Robert Rogerson, Sue Sadler, Cecilia Wong and Anne Green

# Planning sustainable communities – skills and learning to envision future communities: an introduction

The aspiration of creating sustainable communities has been an important part of the UK government's agenda over the past decade, with the role for planning and other professions involved in place-making changing to include expectations of greater consultation and involvement of communities in decision-making. To date, most attention has been given to ensuring that planners are suitably skilled to undertake these new roles. Research conducted as part of an ESRC/HCA Initiative suggests that while opportunities have been provided for planners to acquire and reflect on their skills, more could be achieved by moving from a deficit, market-failure conception of skills needs to a 'strengths-based' approach. As community engagement is enhanced under the banner of the 'Big Society', this paper argues that significant questions need to be addressed over what sustainable communities are and the role planning professionals have in developing visions for such communities.

The aspiration of creating sustainable communities has been an important part of the UK government's agenda over the past decade. In adopting this goal, however, the notion of what such sustainable communities should look like has been poorly defined. Instead, the emphasis has been on ensuring that those involved with their creation – especially those parts of the state (i.e. local, regional and national government and its agencies) – are more responsive to local community views and can work more effectively with local populations. As a consequence, reskilling has been a central tenet of the sustainable communities debate. To quote Egan (2004, 4), who completed a review of the skills base of those professionals involved in planning and place-making, 'upskilling the broad range of core and associated occupations with a role in planning, delivering and maintaining sustainable communities represents a very considerable challenge'.

This paper and the following three papers examine some of the research conclusions arising from an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) funded initiative (hereafter referred to as the

Dr Robert Rogerson, Senior Lecturer in Geography, and Sue Sadler, Senior Researcher, are in the Cities and Sustainability Research Group at University of Strathclyde, 50 Richmond Street, Glasgow G1 1XN; email r.j.rogerson@strath.ac.uk and sue.sadler@strath.ac.uk.
Cecilia Wong is Professor of Spatial Planning and Director of the Centre for Urban Policy Studies, School of Environment and Development, the University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL; email: cecilia.wong@manchester.ac.uk.
Anne Green is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL; email Anne.Green@warwick.ac.uk

ESRC/HCA Initiative) exploring 'skills and knowledge for sustainable communities'.[1] Together, the research illustrates how at a local level across the UK communities and professionals have responded to the sustainable communities agenda. In particular, it focuses on developing more new and imaginative approaches to learning and sharing knowledge between professionals and communities, partnership working, and bringing communities together in more cohesive ways, as well as identifying transferable lessons from what is working in other towns and cities. The research cut across disciplinary boundaries and each project involved local agencies and partners. The three subsequent papers explore some of these themes in more detail. Although the backdrop of the research was the planning context of England, the research projects were drawn from across the UK, reflecting the shared interest by devolved authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in skills for sustainable communities. The 11 projects highlighted this sharing of knowledge across the different planning systems which have emerged through devolution processes in the UK.

In this article, we explore some wider issues associated with planning for sustainable communities. After outlining the genesis of the agenda in the UK, which has taken a specific trajectory in contrast to debates within the US and the rest of Europe in particular, we first consider how the skills and knowledge that planners and others involved in place-making are acquired and, second, to what end – i.e. what is the vision of a sustainable community that is the endpoint of the process? Our central argument is that while emphasis on skills and learning has assisted in making the process more inclusive, we see the lack of clarity over the desired outcomes – or the processes by which such outcomes can emerge – endangering the benefits from current investments.

## Defining sustainable communities

The development of *sustainable communities* as a planning focus has emerged from an essentially environmental discourse, and the current definition has considerable overlap with that of *sustainable development*:

> places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all. (ODPM, 2005, 56)

---

1   Details of the projects included in this Initiative, and summaries of the main research findings and associated case studies can be found at www.strath.ac.uk/gs/sustainablecommunities. The research was funded by grants from the ESRC and the HCA Academy (formerly the Academy for Sustainable Communities). Information on the programme can also be found at http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/research/collaborations/sustainable.aspx.

Despite more than a decade of use, there remains considerable ambiguity about the concept, and most definitions of a sustainable community are provided in terms of general characteristics and attributes. As Talen (2005) indicates, its origins have also emerged from 'New Urbanism' movements in urban design and architecture that seek to use insights from morphology, transportation planning, and ecological balance to design new communities that are sustainable and renewable from within. In many respects, this internalising of the notion of 'sustainable' has been a defining feature. Although Talen postulates that such a community should be able to exist with external assistance, most commentators suggest that a sustainable community is one that has the skills and capacity to sustain itself and has the ability to work in partnership with other communities and agencies, including government, in order to enhance the liveability at the local, day-to-day scale (Stevens, 2009).

The rise of the 'sustainable communities' policy focus in the UK and elsewhere in developed countries has been regarded as a backlash to the inability of planners to manage urban sprawl and the accompanying range of social and environmental problems (Hempel, 1999; Agyeman & Angus, 2003) and to the widespread agreement that the previous planning system in the UK was not fit for purpose (Healey, 2006). As a consequence, the agenda for sustainable communities in the UK has been part of a wider realignment of planning, shifting from the (relatively) narrow arena of regulation to a much broader and more integrative process of spatial planning. It is claimed that this shift has brought together and integrated policies for the development and use of land with other programmes which influence the nature of places and how they can function (ODPM, 2003; Rozee, 2008). Such a repositioning places the planning system and planners more centrally within spatial development, with planners being 'proactive and strategic coordinators of all policy and actions that influence spatial development' (Nadin, 2007, 43) including the creation of more sustainable development.

The Urban Task Force report (Rogers, 1999), commissioned by the then newly elected Labour Government in 1997, gave a clear steer that the existing planning regime and poor design had created too many communities where people did not want to live, and that were unsustainable in the new era of sustainable development. In promoting the desire for 'sustainable cities' and drawing on New Urbanism principles, this report established an agenda for change in planning which led to the 2000 White Paper 'Our Towns and Cities: the future – delivering an urban renaissance' (DETR, 2000) which focused on balancing higher-quality urban design, environmental awareness and social well-being alongside effective and accountable local and regional government.

Over the next two years, there emerged the notion of 'sustainable communities' to represent this new approach to planning and building communities for the future. Widening the regeneration agenda of the past two decades to a discourse

of 'place-making', the 2003 Government statement on Sustainable Communities (ODPM, 2003) offered a more inclusive approach to creating places; one that has become the bedrock of subsequent policy papers, government-sponsored research and a new approach to planning in the UK. The first Sustainable Communities Plan (2003) included aims to 'improve the quality of the public realm – the surrounding environment and community services that make an area more liveable' (Jones and Evans, 2008, 90) as part of the strategy to encourage' longer-term approaches to planning. However, the central thrust of this first plan was to address housing imbalances and uneven demand across England and the housing supply focus dominated the debate on sustainable communities. Alongside this, encapsulated within Planning Policy Statement (PPS1) 'Delivering Sustainable Communities', has been greater emphasis on planning to involve communities in developing a shared view of sustainable patterns of local development (ODPM, 2005). As Imrie and Raco (2003, 8) note, this community involvement has been a mechanism,

> which can break-open systems of governance, making them more responsive, more accountable, and perhaps most importantly, more effective and efficient ... Giving communities more of a say over what policy priorities should be and how resources should be spent is seen, more broadly as a good thing, something to be nurtured, as an integral part of any strong democracy.

Following consultation, and aligned with the development of the sustainable communities agenda, in 2002 the UK Government set out its intentions to transform the planning process. Having previously identified that the planning regime and processes were at least in part stifling innovation and change, the new system was to be effective in 'delivering our objectives for living communities, for urban and regional regeneration; for improving the country's infrastructure, and for achieving truly sustainable development' (ODPM, 2002, 1). At its heart, this change was a shift in culture – from what was viewed as reactive and defensive, risk-averse and centralised to one which grasped opportunities, added value to communities and, importantly, involved the community. This shift towards community involvement has been evident across a whole raft of initiatives, including, for example, the New Deal for Communities Programme, launched in 1998 as one of the most important area based initiatives ever launched in England (Batty et al., 2010).

The trajectory of the subsequent debate on sustainable communities in the UK was significantly influenced by one of the actions of the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, in 2003. In commissioning Sir John Egan to undertake a review of how to make the concept of sustainable communities workable, emphasis was placed on 'new skills and new ways of working for everyone involved' in community building. The 'skills review' argued that many of those involved in the creation of communities – including professionals, government officials, builders – had failed to create

places which encouraged community growth and which were, in turn, unsustainable. Egan's analysis was that many of those professionals involved lacked the skills required for effective working with communities. He argued that professional skills had to be augmented with what was termed 'generic' skills, behaviour and knowledge (Egan, 2004, 4),

> such as governance of communities, economic planning for prosperity, communication (especially listening to and selling in communities), risk taking, and above all leadership and partnership working.

This study was significant in shaping the subsequent agenda. First, the focus on upskilling professionals involved in place-making has challenged the training and learning associated with architecture, surveying, planning, etc. Secondly, the position of planning and planners within the process of spatial planning and governance has shifted (Healey, 2007) from control to facilitation and effective partnership working. Third, and aligned with the wider New Labour project based on communitarianism, communities have been encouraged to have greater involvement in place-making processes, although considerably less emphasis has been placed on skilling people in communities and community organisations to undertake these roles. Finally, the Egan Review emphasised the importance of the *process* by which communities can be created over the *outcome*.

## Developing the skills for sustainable communities

The emphasis on the process of place-making that is anticipated to emerge from dialogue with community stakeholders and facilitation by planners – thus being more inclusive of communities and with the design for the spatial environment being less imposed by professionals – creates a different role for planning professionals. In particular, it emphasises a partnership role for all those who have a direct personal, political or financial stake in the proposed developments. The enshrining of community involvement in the process of assessing individual planning applications, the subsequent development of community planning and other amendments to planning mechanisms have all reinforced this partnership role.

Associated with this 'culture change' for planners and professionals (Shaw and Lord, 2007) has been the assumption that for many professionals and those associated with planning there is a requirement for different skill sets to be learnt. Most attention in academic research to date has been given to generic skills, with the evidence showing an increase in the use of most generic skills over time (Green, 2007), but as Raco (2008) notes, one of the main themes associated with New Labour's planning reforms has been the development of a cadre of young professionals able to support urban and regional competitiveness contributing to the knowledge economy (Peck, 2005).

The importance of a skilled, qualified labour force is recognised across developed economies as important for economic competitiveness, for meeting future employment needs and for greater social justice. In addition, a skilled population has been identified as important in creating social inclusion and sustainable communities. As the Treasury-backed Leitch review (2006, 2) concluded, 'skills is the most important lever within our control to create wealth and to reduce social deprivation.' In the UK, at least until very recently, the policy approach has had a supply-side emphasis, emphasising the primary significance of formal qualifications gained through education and training in addressing skills deficiencies. In the last decade, new institutional structures have been formed to assist in addressing education and skills – including the Learning and Skills Council in England (established in 2001 and subsequently disbanded in 2010), the Sector Skills Councils and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills – as well as other initiatives and programmes. Gradually, the growing evidence base on skills has led to a greater emphasis on the demand for, and utilisation of, skills within the work environment (broadly defined) (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2010).

In the discussion presented in this article we focus on generic skills. As Murtagh and Ellis (this issue) comment, throughout the UK there is a tendency to view skills for sustainable communities in terms of deficits, using arguments of market failure. Several consequences arise from the adoption of this perspective.

First, skills agendas have focussed on 'plugging the gaps', producing more training to generate more trained professionals in areas which are perceived to be weak, and defining new sets of skills within the contexts of existing expertise (Bailey, 2005; Roberts, 2005). Thus, Egan's notion of deficiencies in skills for partnership working has been interpreted as requiring training of people able to make links between existing partners – what Murtagh calls 'knowledge brokers' – to fill the gap, rather than considering training or knowledge within those involved in partnership working. This is predicated on limitations in the quality of the existing workforce to meet the demands (Audit Commission, 2006; Durning and Glasson, 2006).

Secondly, in aligning such deficits with market failure, the assumption is that the production of different skills is one that the state (through the wide variety of education and training programmes) needs to address. Thus the responsibility for addressing these deficiencies is explicitly placed on Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training provided by colleges, universities and other state-funded providers. Within the built environment professions, the acceptance of qualification as a mark of competence in particular skills has been unchallenged. Research within the ESRC/HCA Initiative by Sayce (2010) suggests that while the development of generic or transferable skills is evident in Higher Education curricula, there is little evidence of the explicit inclusion of the Egan generic skills into discipline or professional body requirements, leading her to

conclude that there is a danger of reinforcing 'silos' of knowledge and attitudes. In turn, this has placed emphasis on skill acquisition and on recognition of skills through formal qualifications, rather than the application of skills and the value of learning through everyday practice and non-professional skills within communities.

Further, there has been an emphasis on 'formal' skills within 'formal' organisations – most particularly within the public sector, where Egan and others have argued that bureaucratic working practices have distanced workers from communities and those they serve. In contrast, as Marsden et al. note (in this issue), the focus on skills has paid considerably less attention to (any) deficiencies of skills within local communities, and in turn about the geographies associated with such skills. Sub-national variations in professional skills – the key skills identified by Egan as necessary for successful planning and development of communities – have been acknowledged and formed a powerful driver in Labour's attempt to address a rising spatial disparity in the skills bases of regions and local areas.

Finally, the conception of skills and learning as filling a 'gap' has the important potential drawbacks of undervaluing existing skills, discouraging the empowerment of individuals to reflect positively on their existing attributes, and focusing on individuals (with the assumption that a skilled individual has many/most/all of the necessary embedded skills) rather than on the skill sets of the team.

Research within the ESRC/HCA Initiative has reinforced the value of an alternative standpoint to the 'skills gap', based on a 'strengths-based' approach. Under this, the focus is what skills people have and how they can be augmented through need – usually towards meeting some agreed purpose or task, either on their own or as part of a group. The absence of skills is still recognised and addressed, but this is done so with:

- the participation of the individual, so there is greater motivation to learn;
- measurable achievement, in terms of targets set by tasks rather than qualifications; and
- a reflective learning process so that future 'strengths' are recognised through learning and application.

One of the central challenges of strengths-based work is how to be consistent with the principles of empowerment and self-determination. Transparency and shared responsibility for the oversight of service delivery and practice is needed, with co-production of learning, space for reflection, and opportunities to address failings. To support this approach, there is a requirement for different forms of leadership and mentoring/ support than those associated with skills supply and deficit-based approaches; recognition that structural and cultural impediments constrain people's empowerment and may need to change; and acknowledgement that working teams define goals, and identify and mobilise strengths and resources, including expertise and agency.

## Planning in action

While Egan and the subsequent policy initiatives have been directed so as to focus on absences and deficiencies, less attention has been given to areas where planning professionals have been involved in learning and working effectively with communities in new ways. The three papers in this issue address this latter theme. Each illustrates that planning and planners are key gatekeepers in the production process of the physical and built environment and are central to the facilitating role between stakeholders, ensuring that there is engagement and where possible, that consensus emerges.

The paper by Hockey et al. (in this issue) first explores whether in their new role, planners are being given the appropriate education or learning, and secondly, as important, whether the need for such skill enhancement is challenging the current operational and educational paradigms. Drawing on experiences of core professional groups (as defined by Egan), their research illustrates some of the skills gaps. Current experience among practising professionals indicates that stakeholder engagement has become part of the daily practice of professionals – more than four in five had some involvement with this process – and greater involvement with such practice led them to recognise the importance of such skills. In contrast and in the view of the established professionals, entrants into the professions were under-equipped for stakeholder engagement. Skills such as conflict resolution, financial management, leadership, change management and appraisal were all highlighted as desirable.

This paper also offers insights into the challenge faced by education professionals as they aim to teach generic skills. As Hockey et al. note in this issue (p. 532),

> it is relatively easy to draw up specifications for general competences required by environment professionals; but if these correspond largely to training literatures expressed in general terms, or those specific to a different domain, it leaves open the question of how built environment professionals are to apply them in their own distinctive work.

This challenge of combining 'learning as participation' and 'learning as acquisition' is a recurring theme of the ESRC/HCA Initiative. Marsden et al. (in this issue), working with communities and professionals in Stroud, underlines the importance of the transfer of skills and knowledge through embedding them in practice – and in particular relational and spatial embedding. For these authors, and indeed for others in the ESRC/HCA Initiative, the desirability of incorporating a 'situated learning' approach within practice is underlined. Such an approach not only recognises the role of the (many) individual learners involved (reinforcing the acquisition of skills and knowledge), but also acknowledges the continuing process of such learning within dynamic social contexts. This is in line with a more general emphasis on contextual learning.

The significance of this temporal dimension is highlighted in the case study of conflict resolution and shared community designing in Belfast (Murtagh and Ellis, this issue). The need for the development of a process of learning, sharing knowledge and insights and applying generic skills has been at the forefront of projects in this divided city which seek to work with long-established community divisions. In a setting where there is limited skills transfer, poor understanding of practice-based learning and almost no systems to capture and share knowledge, the Belfast case studies show how agonistic approaches, emphasising the recognition and appreciation of difference, can assist in building partnership working. Crucially, the research points to the role of 'knowledge brokers' to initiate the process; a role that can have wider significance in generating effective community participation.

## Moving forward: planning, place-making and shaping

The reform of the English planning system effected by the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act sought to re-brand planning as a positive instrument designed to help maintain, create and/or recreate sustainable communities. The reforms anticipated a planning profession at the core of the place-making agenda and a plan-making process more clearly rooted in evidence with a greater degree of stakeholder involvement. Associated with this was an equally central requirement for planning professionals to be more skilled to undertake this culture change. With the shift from land use to spatial planning and the concomitant repositioning of planners at the heart of place-making, there has been a need to re-skill the profession. As Shaw and Lord (2009) note, there may have been a premise that planning professionals had a latent capacity to foster collaboration and consensus.

More recently, since the Lyons report of 2007, 'shaping of place' has been more central to planning reforms. Place-shaping is a transformational activity that requires local authorities to set a strategic, shared vision for their areas and to mobilise all local resources in support of that vision (DCLG, 2006). Under this approach, spatial planning has a new focus. To quote Allen and Crookes (2009, 458),

> Spatial planning is now considered to be the 'means for shaping and delivering tomor-
> row's places' rather than a technocratic activity concerned with land use and the like.
> Thus spatial planning has become a means of mobilising and coordinating an area's
> physical, cultural and social assets to produce a competitive 'place offer' that will attract
> or, rather, 'wow' knowledge firms and workers to relocate to that particular place.

For Allen and Crookes, this re-focusing changes the emphasis onto promoting economic growth over general well-being, with the loss of equality and redistribution – replaced by action which supports the desire and liveability priorities of a smaller group in the creative class. Drawing upon phenomenological perspectives, these authors argue

that place-shaping and the role of spatial planning in this needs examination. Their conclusion, echoing Egan's report, is that if planning is to reconcile place-shaping with the creation of sustainable communities, it should pay much greater attention to the everyday needs of ordinary residents and the valuable practical knowledge that arises from their everyday involvement with a particular place.

In moving beyond narrow land-use regulation of the past, planners and planning professionals are expected to develop a more coordinated and consensus-based approach to planning communities of the future. The *Sustainable Community Strategy* (SCS), renamed in the *Sustainable Communities* Act 2007, is the pre-eminent local plan in England and the Local Development Framework (LDF) is a means of delivering the vision and strategy of the SCS rather than having a free-standing role. Within this new local governance architecture, it is the SCS that provides the overarching framework, replacing what planners have traditionally seen as the role of the development plan. In turn, this requires planners to have key roles in facilitating communities to determine a vision for the future of their community. It is notable that this is in tune with the Coalition Government's concerns with localism and the 'Big Society' (Cabinet Office, 2010).

This offers several challenges. First, debates over the skills for sustainable communities have focused primarily on the 'building' and production of such communities. In contrast, less attention has been given to the sustained community development skills; those competencies and attributes which enable a community once formed to continue to function, evolve and live together as a cohesive group.

Secondly, there is currently a limited appreciation of visions of what a sustainable community may look like. The question still asked by too many is 'what is a sustainable community'? To date, although widely used, the term 'sustainable communities' is described rather than defined ... such that 'we'll know it when we see it!' With planners and other professionals having an increased role in assisting communities to consider their future, having the skills and knowledge to envision communities is important.

This is not to argue that there needs to be a single, well-defined outcome. One feature of the very concept of sustainable communities is that it must accommodate a diversity of expressions, reflecting local interpretations and engagement as to what such a community should be like. In this respect, there is no single blueprint. A vision in this sense needs to offer a direction of travel and provide milestones against which progress can be assessed.

In the absence of such a shared vision or understanding, or indeed substantial dialogue over the desirable community characteristics, the ESRC/HCA Initiative's research indicates consequences both for the skills agenda and for the future of communities.

As outlined above, in relation to skills, there has been a tendency for emphasising

learning of skills towards 'deficits' rather than on those skills which contribute towards collectively defined outcomes. In practice this has meant focusing on skills which have more immediacy and utility rather than assisting future and longer-term community and partnership working. It has meant an emphasis on professional skills and compe-tencies, thus tending to reinforce professional silos rather than creating new working relationships; and developing leadership within professions rather than widening skills to encourage engagement of communities with envisioning their own futures.

Defining a guiding vision also matters in relation to key questions that are difficult to answer or address for communities, including:

- how do those involved in working towards creating sustainable communities know they are making 'progress';
- does every community have an inherent right to be sustainable in its own terms, even if this involves its deliberate segregation from other communities;
- 'sustainable' has connotations of conservation and consensual stability, so how can communities work with the inherent impermanence and fluidity that is characteristic of some 'communities'?

## Visions of sustainable communities

Two components – the 'place' and the 'people' – have had differential treatment in policy and academic analysis of the visions of sustainable communities. In planning and indeed in much of the policy literature, the focus has been on place-making; the development of a built environment in which people want to live. As the definition outlined at the start of this article illustrated, place-based notions predominate.

Indeed, of the 43 components which are identified as contributing to a sustain-able community (Egan, 2004), most relate to the provision and quality of physical infrastructure or services. In this respect, and the connections by government of the notion with planning, sustainable communities are viewed as a focus for government and partners, rather than a locally derived and defined concept.

Enabling local stakeholders to have greater influence in shaping the formation of places can however be problematic, and often generates tensions among those involved, for instance, between the desires and aspirations of local residents and businesses and the wider policy and planning objectives embedded in the notion of sustain-able communities. In guiding the discussion with communities, planners however are faced with choices over different points of emphasis in relation to which makes a community sustainable. Emphases can be placed on different aspects of the social, economic and environmental attributes which Egan and others have used to describe such communities. Three examples are provided here to illustrate this challenge: with differing emphases on (i) social aspirations (gated communities); (ii) local needs and resilience (total place); and (iii) inclusion and equity (balanced communities).

## (a) Social aspirations: gated communities

Gated communities have become a feature of the urban landscapes across many developed countries. In the UK, the recent expansion of such communities has led Atkinson et al. (2005) to suggest that they represent a symbolic challenge to the ethos of British planning and to urban policies currently seeking to deliver sustainable, open, socially diverse neighbourhoods. Subject to much critical analyses, normative critiques of gated communities have emphasised their exclusionary character, noting them as defensive and territorial places with explicit rules of social and spatial engagement, designed to exclude certain categories of people and activities. They are portrayed as being associated with destructive forms of splintering urbanism (Graham and Marvin, 2001), and undermining the traditional forms of community bonding and civic trust, leading ultimately to the disintegration of society (Caldeira, 2000; Webster et al., 2002; Low, 2003; Pow, 2009).

As such, gated communities appear to fall far short of the desirable living environment sought under sustainable communities planning (ODPM, 2003, 4–5) which includes a 'well-integrated mix of decent homes of different types and tenures to support a range of household sizes, ages and incomes'. Diversity, vibrancy and creativity in the local culture are valued as encouraging both pride in the community, and cohesion within it. While such characteristics sit uncomfortably with the development of gated communities, on the other hand, the same document notes that sustainable communities should be 'a safe and healthy environment with well-designed public and green space' and have a 'sense of place', and 'low levels and fear of crime', all of which could be interpreted as positive attributes in gated communities. Although the economic exclusionary nature of such communities may restrict access, the varied housing designs and diverse architectural styles (Pow, 2009) offer visual compensation. Further, if key stakeholders – including residents and builders – are to have a say in the shaping of places, then the formation of gated communities represents one vision of a (potentially) sustainable community. As Atkinson et al. (2005) have identified, these potentially contradictory planning ideals have been reflected in much of the national guidance provided to local planning authorities, being reinforced by politicians calling for the extension of gated community principles, citing them as examples of governance for neighbourhoods to empower and secure residents (Blunkett, 2004).

## (b) Creating a resilient community: total place

Creating a resilient community that is focused on meeting all the local needs has also gained credence in the last few years, especially as fiscal constraint in the public sector has resulted in more targeted interventions and support. This 'total place' vision for

communities is more directed towards outcomes than process and on temporal as well as spatial aspects. As Roberts (2009) expresses it, the desirability of implementing the 'whole of place – whole of community – whole of life' way of thinking and acting is designed to focus as much on how an integrated approach to place can be established, as it is about the precise details of a programme of place-shaping, place-making and management. This viewing of communities as 'total places' has been accompanied by giving more freedom to local authorities and local agencies (under the previous Labour Government) and continues to have resonance in the emerging characteristics of the 'Big Society' (under the current UK Coalition Government).

While the aim central to this perspective is generating innovative, locally informed solutions, it is also about cost reduction. The underlying philosophy is twofold. First, local needs can be met more efficiently through local leadership, with greater empowerment being given to public sector organisations to enable this. Secondly, and more difficult, is a recognition that many of the problems faced locally are 'wicked' rather than tame – that is, solutions are beyond conventional fixes such as rational process and that solutions will lie with 'those people with the problem' (Grint, 2009, 1). Although total place empowers local professionals and communities and offers greater diversity of solutions, as the linguistics illustrate through the regular references to 'customer insights', the visions it generates are emerging within an economically constrained and focused notion of place-building.

## (c) An alternative vision: inclusion and equity

An alternative vision which gives primacy to the social character of communities is captured in the notion of 'mixed' sustainable communities or increasingly referred to as 'balanced communities'. These are premised on what Raco (2007) has termed selective imaginations of the differential relations which exist between different types of citizens and their spatial relationship to each other. Although cast in terms of communities which are 'inclusive' and offering 'equality of opportunity' under this visioning, primacy is given to certain types of citizens, those that are 'politically, socially and economically active and self-reliant', increasingly able as a group to be resilient and less dependent on the welfare state. Importantly, as citizens, they will be able to solve and resolve the tensions and issues which arise from community living. To this end, the citizenry are an appropriate mix of social groups with a range of skills within the workforce and associated with community stewardship (Raco, 2007).

This is aligned with New Labour's notion to mobilising 'active citizens' who are able to take on greater responsibility for their own well-being, social and economic. Drawing on Etzioni's extension of communitarian notions (Etzioni, 1996), this conception of positive citizenship being associated with independent individuals has been at the heart of the attempts to build sustainable communities. In particular, the spotlight

has been on differentiating those who are perceived as positive, desirable citizens and those who are not. There have been sharp debates over equitable access, the nature of community, and over social relations and social influence in mixed-income communities, and the role of formal structuring of the community in encouraging or dissuading interaction among neighbours is only starting to be researched (Graves, 2010).

As Murtagh and Ellis (this issue) identify in Belfast, the process of creating more diverse and cohesive communities requires different skills – from planners and within community organisations – from other visions of sustainable communities.

## Conclusions

Each of the community visions outlined above offers only partial alignment with the descriptions of a sustainable community that has currency at the time of writing. However, they illustrate the tensions which exist in using the concept of a sustainable community and in the intended role of planners to support and facilitate communities in designing and maintaining their communities for the future. To date, we would argue that the debates over skills and knowledge have only started to touch on these difficult roles.

As the three papers which follow here illustrate, the acquisition and application of skills and learning in relation to sustainable communities has provided planners and professionals new opportunities to work effectively with communities and to (re)consider the skills that they need, both individually and in partnership, and how they should be utilised and upgraded. The extent to which such enskilling has taken forward communities to the next stage of development remains unclear. This is likely to be even more challenging as financial constraints are imposed on the public sector. More targeted and limited interventions are likely to be sought from those involved in providing services such as planning, with less opportunity to assist in skill-building, and more emphasis being placed on individuals to ensure that they have and engage in learning skills that are needed.

While the actions taken over the last decade on enhancing skills and learning, and in particular on the development of a wider base of professionals with 'generic' skills, has assisted in making the process of community-building more inclusive, the question remains 'how effective such enskilling has been in planning sustainable communities'. The ESRC/HCA Initiative has shown that imaginative and effective ways of engaging communities are being practised locally within the UK, but often there remains in these cases only a limited dialogue over what is a sustainable community. Planning professionals have a key role in moving forward this debate, not only in assisting communities to find clarity about what may be the desired local form of sustainable community, but also in leading the processes by which such outcomes can emerge.

The importance of such leading roles will be further enhanced with the Coalition Government's intention to abolish all regional-level planning in England, and give greater emphasis to localism and local enterprise partnerships. In this new environment, planners who have the skills and positive mindsets to offer vision in establishing local partnerships across public, private and community boundaries will be at a premium. The localism expected under the agenda of the 'Big Society' looks beyond a single local authority and will demand different skills of planning and place-making professionals as they establish new functional spatial layers. Even if in this new regime the notion of 'sustainable communities' is lost, value will continue to be placed on those professionals who can work effectively with local people and private-sector organisations to build better communities. People and places are constantly changing and planning professionals need to continue to learn how best to work with such change.

# References

AGYEMAN, J. and ANGUS, B. (2003), 'The role of civic environmentalism in the pursuit of sustainable communities', *Journal of Environmental Planning Management*, **46**, 345–63.

ALLEN, C. and CROOKES, L. (2009), 'Fables of the reconstruction: a phenomenology of "place shaping" in the North of England', *Town Planning Review*, **80**, 455–80.

ATKINSON, R., BLANDY, S., FLINT, J. and LISTER, D. (2005), 'Gated cities of today? Barricaded residential development in England', *Town Planning Review*, **76**, 401–22.

AUDIT COMMISSION (2006), 'Sustainable Communities National Report: The planning system – Matching expectations and capacity', Wetherby, Audit Commission Publications.

BAGWELL, S. (2007), 'Skills needs for regeneration professionals', *Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal*, **1**, 191–204.

BAILEY, N. (2005), 'The great skills debate: defining and delivering skills required for community regeneration in England', *Planning, Practice and Research*, **20**, 341–52.

BATTY, E., BEATTY, C., FODEN, M., LAWLESS, P., PEARSON, S. and WILSON, I. (2010), 'Involving local people in regeneration: evidence from the New Deal for Communities Programme, The New Deal for Communities National Evaluation: Final report – Volume 2', Department for Communities and Local Government, http://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/downloads/general/Volume%20two%20-%20Involving%20local%20people%20in%20regeneration.pdf (accessed 28 July 2010).

BLUNKETT, D. (2004), Speech to New Local Government Network annual conference, 22 January 2004, http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs3/db_nlgn.html (accessed 28 July 2010).

CABINET OFFICE (2010) 'Building the Big Society', (18 May) www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf (accessed 29 July 2010).

CALDEIRA, T. (2000), *Cities of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in San Paolo*, Berkeley, CA, University of Berkeley Press.

DCLG (DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT) (2006), *Strong and prosperous communities: The Local Government White Paper*, (Cm 6939-1), Norwich, HMSO.

DETR (DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS) (2000), *Our towns and cities: the future – Delivering an urban renaissance*, (Cm 4911), London, DETR.

DURNING, B. and GLASSON, J. (2006), 'Delivering the planning system in England: skills' capacity constraints', *Town Planning Review*, **77**, 457–84.

EGAN, SIR JOHN (2004), *Skills for Sustainable Communities* (The Egan Review), London, ODPM.

ETZIONI, A. (1996), *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*, New York, NY, Basic Books.

GRAHAM, S. and MARVIN, S. (2001), *Splintered Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition*, London, Routledge.

GRAVES, M. (2010), 'The structuring of urban life in a mixed-income housing "community"', *City and Community*, **9**, 109–31.

GREEN, F. (2009), 'Job quality in Britain', Praxis 1, Wath-upon-Dearne and London, UK Commission for Employment and Skills.

GRINT, K. (2009), 'Purpose, power, knowledge, time and space: final report', Local Government Leadership, http://www.localleadership.gov.uk/totalplace/leadership/purpose-power-knowledge-time-space/ (accessed 27 July 2010).

HEALEY, P. (2006), 'Transforming governance: challenges of institutional adaptation and a new politics of space', *European Planning Series*, **14**, 299–319.

HEALEY, P. (2007), *Urban Complexity and Spatial Strategies*, London, Routledge.

HEMPEL, L. C. (2009), 'Conceptual and analytical challenges in building sustainable communities', in D. A. Mazmanian and M. E. Kraft (eds), *Toward Sustainable Communities: Transition and Transformations in Environmental Policy*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 33–62.

IMRIE, R. and RACO, M. (eds) (2003), *Urban Renaissance? New Labour, Community and Urban Policy*, London, Policy Press.

JONES, J. and EVANS, P. (2008), 'Rethinking sustainable urban regeneration: ambiguity, creativity and the shared territory', *Environment and Planning A*, **40**, 1416–34.

LEITCH, A. (2006), *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills* (The Leitch Review of Skills), Norwich, HMSO.

LOW, S. (2003), *Behind the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America*, London, Routledge.

LYONS, M. (2007), *Place-shaping: a shared ambition for the future of local government: Final Report*, London, TSO.

MEEHAN, B. and THOMAS, I. (2006), 'Teamwork: education for entrants to the built environment professions', *Environmental Education Research*, **12**, 609–23.

NADIN, V. (2007) 'The emergence of the spatial planning approach in England', *Planning Practice and Research*, **22**, 43–62.

ODPM (OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER) (2002), *Sustainable Communities: Delivering through Planning*, London: ODPM, www.communities.gov.uk/documents/corporate/pdf/SustainableCommunities.pdf (accessed 28 July 2010).

ODPM (OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER) (2003), *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future*, London, HMSO.

ODPM (OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER) (2005) *Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development*, Norwich, TSO.

PECK, J. (2005), 'Struggling with the creative class', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, **29**, 740–70.

POW, C.-P. (2009), '"Good" and "real" places: a geographical–moral critique of territorial place-making', *Geografiska Annaler, Series B*, **91**, 91–105.

RACO, M. (2007), *Building Sustainable Communities: Spatial Policy and Labour Mobility in Post-war Britain*, Bristol, Policy Press.

RACO, M. (2008), 'Key worker housing, welfare reform and the new spatial policy in England', *Regional Studies*, **42**, 737–51.

ROBERTS, P. (2005), 'Establishing skills for tomorrow', *Town and Country Planning*, **74**, 296–97.

ROBERTS, P. (2009), 'Shaping, making and managing places: creating and maintaining sustainable communities through the delivery of enhanced skills and knowledge', *Town Planning Review*, **80**, 437–54.

ROGERS, R. (1999), *Towards an Urban Renaissance* (Final Report of the Urban Task Force chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside), London, E&FN Spon.

ROZEE, L. (2008), 'How planning can meet the challenges: In praise of Local Development Frameworks', *Town Planning Review*, **79**, 594–622.

SAYCE, S. (2010), 'Skills development for built environment professionals', Research summary, Glasgow, University of Strathclyde, http://www.strath.ac.uk/media/departments/ geographysociology/suscoms/pdfs/researchsummaries/Sayce.pdf (accessed 29 July 2010).

SHAW, D. and LORD, A. (2009), 'From land-use to "spatial planning": reflections on the reform of the English planning system', *Town Planning Review*, **80**, 415–36.

STEVENS, Q. (2009), '"Broken" public spaces in theory and practice', *Town Planning Review*, **80**, 371–91.

TALEN, E. (2005), *New Urbanism and American Planning: The Conflict of Cultures*, New York, NY, Routledge.

UK COMMISSION FOR EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS (2010), 'High Performance Working: A Policy Review, Executive Summary 18', Wath-upon-Dearne and London, UK Commission for Employment and Skills.

WEBSTER, C., GLASZE, G. and FRANTZ, K. (2002), 'The global spread of gated communities', *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, **29**, 315–20.