governance tensions when it came to reforming urban planning. By 1997 the discourse on climate change began to gain serious momentum following the adoption of the UN Kyoto Protocol in the same year. In the following years, the UK government became a leader in implementing climate change-related policies. Innovating in urban sustainability and improving energy efficiency relating to both existing and new urban areas were just some of the efforts the government was trying to support through policy. At the same, time the
urban planning legacy of the 1980s and 1990s meant that there was a tendency for resources to be directed towards building more office and commercial space, due to obvious economic benefits, and less so towards residential houses. There emerged, therefore, an urgent dual policy need – namely, to address global climate change by improving urban sustainability, while at the same time significantly increasing the housing stock, and particularly socially affordable housing.

With a Prime Minister focused on international politics, the formulation of the new housing policy was passed to the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott. In 2001, the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions was dissolved, with the Deputy Prime Minister moving the local government and regions portfolio to the Cabinet Office under his direct control. Under this agenda, the focus was on overseeing a substantial increase in housing, and in particular affordable housing, across Britain. The new policy would require more state control and regulation, reversing the trend of the previous decade. The government, thus, appeared interested in playing a much more central role in deciding what was to be built, where new development should take place, and who was to benefit from the new housing stock.

In parallel to the policy focus on building new houses, the environmental agenda was gaining momentum. In 2001, a new department was created that was to address the growing environmental concerns: the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). Despite the fact that most of the department was built around the skeleton of the old Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) that had been dissolved following its slow reaction to the nationwide outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the mid 1990s, environmental policies became quickly central to its agenda (DEFRA, 2007). It is in this political context that, in 2003, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published the policy report *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future* (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003). Despite being published more than a year and a half after DEFRA had been created and in a political context in which environmental concerns were growing, the report does not mention DEFRA at all, not even as one of the consulted agencies. The lack of input from DEFRA is obvious throughout the document. The focus of the report is on the need to build more houses – namely, 155,000 additional houses year-on-year for the following 15-20 years (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003: 7). This focus on urbanisation and the increase in housing stock, and not primarily on climate change mitigation and adaptation, was obvious also from the allocation of financial resources: the only programme specifically aimed at improving the urban environment (Local environment/Liveability) in 2002-2003 received as little as £13 million out of a total of £5,451 million allocated to address housing issues (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003: 7). That is not to say that environmental concerns and adaptation to climate change were not at all part of the overall strategy. However, they were not central to it. Out of all the environmental aspects – such as urban transport and infrastructure, that could have been addressed in as significant a new policy such as this, the report only addressed two environmental policies: maintaining the green belt around cities, and improving parks and public spaces (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003: 4). Section five of the report, headed ‘sustainable development’, talks almost exclusively about building more homes in the South-East of England. Sustainability, thus, is defined here exclusively in terms of socio-
economic development. The Environment Agency is mentioned only “in regard to addressing flood risks” (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003: 49). It becomes clear, then, where the report positions itself in the urbanisation/urban growth versus climate change mitigation and adaptation policy debates.

Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future is quickly followed by another report pointing in the same direction. The Barker Review of Housing Supply (HM Stationary Office, 2004) highlighted the need to address the urbanisation agenda. It is fair to say that the Review had been commissioned to look at the housing supply and, therefore, its findings were meant to continue to press the political discourse in that direction. However the fact that none of its recommendations address environmental or climate change issues related to urban development points to how disconnected the two policy agendas were at governmental level. The Barker Review reinforced some of the earlier conclusions of the government, namely that the limited house supply was to lead to a continuous increase in house prices, and that this had to be addressed by increasing the housing supply in general, and increasing the number of affordable homes in particular (Barker Review, 2004).

The two reports encapsulate the nature of the policy debate in the early 2000s. Despite the fact that DEFRA had been established in this period, its impact on urban development seems to have been quite limited. The urbanisation and environmental agendas do not seem to have been well connected at the time, with new urban development programmes much more anchored in the former rather than the latter. In the meantime, at international and national levels urban planning and policy discourses align themselves more closely with environmental issues with focus on global climate change, as evidenced inter alia in the significant global rise of eco-city initiatives of various kinds (Joss, 2011).

In the UK, the two agendas were brought together more fully in 2007 with the publication of Guidance on New Settlements and Urban Extensions by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA, 2007). The report is influential in that it paves the way for the government to announce the English eco-town initiative and new town developments. It is further significant in that it recommends a dual strategy for regeneration and ‘greening’: “regeneration and greening are not incompatible opposites: they are both necessary parts of any overall development programme” (TCPA, 2007: 2). The report was followed shortly afterwards, in March 2007, by the Prime Minister’s announcement of plans for five new eco-towns to be built in England, followed by the publication of the Eco-town Prospectus in July 2007 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007) (It should be noted that, while this is a UK government initiative, due to the UK’s devolved government structure since 1998, the policy only applies to England.) The governmental policy centres upon the dual strategy of regeneration-cum-greening espoused by the TCPA report. However, if the conceptual grounding of the new initiative appears solid, its details – in terms of urban sustainability criteria and targets – appear less so.

In late summer 2007, Gordon Brown, newly installed as Prime Minister, announced the doubling of the number of eco-towns to be built from five to ten. This is followed by a number of practical steps designed to support planning implementation. The Town and Country Planning Association launched its Zero Carbon Development Task Force, while the Prince’s Foundation starts running master classes in ‘creating eco-towns in Britain’, to
provide local authorities with guidance on how to submit their initial bids for hosting an eco-town. By February 2008, 57 proposals were received from across England. The proposals attract also a wave of criticism, as experts show that some of the proposals had previously been put forward before and rejected. For example, the Ford Eco Town site had been previously rejected twice by Arun District Council (The Times, 18.05.2008). At the same time the announcement by the government that it intended to put forward a special Eco-Town Planning Policy Statement (ET-PPS) is received with some suspicion by the planning community. Former TCPA president, Professor David Lock, for example accused the government of intending to “force through eco-towns by crashing the planning process” (The Times, 2007: 14). His fear was that the ET-PPS would reduce the ability of planners to oppose development on greenfield sites.

While the consultation with 15 selected local communities commenced in June 2008, the climate change agenda gathered momentum with the launch of the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) in autumn of the same year. However, if the green credentials of the new eco-towns seemed to be increasing, so did the opposition to the scheme. Local opposition groups were set up across the country. In July 2009, both the Eco-Town PPS and the first four selected locations were announced: Whitehill-Bordon, St Austell, Rackheath, and North West Bicester. The announcements also committed the government to contribute £60 million in support of local infrastructure investment to integrate the new eco-towns into existing communities. This is partly in response to concerns over a lack of integrated infrastructure at the heart of the protests: “a PPS which directs separation of eco-towns into isolated eco-enclaves is folly and will grind to a standstill in the planning system” (Chris Twinn, 2008). The UK general election of May 2010 and the subsequent change of government found the English eco-town initiative at the beginning of its implementation phase. As it turned out, the change of government also signalled the beginning of a slow-down, if not discontinuation, of the national eco-town policy.

The impact of new ‘localism’

The new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, in power since 2010, has pursued a policy agenda predicated on less direct state involvement in urban planning and, in effect, a certain return to 1980s policy and practice. The new government considers state involvement concerning the development of new urban settlements as unnecessary, if not as an undue interference. Instead, it favours a return to a more locally-directed and market-driven approach. Under the Localism Act (2011), the government remains involved in large scale projects, such as power stations, large renewable energy projects and airports (HM Government, 2011). Residential developments are not one of the areas for which government coordination is seen as necessary and, therefore, decisions in this policy area are now devolved to local authorities. This now also applies to the four chosen eco-town sites, despite their significant size and earlier government policy status.

At the same time, as part of the new Localism Act, the government abolished the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Regional Plans. The RDAs had been created by the Labour government through the Regional Development Agencies Act of 1998 and were responsible for the Regional Plans, aimed at coordinating urban development at regional
The argument for abolishing them, according to Bob Neill, Local Government Minister, is that “revoking the Plans will protect communities and the environment from top-down pressure”, while “putting planning powers into the hands of local people to take charge of local housing challenges in a way that makes sense for them while protecting the local countryside and green spaces they value” (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2011). As a result of the abolition of RDAs, there is no longer any regional tier of government left in charge of policy and planning. Therefore, ‘localism’ in this case means devolving the decision right down to the local authorities. Under the Localism Act, local authorities are given “general power of competence” which means in practice that “local authorities are able to do anything an individual can do unless specifically prohibited by law” (Local Government Lawyer, 2012). The increase in power for local authorities means that they have the ability to decide how to interpret and implement the eco-town policy. It is now up to the local level to decide whether they want to pursue an agenda focused more on urbanisation, or on climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Without direct government regulation and financial support, the special eco-town Planning Policy Statement (ET-PPS) was withdrawn by the government and is, therefore, no longer a compulsory component of the eco-town initiative. Again, it is up to the local authorities in charge of the delivery of the four eco-town initiatives to decide whether or not to follow the ET-PPS. North West Bicester has decided to do so; others have opted out. This, arguably, is a significant set-back for the eco-towns, as there are no recognised indicators and universally applicable standards defining the various urban sustainability dimensions. Local authorities are in charge of defining for themselves what an eco-town is. The potential risks are only too clear to see – namely, that local authorities may lack the necessary resources and expertise (especially as government funding is withdrawn, apart from rump funding for pilot houses), that they lack agreed, national standards, and that if push comes to shove economic needs will trump environmental aspirations. Without proper financial and expert resource backing by government, it remains unclear how viable the four eco-town initiatives are in the long run and what the time horizon for implementation is. At this stage, the four initiatives are in the process of furnishing master plans and developing demonstration houses. Early indications are that in this de-regulated context timetables seem to be slipping and environmental standards are being relaxed.

Governance tensions

The example of the English eco-town initiatives highlights the complexity of urban planning policy in the twenty-first century, where the dual goals of urbanisation and adaptation to climate change are addressed through the creation of so-called ‘eco-cities’. The two important policy areas and their governance actors, in the case of the English eco-towns, create horizontal governance tensions between separate government agencies responsible for delivering cross-sectoral policy (new housing/urbanisation; environmental protection/climate change adaptation) and – concurrently – vertical governance tensions between national and local delivery levels. This dual set of tensions has become more prominent, as the English eco-town initiative has evolved over the last five years within a significantly changing national political context.
Considering the policy conceptualisation of the English eco-towns, the primacy of the urbanisation rationale becomes obvious. It was the Labour government’s policy on affordable housing – rooted in the *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future* report and *Barker Review* – that mainly informed the conceptual development of the new eco-town initiative. Within this framework, ‘sustainable communities’ was very much understood in terms of a socio-economic growth agenda and less so as an environmental agenda. The latter was only properly introduced at a later stage, which partly explains the ongoing conceptual as well as governance tensions in play. The initial focus on urbanisation created something of a ‘tilted’ governance structure from the outset; this was not re-balanced – for example, by giving DEFRA or DECC more of a central role – at later stages when the eco-town policy is launched. These governance tensions also highlight the lack of coordination and the risk of policy fragmentation.

Horizontal governance tensions, then, were a feature from the beginning. The fact that the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) or its predecessors, were entrusted with delivering this particular policy, meant that the policy was mainly defined in terms of urbanisation. The tone adopted by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and the Environment Agency within it, is illustrative in this sense. DEFRA did not, or could not, take ownership of the initiative. Its involvement was limited to consultatee status on environmental aspects of the new policy, explaining it “is supportive of the eco-towns concept and welcomes our continued involvement in the process” (DEFRA, 2008). Similarly, DECC, a late entrant on the scene, did not (manage to) become directly involved in the emerging eco-town policy. In short, DCLG started off as, and remained throughout, the primary owner of the policy at national level, in spite of the policy’s clear cross-sectoral dimension encompassing urban, environmental and climate change issues. There was, then, a certain bias – in terms of both conceptualisation and governance – built into the eco-town initiative from its initial conception.

It is important to bear in mind the chronology of the events, since this provides useful insight into the focus of the particular sustainability agenda and the governance structures used to implement it. It is worth noting that there was a three to four year gap between the initial reports (2003/4) on the need for substantial additional housing and the launch of the eco-town initiative in 2007. The initial reports focused on social-economic (affordable housing) needs, with DCLG spearheading the initiative. Between 2004 and 2007, however, climate change concerns and related mitigation and adaptation strategies began more significantly to penetrate political discourse and shift policy agenda, both in the UK and internationally. The UK was the first country worldwide to pass legislation setting out binding climate change-related targets, and created the new Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) in 2008. However, instead of bringing on board DECC and DEFRA in the conceptual development and implementation of the eco-town initiative – which from a governance perspective would have been a logical step – DCLG remained firmly in control of the initiative, requesting and obtaining only partial input from the other departments and agencies. This suggests an inability or failure on the part of the UK government to effectively co-ordinate, re-balance and re-align its governance structure to strengthen the cross-sectoral function of the evolving eco-town initiative.
One can only speculate whether the creation of a stronger cross-governmental governance structure and coalition of actors, across the three departments and associated stakeholder groups, would have led to a more enduring national eco-town policy for England and reduced the risk of the (partial) abandonment of the policy with the change of government in 2010. As it is, the initiative has been severely weakened, as illustrated by the abandonment of the eco-town Planning Policy Statement (ET-PPS) as regulatory tool. Again, one can speculate that a more central involvement of DEFRA and DECC might have resulted in a more well-defined and more broadly based development mechanism.

Vertical governance tensions were less obvious in the first years of the policy, but became much more obvious with the change in government. Striking the right balance between national standards and locality characteristics is not simple and relates to the level at which the implementing agency should be located. In other words, what is the right policy delivery level? As noted above, the urban development policy had been significantly transformed during the 1980s and 1990s under the Thatcher government. The delivery of urban development was then much more down to the individual developers and their preferences, with local authorities playing a limited regulatory role. It can be argued that this approach is positive in that it takes into account the needs of local communities and the demands of the market. However, as it turned out, the effects of this policy were not always positive, leading to, for example, an increase in the development of commercial spaces to the disadvantage of social housing.

The Labour Government attempted to redress this imbalance by putting in place a more centralised, government-driven policy. The English eco-town initiative can be seen in this mould, as an attempt to engender a more interventionist approach towards new urbanism. The new policy set out to steer the urbanisation process by prescribing, among others, quotas for affordable housing and specifying environmental criteria, embodied in ET-PPS. This encountered significant levels of resistance from local residents and city planners. The first were concerned that the government was not taking into account the specificity of the site, while the second critiqued the ET-PPS for bypassing established urban planning processes. Indeed, both the locations for the new towns and the Eco-Towns PPS were put forward for consultation. However, questions remained over the appropriate policy delivery level. If a traditional governance level was not in a position to deliver the policy, given its size and impact, was there a need for the creation of a hybrid-governance structure that would bring together the various policy levels and provide coordination?

The answer provided by the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government was that central governmental co-ordination and control over the eco-town initiative needed to be relinquished. Under the new localism agenda, decision-making on the implementation of the eco-towns has shifted almost entirely to the local level. Despite being significant new settlements of over 5000 homes, requiring substantial new infrastructure, the government has not considered them to be important enough to remain under its control, as is the case with other large-scale projects (e.g., power-plants, airports). Putting the delivery of the project under local level control, may arguably have some advantages, such as giving greater weight to local characteristics and needs. At the same time, however, devolving delivery almost entirely to the local level, without significant national expertise and financial support, risks diluting the policy and might even lead to its eventual abandonment.
In order to address the disengagement of central government, local governance solutions are currently in the process of being put in place. Whitehill Bordon, for example, has put in place a complex governance structure made up of a ‘standing conference’ for citizen participation, ‘specialist groups’ focusing on infrastructure, housing or sustainable development, and a ‘delivery board’ bringing together relevant decision-makers. The latter has no statutory powers, relying instead on its members to implement agreed policy via their organisations. Similarly, North-West Bicester (now called Eco Bicester) has put in place a ‘strategic delivery board’ that brings together local councillors and members of the public. The effectiveness of these local governance structures remains to be analysed in due course. From an urbanisation perspective, the speed at which the policy is implemented has slowed due to lack of financial support and diminishing government commitment: for example, only £6 million of government funding was allocated for the creation of 119 affordable houses in North West Bicester. All remaining funding will have to be raised by local actors involved. From an adaptation perspective, the environmental standards are also sliding, with only one of the four sites, North West Bicester, still using the specially designed ET-PPS. The risks of the current approach are that the policy, if ever fully implemented, will not have reached its urbanisation and environmental aims. In turn, this risks turning the eco-town initiative into an ineffective policy mechanism for finding solutions to the dual challenge of meeting urbanisation and climate adaptation targets.

Conclusions: implications for sustainability

This paper set out to analyse the governance mode guiding the recent English eco-town initiative. It sought to show the intricate and problematic relationship between, on one hand, governance structures and processes and, on the other, the evolving conceptualisation, development and implementation of the eco-towns. It suggests considerable governance tensions – arising from a ‘tilted’ governance structure and a lack of effective horizontal and vertical policy co-ordination – at work which, in turn, has created significant conceptual tensions based on a ‘tilted’ approach to urban sustainability. The previous government failed to redress the balance – conceptual and governance – when in the latter part of the 2000s the opportunity arose with the introduction of governmental climate change policy. The current government also failed to redress the balance and, it is feared, may have irreparably damaged the prospect of the English eco-town policy from succeeding following its effective disengagement with the policy at national level.

It remains to be seen whether the reliance on local actors to develop the expertise, co-ordinate planning and implementation, and secure funding will trigger the necessary innovation and lead to successful urban sustainability policy and practice. This is significant not just in terms of the UK meeting its climate change targets – to which it is committed through its pioneering climate change act – and providing much needed additional housing. It is also significant in terms of the UK securing an internationally recognised, credible role as innovator in urban sustainability and related technology, against stiff competition from competitors, such as France, Germany, and Sweden.
References


