

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES: PLANNING FOR INTEGRATION IN FRACTURED PLACES



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The purpose of this article is threefold: to offer some insights into the origins of the sustainable communities idea; to identify the components of an idealised sustainable community and to discuss the implications for practice; and to consider the results of the recent ‘Living Together’ research project by the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), which investigated six communities on the island of Ireland, three in the North and three in the South.

In offering these three purposes the author is aware that any brief discussion of the entire sustainable communities agenda is likely to be both superficial and raise more questions than are answered. Nevertheless, given the complex and often contested nature of the sustainable communities approach, it is important to continue to test and assess the relevance and helpfulness of the model itself. Put simply, given the complex and contested theoretical foundations for the sustainable communities approach, it is essential to be aware of the limitations of what has become a practice-driven operational paradigm.

Although the nature and content of the relationship between the theory and practice of sustainable communities may at first glance reflect all the untidy characteristics of pacemaking in an athletics race – first theory advances, then practice pushes ahead, soon theory moves to the pole position again, and so on – in reality this sharing of the lead

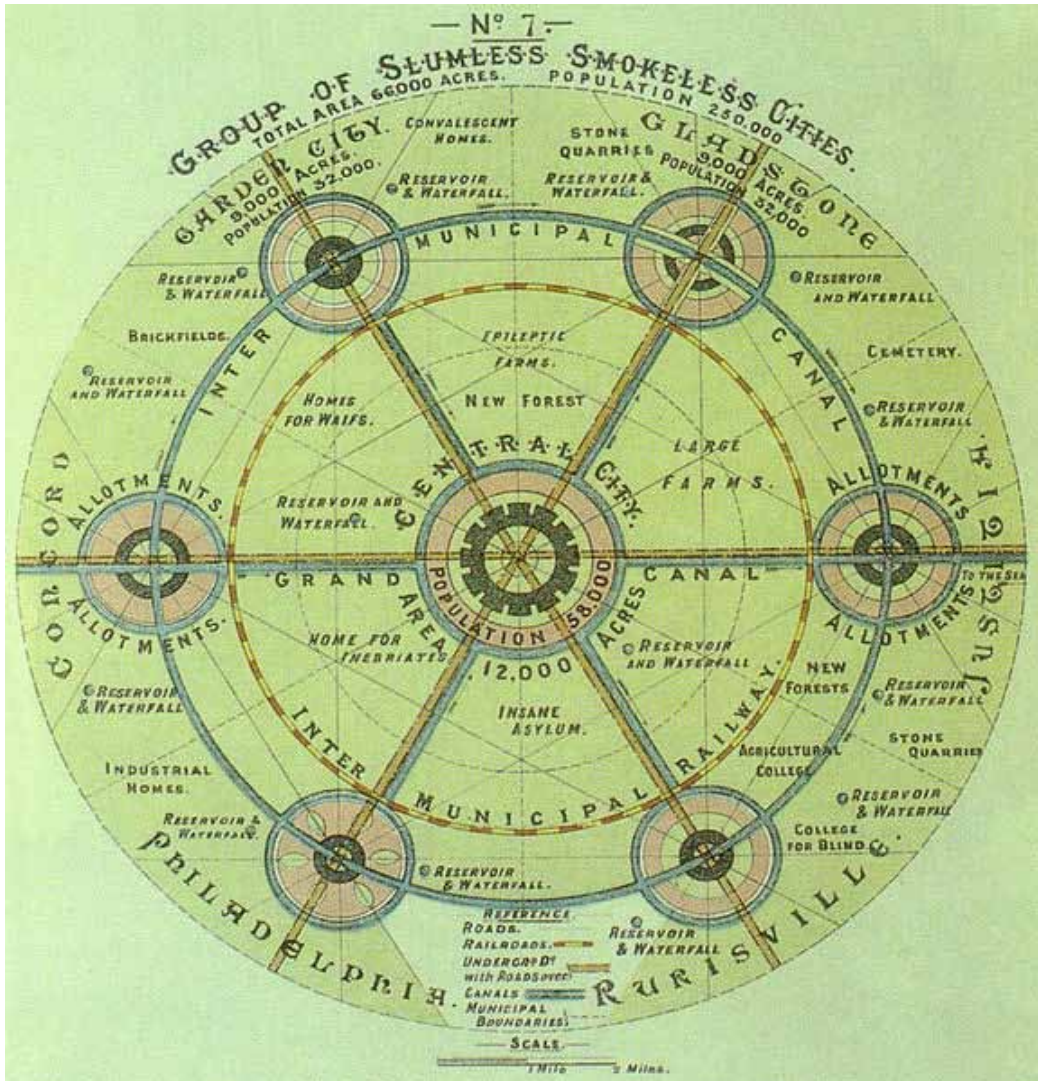
is normal and, in the context of establishing an enduring partnership between practice and theory, could even be considered as desirable. What is most important is to realise that the sustainable communities model does not attempt to explain all of the myriad interactions contained within its individual components; rather, it is best considered as an organising metaconcept which seeks to achieve an overview and to perform a co-ordinating role.

Equally, whilst it is tempting to fall into the trap of endlessly discussing the precise definition of a sustainable community, such a trap represents a somewhat sterile exercise which sidesteps the most important characteristic of the sustainable communities approach: this is that it is an aspirational model which is more about the objectives and processes of policy-making and implementation, than it is about precise targets and measurement. One thing is reasonably sure, that a sustainable community will be a place that continually seeks to forge new social, political and cultural relationships in order to adapt to changing circumstances and new challenges - to paraphrase Mazmanian and Kraft (1999), sustainable communities reflect the dynamics of the social and other interdependencies that are evident in communities.

With these points of introduction in mind, the paper now turns to a discussion of the various origins of sustainable communities thinking and to the evolution of this most practical of theories. This is followed by a discussion of the components of the model and of the generic characteristics of a sustainable community. Finally, these characteristics are utilised as the elements of a ‘scorecard’ against which the performance of the communities studied in the ‘Living Together’ project can be assessed.

This paper reflects work in progress and does not purport to provide a final answer or definitive

Figure 1: Ebenezer Howard's 'social city'



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insight into the theory and practice of sustainable communities. The paper draws upon work undertaken with Lucie Middlemiss of the University of Leeds, which was recently presented at a conference hosted by the University of Westminster (Middlemiss and Roberts, 2010) and also reflects the ongoing work programme of the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).

The Origins and Evolution of Sustainable Communities

It is difficult, if not impossible, to identify a single point of origin for the emergence of sustainable communities theory and practice. Rather, what is more readily evident is a pattern of simultaneous innovation, akin to many developments in science and technology, that has led to the parallel introduction of explanations and new modes of



practice. Although each contributor to theory or practice may claim uniqueness, in many cases the only real differences are in the language used. Language is less important than real meaning, although the excessive employment of obscure jargon has sometimes hindered agreement on the important core of principal concerns.

In order to help to introduce a measure of agreement at the outset, it is possible to identify some common historic roots of sustainable communities theory and practice. Most notable here is the work of the late 19th century social reformers and radicals, such as Ebenezer Howard (1898), who attempted to translate concerns with social justice, economic progress and effective environmental management into new models of spatial development (see *Figure 1*). In Howard's case this became the garden suburbs and cities (later, the new towns) movement. The basic concepts upon which Howard built his analysis included both spatial and organisational concerns, blended through a consideration of the physical characteristics of what he described as a 'social city'. Howard's model of spatial and social organisation shares a number of common elements with the modern day sustainable communities approach (Roberts, 2005).

In essence, Howard's 'social city' sought to meld the most favourable aspects of rural and urban life through establishing settlements that provided a complete living and working environment. The social city was characterised by three distinguishing features: the balancing of social, environmental and economic concerns; the treatment of the components of place in a single process of vision, strategy, implementation and management; and the commitment made to spatial development and social engagement, including the active encouragement given to the resident population and others to undertake 'pro-municipal work'.

Although relatively few places have subsequently been fully developed and managed according to the principles expressed by Howard and the other pioneers of sustainable communities thinking, the

concept, as well as the excellence of what practice has occurred, has proved to be enduring. Ideas related to 'social city' have driven many innovations and reforms in placemaking theory and practice, including the international new towns movement, important aspects of mixed or balanced community development and regeneration, and policy initiatives directed at neighbourhood improvement and management (see, for example, Alexander, 2009; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008; Lupton and Fuller, 2009). In addition, the objective of treating space and place as the essential organising concepts which underpin the effective governance of social, economic and political relations can be seen to have been influential in many spheres of planning and territorial management theory and practice (see, for example, Davoudi, 2008; Morphet, 2007).

Despite the inherent intellectual and practical strengths of the 'social city' – sustainable communities concept, for much of the twentieth century such ideas were marginalised, often due to a combination of low aspiration and expediency. In many Western nations, including both the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, attempts were made periodically to introduce a more satisfactory guiding paradigm, but both in times of boom and bust such efforts were partial, infrequent and underdeveloped. The norm became the large homogenous housing estate, either provided by the public sector or privately developed. Such estates were frequently designed and created with inadequate attention given to the full range of facilities, infrastructure and governance arrangements to establish a sustainable community.

This 'one-size-fits-all' model was the result of many interacting forces: massive demand for housing in post-1945 Europe, surges of economic and population growth, resource shortages, periodic financial crises, rigid and restrictive professional norms, unimaginative architecture and construction methods, poor service provision, the separation of public sector budgets and services, and a host of other restrictions and impediments. The consequence was the emergence of a homogenous,



Empty buy-to-let property

centrally-determined model which often proved unequal to the task of providing high quality, lasting communities and instead offered sub-optimal solutions; the most widespread of these solutions was the mass (chiefly public) housing estates which were built from the late 1940s onwards.

As early as the late 1950s and early 1960s some of these 'model estates' were proving to be problem places, many of which are today described as 'failing neighbourhoods', 'sink estates' or places requiring extensive 'housing market renewal'. The modernist solutions to the twin challenges represented by the need to deal with slums and address the housing shortages of the mid twentieth century have been criticised by both academic and policy commentators (for example, Power, 1993; Hanley, 2007).

It is in this legacy of failed provision and unrealised opportunities that the modern sustainable communities movement has its roots. A number of radical evaluations and searching critiques published from the late 1960s onwards pointed to the absence in many projects and programmes of any real attempt to either deal with the totality of a place or engage and involve local people in

creating and managing communities (Davis, 1972). The various critiques also pointed to other failures, including the lack of long-term management of localities and the virtual absence of strategies to ensure the successful adaptation of places which faced changing contextual circumstances, such as the failure of a major source of employment or the withdrawal of a basic service, such as health or retail provision. Although much has been written about the failure of mass public housing, an equal pattern of low ambition and eventual failure occurred in many areas of private housing, with a most recent example offered by the many currently empty buy-to-let properties.

Both the repeated occurrence of failures in the provision of housing and the weaknesses which resulted from a lack of co-ordination between the delivery of housing and other necessary services, were sufficient in themselves to stimulate the search for a new model for community development. However, this search for a new paradigm was accelerated in response to the growing social and economic divisions which began to emerge from the mid-1970s. Community projects of various kinds were introduced, many of which emphasised the



desirability of promoting community engagement and the development of social capital. This was increasingly translated into policy, with the emergence of specific urban programmes and a range of other selective interventions. These included the introduction of local community development and environmental initiatives. A further aspect of this innovation at local level saw the establishment of community-based approaches, often related to specific threats to the continued existence of a neighbourhood or community (McBane, 2008).

By the late 1980s many of the wider ideas and initiatives that provide a background to current theory and policy began to emerge. More comprehensive spatial and regeneration policies emerged at EU, national and local level; these initiatives were given additional impetus by the publication of the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) and a range of other social, environmental and economic assessments. In the UK by the mid-1990s these new ideas, together with a limited range of practice experience, led the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (1995) to conclude that future community regeneration should focus on developing longer-term, more comprehensive and inclusive models of regeneration and spatial management.

These more inclusive comprehensive models and modes of practice aimed to redress the balance between the dominant physical (land and property) approach and the wider sustainable development agenda. By 1999 Mazmanian and Kraft were arguing in favour of linking sustainable development concepts with those of community in order to capture the components of place; while Church and Young (2001) noted the use of the term 'sustainable communities' to reflect the new wave of place-based policies and programmes. Equally, other authors acknowledged sustainable development as a new driver of regeneration (Roberts and Sykes, 2000), and argued that the term 'sustainable communities' signified the application of sustainable development at local level (Lafferty, 2001).

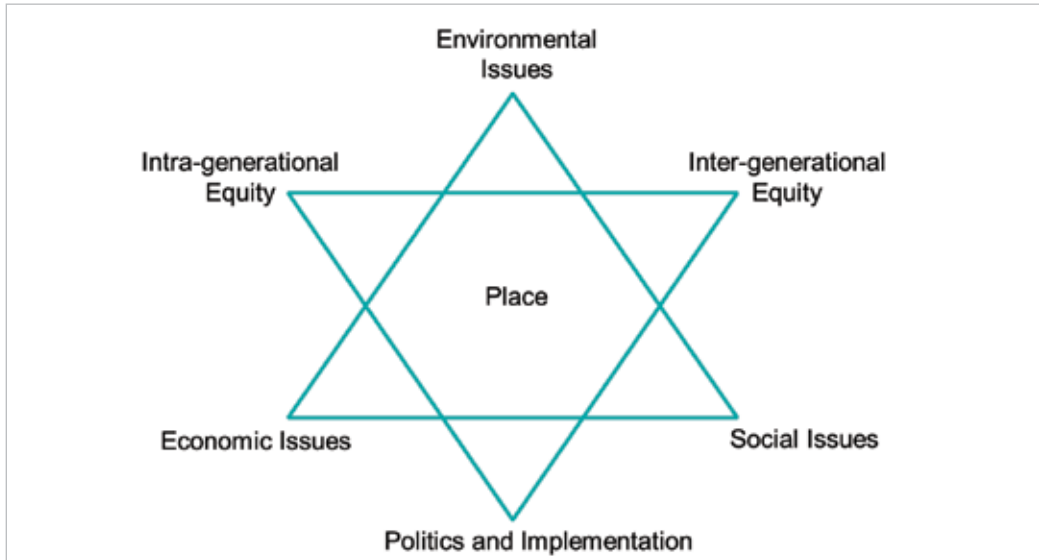
The model of sustainable communities which emerged from 2000 onwards was seen as a means of addressing a web of interconnected problem sets – such as a shortage of affordable housing, low income, social deprivation and environmental degradation – through a comprehensive programme of interventions, investment and engagement. It was argued that such a response was required in order to prevent future community destabilisation and to embed a sense of community 'ownership' of policy and practice. In the UK these ideas were formalised through a series of sustainable community plans (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003), while at European Union level the sustainable communities approach was adopted through the Bristol Accord (ODPM, 2005). The detailed components of the sustainable communities model have varied over time and between countries, but the broad characteristics of the model are generally considered to reflect the priorities of the Brundtland agenda.

The Components and Characteristics of Sustainable Communities

In the previous section, reference was made to the close relationship between the components of the Brundtland model and the features of the sustainable communities approach. At one level this relationship can be seen as the fine grain translation of global concerns at a local scale, whilst, in another sense, the sustainable communities model can be considered as a means of establishing bottom-up priorities within the context of a national or international policy framework. Irrespective of the interpretive stance taken, both models share common elements of understanding, analysis and implications for action.

The standard model of sustainable development, drawn from the analysis presented in the Brundtland Report (1987), considers matters of social justice, the use of environmental resources and responsible economic progress both within the current generation and between generations. Additionally, the Brundtland analysis considers the politics and applications of the sustainable development

Figure 2: Sustainable Development and Place



Source: Roberts, Ravetz and George (2009)

approach at all levels from the global to local (see Figure 1).

The explicit insertion of place into the general sustainable development model is an important addition to the basic analysis. This reflects both the realities of the post-Brundtland politics of implementation, a process that has been guided by the decisions made at a series of international conferences to focus on practical applications at community level, and by the theoretical guidance offered by authors such as Massey (1994), who warned against assigning all causality to some unknown external force operating at global level. These interpretations and guidance suggest that place, rather than just becoming the eventual repository of an existing model of sustainable development, is the arena in which the realities of sustainable development are made plain and dealt with.

If it is accepted that the spatial dimension of sustainable development is a significant factor in its delivery, then the second step in the translation from sustainable development to sustainable communities

is the provision of a finer grain model than that derived from the Brundtland analysis. This finer grain model – the sustainable communities approach – also reflects the new, or renewed, interest paid to place and placemaking in recent years (Roberts, 2009), combined with the consequences of a growing concern with matters of social justice and cohesion (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007). These drivers of change supported the development of the sustainable communities model, which, as Kearns and Turok (2004) suggest, allows the politics and organisation of sustainable development to be fully incorporated into the delivery of improved placemaking and enhanced governance arrangements at community level.

Although the precise specification of the sustainable communities model has evolved considerably over the past eight years, the general model has provided a framework for thinking and action at community level. The general model encapsulates eight basic components of a sustainable place, together with a ninth overall organising component which is concerned with strategy, delivery and the management of a sustainable communities

Figure 3: Components of Sustainable Communities



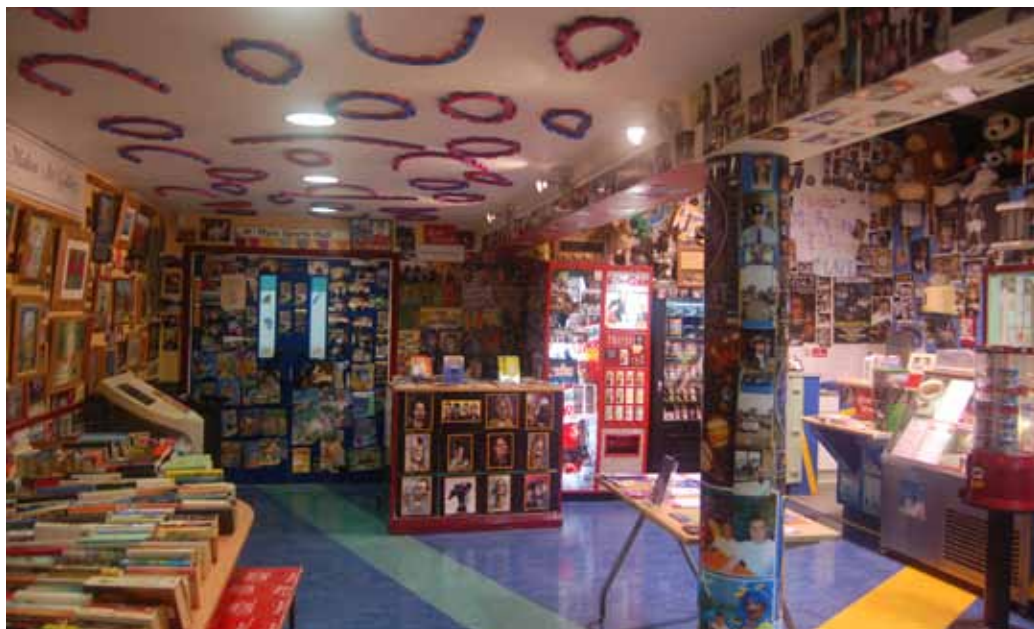
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005)

programme for an entire place. The eight basic components are:

- Active, inclusive and safe: fair, tolerant and cohesive with a strong local culture and other shared community activities;
- Well-run: with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership;
- Well-connected: with good transport services and communications linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services;
- Well-served: with public, private, community and voluntary services that are appropriate to the needs of people and accessible to all;
- Environmentally sensitive: providing places for people to live that are considerate of the environment;
- Thriving: with a flourishing, diverse and innovative local economy;
- Well-designed and built: featuring a quality natural and built environment;
- Fair for everyone: including those in other communities, now and in the future.

These basic components and the ninth 'place shaping' meta component are illustrated in Figure 3.

Whilst the immediate primary purpose of introducing the sustainable communities model in the UK was the need to provide guidance for the development of new communities in the Thames Gateway and elsewhere, an important secondary purpose was to support the regeneration, restructuring and further development of existing communities, and especially those that had failed or were 'fractured' (ODPM, 2003). This dual role – supporting new and existing places – is both appropriate and logical. To ensure that new places are developed and managed according to sustainable communities principles is a way of 'future proofing' them; as is the use of the same principles to guide the regeneration of failed



A community centre in the Mahon area of Cork visited under the 'Living Together' project.

or fractured communities. In both cases, the chief objective is to prevent future degeneration and the need for further major intervention. This approach has been summarised as a 'whole of place – whole of community – whole of life' treatment.

Taking the eight plus one components of the sustainable communities model as a starting point, it is possible to derive criteria for both the selection of appropriate interventions and for assessing the effectiveness of the chosen interventions. Such an approach has been used to judge sustainable communities programmes (see, for example, Robinson and Pearce, 2009; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008; Roberts 2007) either equally across all of the criteria, or with particular emphasis on some of the criteria within the general context of the entire set.

Three important riders should be noted at this juncture. First, it is essential to realise that the sustainable communities model is chiefly about raising aspirations rather than setting precise

targets. Second, the very nature of the model implies that these aspirations are more about improvement and the dissemination of best practice, rather than achieving fixed goals. Third, it is desirable that a strategy and programme should incorporate all eight of the basic individual components; although it is unlikely that equal weight will be given to all components and it is inevitable that different communities will place emphasis on particular components. Taken together, these three riders suggest that the ninth overarching component is fundamental to the successful implementation of the model, because it acts as a co-ordinated delivery mechanism to ensure the most effective overall deployment of all resources – human, physical, environmental and economic.

Reflections on the 'Living Together' Project

Whilst acknowledging the caveats noted above about the limits of the sustainable communities model when used as a basis for assessing the performance of individual community development or improvement projects or programmes, this section



of the paper offers some broad reflections on the 'Living Together' project (Gray et al, 2010). These reflections use both the sustainable community components noted above and the various categories defined in the project in order to capture the lessons learned.

The 'Living Together' project investigated initiatives, policies and programmes undertaken to build or improve subsidised housing (affordable housing) in mixed communities. At the outset the project recognised the uniqueness of each community – a pre-requisite for the application of the sustainable communities approach – and acknowledged the very different contextual circumstances in which 'place shaping' occurred. Six cases, three in Northern Ireland and three in the Republic of Ireland, were examined, with the communities varying considerably in terms of location, size and the prevailing governance arrangements. Considerable differences were also noted in terms of the development history of the communities studied (they were in Antrim, Enniskillen, Derry/Londonderry, Sligo, Cork and Adamstown, Co Dublin): some were developed from the 1950s onwards, others were more recent; some were built in or adjacent to existing settlements, others were at peripheral locations. The programmes of development in the six communities also varied in terms of scale, ownership, content, policy context and mode of delivery. Some common themes were present, such as the incidence of severe socio-economic problems, deprivation and poor housing conditions. For further details of the project and its findings see Gray et al, 2010.

For the purposes of illustrating the general features of the sustainable communities approach, this paper now briefly considers the lessons from the 'Living Together' project. Although the lessons from the study differ in terms of their categorisation from the standard sustainable communities components, there are a number of significant points of broad coincidence between the two, both in terms of what has been achieved and how outputs and outcomes have been planned and implemented.

Most noticeable is the emphasis put on what could best be described as the fundamentals of place, such as community safety, social integration and physical improvement. Without successfully implementing policies related to these issues, other elements of a sustainable communities work package stand little chance of success. Although the level of achievement with regard to these fundamentals varied between the communities studied, it is reassuring that they are acknowledged as important pre-requisites.

The key lessons from the project also reflect a number of the sustainable communities components. Aspects related to community sensitivity and the promotion of choice echo the sustainable community calls for the promotion of inclusive places which are well-served, whilst the provision of services and infrastructure links to the sustainable community components of being well-connected and well-served. However, on both the first two counts the project reports variable performance, offset in part by some strong indications of positive change in terms of social regeneration in places such as Cranmore (Sligo).

Other areas of coincidence and positive reporting relate to the attempt to build new or stronger markets in the communities (an aspect of the sustainable community 'thriving' category). Another dimension of the 'thriving' dimension relates to the aspiration in the six communities to enhance economic performance and generate employment. Again the realities at community level vary, but the point made regarding the positive effect on the availability of jobs and good transportation is a familiar story.

Finally, it would appear that the lessons of the project regarding the importance of providing or improving social housing, as well as actions with respect to living and prospering together, reflect the lessons from the wider sustainable communities literature. The first of these maps directly onto the 'well-designed and built' and 'environmentally sensitive'



components, whilst the second characteristic reflects the importance of the 'fair for everyone' and 'well-run' components.

Although it is unwise, and impossible, to provide a definitive judgement in the absence of more detailed evidence and assessment, it would appear that elements of progress in the six case study communities broadly validate the merits of using the sustainable communities model as a guidance framework.

Final Thoughts

Whilst this paper has chiefly been concerned with offering an overview of the origins, evolution and characteristics of the sustainable communities model, it has also offered some reflections on the application of the model to six communities in Ireland. Three broad conclusions can be drawn from this exercise.

First, the general model would appear to offer a broad framework for the analysis of the problems and potentials encountered in individual communities, and it also provides a framework for the creation of comprehensive and coordinated programmes of improvement. The case studies demonstrate the importance of overall strategy in delivering positive outcomes and reflect the

interdependence of the various components of place.

Second, the case studies broadly confirm the benefits of adopting a 'whole of place' approach and using this as a means of delivering benefits through tapping synergies. Even though there are very real constraints on the extent to which synergies can be exploited, the very fact that they exist and are recognised provides a basis for future action. A side issue here is the need to share lessons about what works best and what to avoid.

Third, the case studies confirm the need to be realistic about what can be achieved in a relatively short time in communities that start from a low base. This requirement to be realistic need not diminish the aspirations of a community, but it is important to be honest and, as the case studies demonstrate, early wins can help to build confidence.

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This project is part-financed by the European Union's European Regional
Development Fund through the INTERREG IVA Programme.