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LEPs and sustainable development

Peter Jones, Daphne Comfort and David Hillier provide a commentary on the sustainable development initiatives currently being pursued by some of the Local Enterprise Partnerships

The creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) was announced in 2010 by the then Coalition Government, and since then a total of 39 LEPs have been established, covering all of England. LEPs are 'local business led partnerships between local authorities and businesses' designed to 'play a central role in determining local economic priorities and undertaking activities to drive economic growth and the creation of local jobs'.¹

While the initial principal goals of the LEPs were focused upon setting out investment priorities, supporting high-growth businesses, leveraging funding from the private sector and leading changes in how businesses are regulated locally,² some voices have stressed the need for LEPs to balance their focus on growth with a concern for sustainable development. In one of the recommendations of its *Policy Analysis of Housing and Planning Reform* publication of 2011, the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), for example, argued³ that in addition to 'creating the right environment for business and growth' LEPs should also address 'the transition to a low-carbon economy'.

Furthermore, in its preliminary guidance to LEPs on the development and delivery of European Structural and Investment Fund strategies, the Coalition Government advised that sustainable development was one of a number of 'cross cutting issues' that would need to be considered in developing investment strategies.⁴ More particularly, LEPs were advised that they needed to demonstrate how they would 'promote environmental protection requirements, resource efficiency, climate change mitigation and adaptation, disaster resilience and risk prevention and management in the selection of operations'.

While LEPs have no statutory town and country planning powers or responsibilities, their role in driving economic growth effectively means that, in part at least, they are driving plan-making and the determination of planning decisions.

More recently, in reviewing the planning role of LEPs, Pugalis, Townsend, Gray and Ankowska have argued that 'it is critical that more thought is also given to the mechanisms required to empower the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development otherwise strategic priorities will continue to be overridden by economic growth concerns'.⁵ This plea was echoed in research into the 'planning and delivery potential of LEPs'⁶ conducted in the South West of England, in which 'sustainable development' emerged as a 'key message' which emphasised that 'it is important that LEPs reflect a balanced approach to economic growth and development'. That said Pugalis, Townsend, Gray and Ankowska revealed that sustainability was identified as a one of the 'growth drivers' in over 60% of the Strategic Economic Plans published by each of the LEPs in 2014. With this in mind, this article reviews the LEPs' websites to outline and provide a commentary on the sustainable development initiatives currently being pursued by some of the LEPs.

The development and funding of LEPs

Proposals for the creation of LEPs were first announced in May 2010, with further details on the responsibilities and the geography of LEPs being circulated by the Secretaries of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and for Communities and Local Government to local authorities and business

leaders. A total of 62 LEP proposals were received by the Coalition Government and 24 were approved in October 2010, and a further 15, including one covering the whole of London, were approved subsequently, taking the total to 39. While these 39 LEPs cover all of England there is some overlapping, and 37 local authority districts are covered by two LEPs.

While the LEPs were initially seen to have a common set of roles and responsibilities, Pugalis, Townsend, Gray and Ankowska suggested that 'the gestation of each LEP has been distinct' and that a 'lack of uniformity is the only consistency across LEPs, as they defy a single definition'.⁵ More critically, they argued that 'Legally, LEPs are not public bodies or state-owned organisations. They continue to operate with an opaque remit and lack firm institutional foundations'; and that while 'Many LEPs claim they are 'locally owned' and 'free from central control'', in reality 'they benefit from the patronage of central government' which is 'actually quite directive of their work'.

The sources and scale of the funding for LEPs have varied over time. Initially intimations were that LEPs would not receive direct funding and that they would be expected to meet their own routine administration costs. In August 2011 the Coalition Government made allocations to LEPs from a £5 million fund designed to cover start-up costs, and LEPs were instructed to demonstrate how they would become financially self-sufficient. The scale of central government funding has grown substantially since then.

'A focus on economic growth is very much the headline and dominant issue on the LEPs' websites, and at best sustainable development receives much less prominent, more qualified and more limited treatment'

More specifically, LEPs have received substantial funding allocations from the Growing Places Fund, from the Single Local Growth Fund and from the European Structural and Investment Fund, and a number of LEPs have been successful in bidding for funds from the Regional Growth Fund. Ward has reported that, overall, LEPs were allocated £6,540 million of European funding for the period 2014-2020 and £7,268 million in Growth Deal funding in 2014-2015.² That said, Pugalis, Townsend, Gray and Ankowska reported⁵ that there were 'huge

differences in funding (including European Structural Funds) which LEPs 'control''.⁵

The LEPs have attracted strong support from the Government and while Andy Steel, Chair of Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP, in his foreword to a Localis/Lloyds Bank report into the future of LEPs, perhaps unsurprisingly views LEPs as having 'a very bright' future and 'a pivotal role in regional economic development'.⁷ However, the LEPs are not without their critics. Ward summarises a number of concerns relating, for example, to fears that locally driven Strategic Economic Plans may not be the most appropriate way to deliver national growth priorities, worries that substantial public investment in LEPs may produce only limited returns, and claims that weak leadership, insufficient administrative capacity and changes in board membership is limiting the effectiveness of LEPs.²

Sustainable development

The ideas underpinning sustainable development are not new,⁸ but the concept began to attract increasing attention from the 1980s onwards, following the publication of the *World Conservation Strategy*⁹ and *Our Common Future*.¹⁰ In the following decades the term sustainability has become increasingly seen as offering potential solutions to a wide range of challenges and problems from the global to the local scale across seemingly almost all walks of life. Arguably the most widely used definition of sustainable development is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.¹⁰

That said, sustainable development is a contested concept, and it is 'a controversial topic because it means different things to different people'.¹¹ In summary, there is a family of definitions essentially based in and around ecological principles, and there are definitions which include social and economic development as well as environmental goals and which aim to embrace equity in meeting human needs. At the same time a distinction is often made between 'weak' and 'strong' sustainability – Roper, for example, has suggested that 'weak sustainability prioritizes economic development, while strong sustainability subordinates economies to the natural environment and society, acknowledging ecological limits to growth'.¹²

LEPs and sustainable development initiatives

A focus on economic growth is very much the headline and dominant issue on the LEPs' websites, and at best sustainable development receives much less prominent, more qualified and more limited treatment. The economic focus is succinctly expressed in a number of ways. Thus the LEPs typically describe their focus as being 'to create economic growth in an innovative, enterprising and



Many of the LEPs report their commitment to 'sustainable living, growth and job creation'

international business environment', 'to drive economic growth and to create jobs across the region', and to 'deliver growth'.

A number of LEPs stress their commitment to sustainable economic growth and employment creation, and this aim is also illustrated in a number of ways. Some LEPs, for example, claim to be 'driving forward sustainable economic growth', to be promoting 'sustainable balanced growth' and to be looking to 'allow businesses to grow, become more profitable, and greener'. More generally, many, but not all the LEPs report on their commitment to sustainable growth, sustainable job creation, sustainable living, sustainable urban extensions, sustainable urban drainage schemes and sustainable transport systems, for example, without attempting to define what the term sustainable means either generally or specifically.

Many of the LEPs identify sustainable development as a cross-cutting issue, as suggested in the Government's advice on European Structural Investment Fund strategies as outlined earlier, but here again sustainable development is not defined. The Swindon and Wiltshire LEP, for example, has identified sustainable development as one of its cross-cutting themes and claimed that its European Structural Investment Fund investments 'will be governed by reference to shared principles for Sustainable Development which is developed from the two unitary authorities' respective Local Plans'.¹³ More specifically, the Swindon and Wiltshire LEP has outlined its principles on sustainable development that guide decisions and investments in order, inter alia, to ensure high-quality design and build, promote healthy safe and inclusive communities,

protect, conserve and enhance the natural environment, assess and address the impact of climate change, and use land and resources in an efficient and effective way. Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire LEP has emphasised its intention to 'promote environmental protection requirements, resource efficiency, climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management in the selection of its programmes and projects'.¹⁴

Social inclusion, seen as an important element in some definitions of sustainable development, is also seen as an important cross-cutting theme. In its EU Structural and Investment Fund Strategy, the Black Country LEP, for example, emphasised its commitment to 'social innovation, inclusion and community led economic development', where the emphasis is said to be on 'social innovation – new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs', which will be concentrated 'on building capacity within deprived neighbourhoods'.¹⁵ Here the focus has been on 'tackling the barriers to work in 'troubled families', 'combating discrimination of groups with protected characteristics in the labour market' and 'developing the capacity of social entrepreneurs to address the needs of their local communities'. Sheffield City Region LEP has also stressed its commitment to 'social inclusion and utilising our social capital' and argued that 'sustainable growth will be achieved if we ensure that all areas, communities or groups benefit and grow as opposed to some growing at the expense of others'.¹⁶

More generally, a small number of LEPs have outlined the sustainable development and sustainability initiatives they planned to pursue. The

nature and scale of these initiatives vary, reflecting both the strategies of individual LEPs and the challenges and opportunities within the LEPs' areas; but a few specific examples provide an illustration of how sustainable development is being addressed.

The Cumbria LEP, for example, has identified 'environmental sustainability' as one of four 'key drivers' designed to help to 'deliver economic growth'.¹⁷ It has emphasised that it 'appreciates the economic value of our landscape and green infrastructure', and has argued that it would 'work with the Cumbria Local Nature Partnership to promote and safeguard the inherent value of environmental assets for the benefit of the economy'. Furthermore, it has argued that the environmental quality of its area will not only support its priority themes (namely, advanced manufacturing growth, nuclear and energy excellence, a vibrant rural and visitor economy, and the strategic connectivity of the M6 corridor), but also provide significant opportunities in its own right. At the same time the Cumbria LEP recognised that climate change and flood hazards

The plan seeks to provide strategic direction in the industrial, commercial, transport and domestic sectors to bring investment, employment and environmental and social benefits for both the city and its wider region. The Liverpool City Region LEP identified the area's local authorities as the key players, notably in providing the policy framework, in place-making, and in community leadership, but argued that the private sector also had an important role to play in bringing the necessary skills and investment to the programme.

In its Strategic Economic Plan the South East Midlands LEP described plans for 'Bicester Eco town' as a 'national exemplar for innovative sustainable construction and living'.¹⁹ The proposed development covers a site of some 345 hectares and includes the construction of up to 6,000 homes and the creation of over 4,000 jobs. The development will generate renewable energy from an array of solar photovoltaic panels on the residential properties, with a gas-powered combined heat and power plant providing supplementary energy and



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need to be addressed and managed if new private sector investment is to be attracted into the area.

The Liverpool City Region LEP launched a *Sustainable Energy Action Plan* in 2012,¹⁸ embodying a vision and a programme to co-ordinate the LEP's energy sector ambitions, to advance a range of energy projects, and to bring greater resilience to energy networks. The ultimate goal is for the LEP area to 'transform itself into a low carbon economy in which future economic growth, the delivery of which remains of vital importance, is decoupled from the consumption of fossil fuels and their inevitable [carbon dioxide] emissions'.

heat. While the South East Midlands LEP has recognised that the sustainable construction sector is not well established in the town, it reported that the skills are being developed within the private sector and the local college and the supply chain is beginning to become established.

The South East Midlands LEP also outlined plans for Priors Hall, which it described as 'a major sustainable urban extension to Corby which will provide a new mixed community, comprising new dwellings and associated facilities, infrastructure and open space inspired by the parkland tradition of the Rockingham Forest area'. The development will

eventually include over 5,000 dwellings, a new school, employment land, a business academy, an enterprise centre and extensive public open space. The South East Midlands LEP has argued that Priors Hall 'will make an important contribution to the regeneration of the town, providing an area of open countryside within easy reach of many homes' and that 'it will enhance the transition between urban Corby and its rural hinterland'.

Humber LEP's Strategic Economic Plan includes a strategic 'flood risk and environmental management' plan designed to 'stimulate economic development through further investment in flood and coastal risk management' and to 'promote and embed sustainable development and activities across the LEP area to sustain the natural environment'.²⁰ Here, the priorities include supporting investment in flood defences to reduce the risk of flooding (which is seen as the major environmental barrier to investment and growth in the Humber region), maximising the economic potential of the LEP area's unique natural assets via a partnership approach to sustainable development, and supporting the development of housing with flood defences, adaptation to climate change and energy efficiency measures.

In promoting sustainable development the Humber LEP has identified a number of 'key objectives' – including using the estuary, the coast and agriculture as key assets in securing low-carbon and renewable-energy investment; encouraging development and investment that is resilient in the face of flood risk, climate change and the need for resource efficiency; and supporting investment and development which helps to manage the environmental impacts of travel and transport.

In its *Green Economy Pathfinder Manifesto*, launched in 2012, New Anglia LEP argued that its area is 'ideally suited to leading the UK's transition to a green economy across the focus areas: low carbon, natural capital and social capital'.²¹ The New Anglia LEP suggested that while the growing population of the area had both the energy and the commitment to build the green economy in a sustainable way, the focus had to be on 'turning challenges into opportunities'.

As one of the driest and most low-lying areas within the UK, the area is seen as on the frontline of the battle against climate change, but the New Anglia LEP stressed its determination that the growth of the green economy should not be undermined by such challenges. The plans for the growth of the green economy were captured in a route map which includes reducing greenhouse gas emissions, encouraging investment in manufacturing to supply the offshore renewable energy industry, supporting the development of hub-and-spoke networks in agricultural, smart and low-carbon technologies, and identifying and developing the workforce skills base across the whole of the green economy.

Discussion

Economic growth dominates the visions and missions of all the LEPs and, although some planners and planning organisations have called for a more balanced approach to economic growth, the majority of LEPs have paid limited attention to sustainable development. A number of issues merit discussion here. Where the term 'sustainable' appears in the LEPs' plans and reports it is not defined, but it seems to be equated with the more general definition of the word sustainable – namely, to be capable of enduring rather than including any focus on ecosystems or environmental resources – and with conceptions of business continuity. As such, the LEPs' approach would seem to privilege economic and commercial imperatives in the construction and development of sustainable development agendas.

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Less pervasively, the term 'resilience', also part of the sustainable development lexicon, is used by many LEPs in relation to economic growth, transport development, and flood hazards and flood defences. Environmentally, resilience can be defined as the capacity of an ecosystem to survive, adapt and grow in the face of unforeseen or catastrophic change, while a resilient enterprise is seen as having the capacity to overcome disruptions in order to continue to fulfil changing customer needs and expectations. That said, the LEPs have generally used the term resilience as a general statement of intent, without defining or exploring its meaning and policy consequences.

More specifically, Broadbridge and Raikes have argued that LEPs 'are not yet engaged in the kind of longer-term thinking that more resilient local economies depend upon, nor are they sufficiently transparent or accountable to enable this to happen'.²²

More fundamentally there is a set of issues about the relationship between economic growth and sustainability. While some critics (such as Higgins²³) suggest that continuing economic growth, dependent as it is on the seemingly ever-

increasing depletion of the earth's natural resources, is fundamentally incompatible with sustainable development, this view finds little favour in the corporate world or with governments. In *Securing the Future*, for example, the UK Labour Government's Sustainable Development Strategy, launched in 2005, 'high and stable levels of economic growth' was one of four aims, alongside environmental protection, the prudent use of natural resources, and social progress, seemingly endorsing the compatibility of growth and sustainable development.²⁴

More recently, the Coalition Government stressed its commitment to sustainable development, which 'means making the necessary decisions now to realise our vision of stimulating economic growth and tackling the deficit, maximising wellbeing and protecting our environment, without affecting the ability of future generations to do the same'.²⁵ The current Conservative Government has not issued any specific formal statements or policies relating to sustainable development, but in a recent briefing on the Government's proposals for planning reform²⁶ the focus is on growth, with little mention of sustainable development. More generally, Tewdwr-Jones has argued that recent UK Government policy on sustainable development has been 'defined politically as job creation and economic growth'.²⁷

'More positively, a number of the LEPs have argued that the development of a green economy provides new opportunities for private investment, economic growth and job creation'

More positively, there are arguments that the relationship between economic growth and sustainable development can, and perhaps should, be seen more constructively, in terms, for example, of the green economy. A number of the LEPs have argued that the development of a green economy provides new opportunities for private investment, economic growth and job creation. A green economy, as defined by the United Nations Environment Programme, 'is low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive'.²⁸ Within such an economy 'growth in income and employment should be driven by public and private investments that reduce carbon emissions and pollution, enhance energy and resource efficiency and prevent the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services. These investments need to be catalysed and supported by

targeted public expenditure, policy reforms and regulation changes'.²⁸

Furthermore, the UN Environment Programme has argued that 'any strategy to green economies should consider the impact of environmental policies within the broader context of policies to address innovation and economic performance'.²⁹ Some of the LEPs are seeking to encourage the development of the concept of the green economy and to capitalise on their public-private sector partnership status to stimulate investment and develop policy as outlined above to this end. However Paul *et al.* have argued that the 'green economy must not be reduced to the idea of green growth which remains anchored in the present capitalist production-consumption model and holds on to economic growth as the decisive indicator for development'; rather, the focus should be 'on the potential the green economy concept offers in terms of framing debates in alternative ways'.³⁰

Conclusion

The 39 LEPs within England have developed a range of economic strategies designed to drive economic growth and employment creation. While there have been calls for balanced growth which incorporates environmental and social as well as economic dimensions, the LEPs currently seem to be paying only limited attention to sustainable development. Here Fernando's argument³¹ that 'capitalism has shown remarkable creativity and power to undermine the goals of sustainable development' would seem to resonate.

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Notes

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