Defining the Limits of Community Governance

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Abstract — Recent government policy statements emphasize the importance of community participation in rural areas. Likewise the literature on governance emanating from the urban studies' field stresses that partnerships and coalitions are now central features of the governing process and the new partners often include community organizations. In this paper we examine critically the concern with community participation and argue that in certain policy sectors there is still a requirement for the state to impose a dominant strategic line. We examine the construction of such a line in the housing field and show that calculations of housing demand flow from the central to the local state and in the process tend to sideline local views of development. We conclude that although the shift to governance may open up scope for community involvement in certain arenas, in others strategic policy still overrides local demands and hierarchical relations between the centre and localities still exist. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

Introduction

That some considerable shift in state form and function is currently taking place is illustrated by the shifting terminology of academic commentators: in particular, where once we talked of government we now talk of governance. As others in this issue have noted, governance refers to a shift from state sponsorship of economic and social programmes and projects, to the delivery of these through partnership arrangements which usually involve both governmental and non-governmental organizations. In effect, 'governance is about governmental and non-governmental organisations working together' (Stoker, 1997a, p. 1) in non-hierarchical and flexible alliances (often characterized as 'networks'; Rhodes, 1995). The emergence of alliances as key mechanisms of local governance ensures the inclusion of new partners in the delivery of policies and services. Frequently, these partners are established institutional actors who have the 'positional strengths' (Harding, 1996, p. 643) to deliver the required resources. The general significance of this is held to be a new role for the state as the co-ordinator and manager of these partnerships.

In any shifts from government to governance, therefore, new institutional arrangements come into being which promote partnerships, alliances and forms of 'government at a distance'. The state seeks out those external agencies which seem most appropriate to the delivery of particular governmental objectives and programmes and aims, at least in principle, to co-ordinate and manage complex relations in line with some notion of the 'public interest'. Although the 'public interest' is often quite difficult to define, one mechanism which is frequently employed to inject some notion of the 'public good' into the functioning of governmental institutions is public participation. Through the enrolment of citizens, whether as individuals or as groups, it is hoped that government can be kept in tune with public aspirations. Thus 'active communities' (Rose, 1996) and 'active citizens' (Kearns, 1995) are now commonly evoked as new 'partners' of government.

A new partnership role for citizens and communities in rural areas is evident in the recent Rural White Papers for England, Scotland and Wales (Department of the Environment/MAFF, 1995; Scottish Office, 1995; Welsh Office, 1996) which, for all their differences in emphasis, share a common concern for the incorporation of communities into the formulation and implementation of rural development strategies. The Scottish White Paper, for
instance, endorses ‘bottom-up’ approaches and envisages an enhanced role for local decision-making in developing governmental practices and partnership schemes (Scottish Office, 1995). The Welsh version likewise concentrates upon the idea of ‘sustainable communities’ (Welsh Office, 1996) while the English version seeks to encourage ‘active communities which are keen to take the initiative to improve the quality of life’ (DoE/MAFF, 1995, p. 14). On one reading, the degree to which rural communities are now credited with the ability to take forward the various proposals contained in the Rural White Papers is remarkable in what many believe to be one of the most centralized systems of government in the western world. However, it might be argued that this apparent shift in emphasis from the formal mechanisms of bureaucratic government to the more informal usage of community institutions deserves closer scrutiny, for the emphasis on ‘community’ may disguise the extent to which the state is curtailing its activities through the withdrawal of various services and other support mechanisms (Murdoch, 1997). For instance, the English White Paper, after noting that the countryside is what are most likely to succeed (DoE/MAFF, 1995, p. 6).

In such a fashion, limits are introduced on the proper scope of state activity. This idea of ‘limits’ is also reinforced by the emphasis that is then placed on rural people ‘helping themselves’:

Self-help and independence are traditional strengths of rural communities. People in the countryside have always needed to take responsibility for looking after themselves and each other. They do not expect the Government to solve all their problems for them and they know that it is they who are generally best placed to identify their own needs and the solutions to them. In any case, local decision making is likely to be more responsive to local circumstances than uniform plans. Improving the quality of life in the countryside starts with local people and local initiative (DoE/MAFF, 1995, p. 16).

Thus, not only should the scope of government be limited, but local, ‘rural’ people expect this: they know, almost instinctively, that they are best placed to solve their own problems.

The narratives which flow through the rural white papers conjure up for their readers, first, a countryside of diversity and local character and, second, a limited role for national government. It is asserted that differentiation and diversity can be most effectively governed at the level of ‘community’ and the plethora of small, tightly knit and self-reliant communities that the rural white papers would have us believe make up rural society are to be the means by which new, innovative and flexible forms of governance can be introduced. In this way, community governance provides a solution to one of the key problems facing the modern state: it can no longer govern national spaces in an all-inclusive fashion (due to increasing demand for state action allied to expenditure constraints) but does not wish to be seen as exclusionary. Something must, therefore, fill the gap between these two dimensions. The solution is to promote self-government so that citizens and communities take on more responsibilities themselves. Thus, all can be given the opportunity to participate in new forms of enabling government; all can become partners of the state.

However, this solution to the problem of differentiated government leads to further difficulties: first, not all citizens and communities have the abilities or resources to take on the responsibilities that partnership entails, thus the state retains such mechanisms as ‘safety nets’ and compensatory mechanisms to protect the least active citizens and communities; second, increasing the local dimension in new partnership arrangements gives rise to complicated problems of co-ordination: how can some broad notion of the public interest be delivered if citizens and communities are left to go their own way? This latter concern indicates that the state still has a key role to play in the delivery of strategic policy and governmental co-ordination. As Jessop (1997, p. 13) says: ‘it is essential [for the state] to establish new institutional arrangements and allocate specific roles and complementary competencies across different spatial scales and/or types of actor and thereby ensure that the dominant strategic line is translated into effective regional and local action’ (emphasis added).

In this paper we wish to take up this second problem in order to show how the requirement to establish a strategic policy runs up against the desire to build partnerships which genuinely enable participants to ‘govern’ themselves. That is, we will examine how the nation-state’s desire to consolidate the ‘dominant strategic line’ can result in the making of key decisions at a central level that can have an acute impact at the local level, through national-to-local networks which have a tendency to override the wishes of local communities and citizens. When confronted with a ‘strategic line’ the response of local citizens and communities varies, depending on their capabilities and competencies; but what all commonly face are networks in which the links...
between the national and the local are established in such a way as to give priority to national needs over local aspirations.

In order to illustrate the limits of community governance we will use examples which derive from on-going research work into the changing nature of communities in Buckinghamshire in the south-east of England, and we will illustrate the (in)ability of local communities to govern themselves by reference to housing. In this sector, strong networks, reaching from the national to the local level, exist mainly because the provision of housing is deemed to be of strategic significance. Therefore, while communities are enrolled in decision-making processes around housing development — especially as it impacts upon particular localities — their participation is circumscribed by the existence of a ‘dominant line’ which aims to ensure that sufficient houses are built to meet market demand. This line can set very definite limits on community participation for were local communities to oversee planning-for-housing processes there would be an ever-present danger that insufficient houses would be built to meet the presumed ‘national demand’. In sum, this case study raises some acute problems about the types of community participation envisaged by the white papers and highlights the uneven nature of any shift away from government towards governance.

Planning-for-housing and the limits of community governance

Constructing the strategic line: the national forecasts of housing demand

In the housing sphere, local planning authorities allocate land to meet local housing requirements. These requirements must, however, be related to those calculated at the national level, for if local housing allocations do not match up to the required national totals regional housing shortages might occur. The dominant strategic line, therefore, seeks to ensure that local authority designations meet national requirements and an elaborate set of linkages has been established to guarantee that local authorities think in a strategic fashion about their own local housing land allocations. The line emerges from a series of national housing calculations, produced by the Department of Environment (DoE) every 3 years or so. The calculations effectively act as forecasts of housing demand and tie local authorities into a set of arrangements which mean they must pay heed to national housing requirements when making their own decisions.

In general, the forecasting procedure runs as follows. With the arrival of every new set of national census results the DoE sets about comparing these with previous census series. Once this comparison has been made, the results are projected into the future. This is done using specialist statistical methods of calculation (such as the so-called ‘cohort survival’ method — DoE, 1980) which apply mortality and fertility rates, assumptions about net migration, and other such calculations to a base year population total. This population is, first split into age cohorts, distinguished by 5-year periods. The numbers of males and females likely to be found in each cohort are then calculated over a series of 5-year time horizons until a calculation of all numbers in all cohorts is gained. The calculations are numerous and complex. As the DoE noted in 1980: ‘The method involves a large number of repetitive calculations and is therefore particularly suited to the use of a computer’ (p. 111).

As a result of these repetitive calculations, forecast numbers of the population in each age group can be established, usually up to 20 years hence. While the DoE admits that these figures contain a large number of assumptions (about death and fertility rates, for example), they are nevertheless believed to provide a sound basis upon which to formulate plans. Thus it says of the latest forecasts (made in 1995) that, though there are uncertainties attached to the figures, they ‘are the best assessment that can be made with currently available information’ (DoE, 1996, p. 47). However, the DoE is constantly refining its methods in the hope that the forecasts’ ‘accuracy’ can be further improved (mainly because almost all the forecasts made in recent times have proved to be significant underestimates of ‘actual’ population growth). The Head of Housing Policy at the DoE recently explained that although the forecasts are based on a range of assumptions ‘they are assumptions really designed to give as neutral a picture as you can of the future’ (House of Commons, 1995, p. 43). Achieving ‘neutrality’ takes constant work.

At this point in the process the DoE simply holds calculations of a future population. It needs to execute a further translation by turning these population numbers into housing projections. One fairly simple and straightforward means of doing this is to divide the projected population number by the estimated average household size. It is recognized, however, that this is a fairly crude measure and suffers from the drawback that small variations in household size can produce large fluctuations in the projections. Thus a more sophisticated method is used which involves forecasting the proportion of the population in the various (age, sex and marital status) sub-groups who will head a household. This forecast produces a number of likely households in a
variety of different categories (married couples, lone parents, one person households, co-habiting households and others) as the propensity of each group to form households in the future will reflect the propensity in the immediate past and the rate of change in that propensity' (Bramley and Watkins, 1995, p. 21). When a figure for the total number of households has been derived then a further calculation leads to estimates of different household sizes. Having established the number of households in each category, the DoE then translates these into the number of houses required.

Once a set of national projections has been calculated and accepted then these are converted into regional dwelling requirements. This exercise (which is generally carried out by regional planning fora and statisticians from the DoE) aims to arrive at a recommended base set of figures for housing requirements in each region. In essence the national figure provides a 'control' total to which the sum of the regional estimates must agree. In making the regional calculations a whole range of factors are taken into account — number of households in the area, surveys of housing quantity, scope for conversions, vacancy rate estimates and so forth — so that a set of workable figures are produced within regional policy guidance. Any regional constraints on meeting regional targets only begin to emerge as the figures move further down the planning hierarchy and it is when the forecasts become included in the various structure plans that the potential problems associated with actually finding space for new housing come into sharp focus. The counties are expected to distribute their dwelling requirements amongst district authorities. Nevertheless, while the constraints may now be more apparent, the district and county councils are obliged to find sites in order to meet the perceived levels of 'demand'. It is this obligation which emerges from the way local authorities are incorporated into the national-to-local network (see Fig. 1). The figures are thus disaggregated from the top down (Holmans, 1996, p. 9). However, the DoE is keen to stress that the forecasts should not be regarded as a determinant of local housing requirements for they merely indicate the likely levels of demand which may exist in a local area over a given period. They say the numbers 'provide a starting point for policy decisions. The projections cannot be regarded as precise predictions for future years and the sources of uncertainty have to be borne in mind. Uncertainty increases with the degree of detail, both geographically and by category of household; and with distance into the future' (DoE, 1995, p. 13).

However, as we will illustrate below, while uncertainty might increase as the figures move down the hierarchy so does their authority.

'Localising the strategic line': county structure planning and the 'numbers game'

In order to examine the extent to which the numerical calculations are open to any meaningful interaction with local views we turn first to the Buckinghamshire Structure Plan Review process. Buckinghamshire provides a useful case study of the conflict between growth and environmental protection, as population growth in the county has been particularly intense in recent years: between 1971 and 1991 it had the fastest population growth in the UK (an increase of approximately 30%). The county also has a long tradition of middle-class in-migration to the rural areas (Murdoch and Marsden, 1994; Abram et al., 1996). As the south-east, particularly those counties to the west and north of London, has seen a growth in this social strata so the most attractive environments in Buckinghamshire have witnessed a continued in-migration of wealthy residents, particularly into the preserved southern districts. In previous work (Murdoch and Marsden, 1994) we have shown that villages in this county are
becoming increasingly middle class in character. We found, on average, that around two-thirds of village residents showed themselves to be strongly opposed to this category. Almost all the residents in these villages further third in the economically inactive (retired) into socio-economic groups 1, 2 and 3, with a

It is also important to note the spatial distribution of development within the county over recent years for this indicates where the most pressurized and protected enclaves lie. Prior to the recent local government review (which took effect after the events described here) Buckinghamshire was made up of five districts: Milton Keynes and Aylesbury Vale in the north; High Wycombe, South Bucks and Chiltern in the south. The initial growth centre was High Wycombe where, during the 1960s, the Labour controlled council sanctioned a policy of substantial public housing investment. However, by the early 1970s a coalition of conservation groups, spearheaded by the local branch of the Council for the Protection of Rural England [CPRE] and the Chilterns and High Wycombe amenity societies, forced the adoption of a much more restrictive growth policy in the south of the county, an area which comprises mainly of Green Belt and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty [AONB] (Healey et al., 1982). Over the following two decades, structure plan policies of containment in the south and urban expansion in the north came to be bolstered by a local political coalition — made up of amenity societies, action groups, local residents, county and district councillors — which had come into existence as a ‘second line’ of defence against any incursion into the rural areas of both the south and the north. This coalition would only accept growth in the urban areas of Aylesbury and Milton Keynes, and to a lesser extent High Wycombe, and sought to ensure that development plan policies adhered to these protectionist principles. Further growth was, therefore, pushed into the north of the county, notably the town of Aylesbury and the new city of Milton Keynes. Throughout the 1980s, growth levels within the county remained high and the planning restrictions in the south ensured that Aylesbury Vale (which grew by 8.2% between 1981 and 1991) and Milton Keynes (which grew by 39.2% during the same period) took the bulk of the new population (in the south population numbers remained almost static — Buckinghamshire County Council, 1996).

As we indicated in a previous paper (Abram et al., 1996), the anti-growth coalition, which had become entrenched around planning processes, ensured that earlier structure plan policies of Green Belt/AONB protection were maintained into the structure plan review process (1990–1996) to be examined here. However, while this anti-growth coalition attempted to protect the rural areas of both the south and the north from any significant increase in development activity, the County Council could not reject development emanating from the county’s position in the region as a whole. The County Council, because it was incorporated into the ‘dominant strategic line’ on housing, had the responsibility of providing for levels of housing provision determined by the numerical calculations of national, regional and local housing demand. At the time (1992) it had been calculated that the south-east region would require 222,250 new homes during the structure plan period (1991–2011) and Buckinghamshire County Council initially agreed to provide 62,600 of these. In line with the general protectionist strategy, the housing distribution figures allocated the vast bulk of new housing to Milton Keynes, Aylesbury and High Wycombe. It was expected that the total figure of 62,600 would be distributed in the following way: Milton Keynes would take 37,200; Aylesbury Vale 14,300; Wycombe 6700, Chiltern 1900 and South Bucks 2500. The southern districts of Chiltern and South Bucks were to be protected.

However, there were many local residents, amenity societies and action groups who expressed some disquiet about the overall levels of development expected in the county. Many members of the anti-growth coalition who lived in the south and the rural areas of the north, although pleased that the countryside was to be offered protection, worried that levels of development were too high in the county as a whole. They recognized that all residents would be affected by significant growth in the population. Thus there was a general feeling of disquiet about the levels of housing proposed in the plan and some attempt was made to question the need for growth on the scale proposed. Raising this question, however, proved much more difficult than arguing for the straightforward safeguarding of environmental designations even for these resourceful and articulate people (Abram et al., 1996).

Although central government’ planning policy guidance note on housing (PPG 3) makes clear that ‘Structure Plans will need to explain how the housing figures have been derived and the assumptions underlying them’ (DoE, 1992, para. 11) it became evident during the Buckinghamshire Structure Plan Review process that only those participants with sufficient resources to engage in the technical arguments necessary to undo the ‘facts’ coded into the housing policies could hope to chal-
lenge the power of the numbers at the local level. This became most striking during the Enquiry-in-Public (EiP) where a full-blown debate about the housing numbers in the Buckinghamshire Structure Plan took place. On one side of the argument were the house builders who took issue with the policies underlying the County Council’s figures, and attempted to get the totals increased. They challenged the figures from a number of different directions, arguing, for instance, that the County Council had underestimated both in-migration pressures and the potential for job growth. The vacancy rates used by the County in their calculations were also criticised as too modest. The House Builders Federation (HBF) provided a set of comparative figures and projections which gave alternative scenarios to those provided by the County Council and proposed a figure of 79,500 dwellings between 1991 and 2011 (around 17,000 higher than the County Council’s figure). Other developers provided their own housing projections (ranging from 64,000 to 74,000 for the plan period) and all concentrated on undermining the County Council’s housing projections, using alternative calculations.

On the other side of the debate were those actors seeking to get the totals lowered. Unlike the house builders, however, who used their considerable resources to open up the housing calculations in order to expose the political assumptions which they believed lay behind them (one HBF officer said during interview: ‘it’s political pressure that is leading them [the County] to adopt the figure they have…It’s the politics that leads to this’), the anti-growth actors, such as amenity societies, parish councils and voluntary agencies, formulated their arguments in terms which strayed some distance from the dominant strategic line emerging from the national-to-local planning-for-housing-network. Their arguments were neither technical nor numerical; they were simply ‘political’. Thus it was noticeable at the EiP that the house builders, and the consultants employed on their behalf, couched their remarks very much in the language of forecasts and numerical calculations. The anti-growth representatives, however, seemed to find this discourse highly restrictive for it prevented them getting to what they perceived to be the ‘real’ issues (as one said, during interview, ‘I never seem to be able to find the right forum to say what I want to say’). During a long discussion on the projected levels of growth expected in the north of the county the CPRE representative, for instance, said:

I really just wanted to remind the EiP that we did make comments at an earlier stage on the fact that we questioned the need for Bucks as a whole, and particularly Aylesbury Vale in this case, to grow at the rate that it is projected to grow and remind the EiP that the population of Bucks has grown over the last 10 years by 10% higher than all but one other county in the UK and it is projected to grow at the same rate again with only two other counties taking the same rate of growth. So, again, we would like to press our point that we don’t believe that Bucks should be growing at the rate it is and some of the problems that we’re talking about today could be solved in that way.

This comment was seconded by the Friends of the Earth representative who said:

I’d like to say that we agree very much with the point that…CPRE has just reminded us of. The view that growth in the county in the past has been the result of management and, therefore, that future growth is also amenable to management, our view is that simply to draw a line extending past trends is not management and in my view certainly such a process has no part in the principles of sustainable development. Sustainable development implies managing trends that are not seen as sustainable. We, therefore, feel that the housing figures are overall too high and that puts too much stress on both town and country environments…indeed the whole county.

These remarks captured the concerns of many actors in the review process but they also ran against the whole thrust of the dominant strategic line. This line ensured that most of the debate was conducted around the numbers themselves; not only was there very little questioning of their factual basis but the discourse of numerical calculation excluded other types of representation. As a consequence those local participants who expressed deep reservations about the validity of the statistics, the assumptions about the ‘need for growth’ and so on, but who did not put forward a thorough numerical analysis, using alternative calculations, were not able to make any impact on the projections. The numbers cascading down from above were accepted by both the planners and the developers operating at the local level. While they argued over various modifications to the housing totals they accepted the need for growth at broadly the levels enshrined in the figures.

From the final report of the EiP panel came a recommendation that the housing figures should be marginally increased. Having thoroughly checked the County Council’s calculations, the panel concluded that on technical grounds (i.e. underestimates of migration and vacancy rates) more houses were required. Thus the total number of houses to be provided during the plan period was raised from 62,600 to 66,500. In their response to the EiP panel report the County Council argued that its in-migration figures were sound but accepted that the vacancy rate had been too low. It settled on a figure of 64,000 houses throughout the plan-period, an increase of 1400 houses above the original total. This figure was included in the final, adopted
version of the Structure Plan (Buckinghamshire County Council, 1996).

To summarize this section, the whole debate around levels of development revolved around the figures. Even though a well organized and long-standing anti-growth coalition was deeply suspicious of the ‘numbers game’ they were forced to play along; however, they could find no way to resist the technical calculations coming down from ‘on high’. The only actors with the required technical knowledge to play the game successfully were the house builders. They too were suspicious of the numbers but only those calculated at the local level; they accepted the national and regional projections and used these as a basis from which to launch their assault on the County Council’s calculations. They successfully employed the national and regional figures in their debate with the local authorities. Thus the configuration of local argument by the national-to-local calculations of housing demand enabled the house builders to dominate the debate about the required levels of housing development in Buckinghamshire.

The ‘end of the line’: district plans, housing land and the limits of community governance

It is at the district level that housing numbers are turned into specific housing sites and, ultimately, housing. However, while it is true that the districts come at the end of the strategic line, district planners were deeply involved in the debate about housing allocations at the structure plan level. Having formulated its strategy in early structure plan policies the County Council was then obliged to incorporate the districts into the review process. In the case examined here the policy of maintaining Green Belt and AONB boundaries in the south, and thus focusing development activity in the north, was welcomed by the southern districts of Chiltern and South Bucks. More unexpectedly, however, the northern districts also went along with the strategy. For Milton Keynes the role allocated to the borough was very much in line with its expected course of development up to 2006 when it was still expected to play a regional growth role; thus it was happy enough to play its part in soaking up development pressures from the south of the county (even though planners in the city were sceptical that Milton Keynes relieves any pressure from the south of the county). Crucially, Aylesbury Vale District Council were also supportive of the distributional strategy and seemed happy for the town of Aylesbury to continue to act as a regional growth centre. The district were keen to behave ‘responsibly’ in accordance with the demands being made of the county at the regional level. Thus the town of Aylesbury, whose population had grown by 200% between 1960 and 1990, was to be a focal point for development throughout the plan period. In this section we will concentrate upon Aylesbury Vale (the district has been the focus of earlier work — see Murdoch and Marsden, 1994) for the issues around development and protectionism become especially stark in this area. In particular, as the housing figures were incorporated into the district plan Aylesbury Vale District Council (AVDC) were faced with the task of persuading both local constituents and, in some cases, local politicians of the need to build around 14,000 houses during the plan period, this in an area which had already sustained high levels of development during the 1970s and 1980s.

During the Structure Plan Review process we interviewed a member of AVDC’s planning department and asked him about the attitude of the district to the calculations of housing demand flowing towards the district. He replied that the Council were broadly happy with the figures and he went on to talk, with some pride, about the innovative proposals circulating within the planning office to build ‘sustainable villages’ around the outskirts of Aylesbury. He argued that Aylesbury Vale still had the capacity to take the housing numbers adopted in the structure plan and he believed that the planners were up to the task of finding innovative ways of meeting development targets. However, as we turned to examine the incorporation of the figures into the district plan, evidence began to emerge that the planners may have been thinking much more ‘strategically’ than either local politicians or concerned members of the public. This discrepancy was compounded by a change in the political make-up of the Council at the start of the District Plan review process when a Conservative majority gave way to the Liberal Democrats. The Conservative members had been more willing than the new ruling group to go along with strategic thinking; the Liberal Democrats showed themselves, in some significant ways, to be more concerned with local demands and aspirations.

With the figures for numbers of houses at the district level fixed by the County Structure Plan, further negotiations at District level only considered the distribution of the total throughout the district. As indicated above, the district council had decided on a distribution strategy early on in the development of a new District Local Plan. Before the structure plan was complete, the district and county embarked on a joint research process, employing a consultancy firm to set up a transport model for the Vale of Aylesbury. The district planners used this to
underpin their suggestions for the best distribution of housing around the Vale, in order to best limit the amount of traffic, given the massive expansion in housing needed to meet the structure plan figures. The consultants suggested that a split between rural and urban housing of 25 to 75% respectively would work best, and that siting most of the Aylesbury town housing either side of the existing town would enable an economically feasible public transport corridor to be developed through the town.

Once agreed, this strategy set the baseline for the development of the plan, even before any other implications had been considered. The Council's priority was clearly to attempt to reduce the amount of traffic in the Vale, in accordance with Local Agenda 21 of the Rio Enviroment summit, and this relied on concentrating development in and around the town of Aylesbury, and in a small number of larger sites which already had certain amenities and access to public transport. All other issues appeared to be secondary, including the government's also-stated priority of using brownfield sites for development before greenfields were 'breached'. Thus the first versions of the new district plan concentrated development within the urban areas of Aylesbury (in 'sustainable urban villages') but some allocations were made in the locations of Buckingham (a small town), Haddenham and Winslow (the latter are large villages). These three settlements were expected to take 925 houses in total.

The adoption of this strategy meant that when the plan went out to consultation, its main tenets were already fixed. Objections from the public, mostly along the lines that too much development in particular areas would 'spoil' them, either ecologically or socially, cut little ice among the planners at the District Council, or among the senior political members of the strategic planning committee. However, the sheer volume of objections from certain wards of the district, only shortly before the general election, led the local representatives to reconsider their approach to the plan. At the first meeting of the Council's strategic planning committee the designations at Haddenham and Winslow were challenged. Local residents and local politicians expressed great disquiet about the amount of development allocated to the two villages. They argued that the proposed levels of new house building would alter the whole character of the villages and would disrupt community life to an unwarranted extent. Whereas all had supported the initial strategy, when it became clear what that strategy meant to their wards, some of the councillors decided to act, such that some of the housing destined for the larger rural settlements was redistributed among a number of the next smallest villages in the district. The numbers of houses at Haddenham and Winslow were reduced to 150 each and 10 other villages were to take allocations of between 25 and 50 houses.

Politically, this was a very interesting move. One of its effects was to involve a much larger number of district councillors directly in the negotiations over the plan, as many more had development directed into their wards. A discourse of 'taking ones fair share' arose among councillors, in order to shift development off their patch, but also to try to convince their constituents that development was a necessary evil. Given the very strong antipathy to development throughout much of the Vale, this move also provoked a chorus of resistance from village groups around the district, some of whom began to join forces with the intention not only of challenging the district's distribution of new housing, but the very strategy that underlies it.

The effect of this shift in policy was not only to increase the opposition to the plan (there were now 12 villages opposed to the allocations rather than 2) but also to undermine the sustainability criteria which were supposed to be underpinning the allocations themselves. And the sustainability strategy received another blow at the next meeting of the District planning committee when the councillors turned their attention to the allocations within Aylesbury. After a series of heated arguments the councillors threw out one of the planner's three strategically-placed 'sustainable village' suggestions, in favour of a range of sites which were selected by the district councillors themselves (these accorded to no discernible, that is, professional planning, criteria). The planners were now given the task of justifying a series of sites which they themselves did not favour.

As the debate around the plan unfolded the councillors and many concerned local residents took great exception to the site allocations proposed by the planners. While certain councillors and village groups were concerned to protect particular greenfield rural areas they also showed some degree of antipathy to the overall levels of development expected in the district as a whole. For instance, during a discussion of the housing forecasts, councillors expressed such sentiments as: 'it would be tragic if this county is to become semi-suburban sprawl', 'we need to challenge some of the assumptions behind the figures'; 'we don't want more people to live in this area in considerable numbers... Might we be so bold as to say that Buckinghamshire is full up?' At the end of this discussion it was proposed that AVDC should tell the Department of the Environment that the district 'cannot cope' with
further housing allocations. Again, however, the planners were uneasy with this course of action and counselled caution by saying that 'it would be unfortunate if one of SERPLAN's members says we don't want it [housing], look elsewhere'. The concern to appear strategic and responsible in planning terms thus ran up against local worries over development pressure.

Conclusion

The material presented above has demonstrated that in the housing sphere a dominant strategic line exists which ties rural localities into a set of calculations and relations which extend 'down' a planning 'hierarchy' from the central state. This line seeks to ensure that local decision-makers calculate in strategic terms (around the number of houses required in their administrative areas over given time periods) thereby limiting the extent to which they can be swayed by local opinion. Thus, rural localities are redefined within the national-to-local networks of planning-for-housing as potential housing sites and the strength of this redefinition tends to resist alternative representations of rural places coming for instance, from local communities. As we have seen, as the calculations of housing demand move down the hierarchy so they become harder to resist. They come with the weight of central authority and are propelled by a range of actors — planning professionals, house builders, some local politicians — into local situations. Most of the debate at the local level is not, therefore, over the validity of the housing allocations (although there is some disquiet about this) but over where the housing should be sited (that is, the arguments revolve around distribution). Whether the levels of housing enshrined within the figures are required locally is never open to serious debate.

This hierarchy in the housing field raises one or two questions about the shift from government to governance. Some commentators have noted that planning as an activity seems to have withstood most assaults on it over the last twenty years or so. As Cullingworth (1997, p. 948) has recently pointed out, 'after 50 years, the planning system is very recognisably the same as it was when introduced after the Second World War'. Despite wholesale changes in the national health service, education and other public services, planning has somehow remained intact. Cullingworth believes the reason for durability in the system can be traced to the constellation of political forces which have gathered around it. Both developers and protectionists, for instance, rely on the system to deliver the requisite 'goods' and both are liable to fight any fundamental changes in planning's ability to deliver these 'goods'. Planning-for-housing can be set within this general context and this goes some way to explaining why the hierarchy outlined in this paper continues to function. However, there is a more fundamental reason why the case study outlined here challenges the notion of a shift towards governance: this reason relates to the need for strategic co-ordination in almost all spheres of government; that is, as Jessop (1997) stresses, the state must still ensure that the dominant strategic line can link together actors in a whole variety of spheres and scales. The central state must continue to play a coordinating role and, therefore, seeks to configure actions from afar. While the processes of mediation and co-ordination can be executed in institutional arrangements other than formal hierarchies, some subsumption of local demands to those deemed of national significance would appear to a necessary part of any governance or governmental system.

In essence, these considerations mark out the limits of community governance. Citizens and communities cannot simply be allowed to go 'their own way' within the partnership arrangements which comprise governance institutions; they must be linked into some form of co-ordination and mediation otherwise these partnerships will fall apart. Thus, while they can be enrolled into programmes of government, their incorporation is usually on acutely constrained terms. They may be called upon as consultees, they may be asked their opinions, and they may even be permitted to implement a variety of governmental programmes (Murdoch, 1997), yet they are rarely invited into the central arenas of policy formulation and they are not heard in many of the technical discourses which comprise the more specialised areas of planning (such as forecasting). Thus, community and citizens will find any kind of negotiation with the planning system compromised by discourses, relations and institutions which determine trajectories of rural development from afar.

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