

Fora, Networks and Public Examinations: The Role and Significance of Public Participation in the New Regional Plan for South East England

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1.0 Introduction

Ever since Sherry Arnstein's simple and effective typology of the levels of public participation, planning theorists have been trying to conceptualise the nature of public involvement. At the same time planning practitioners have been grappling with the realities of trying to engage in a meaningful and 'democratic' way with the local communities and stakeholder groups in whose name the plans and strategies are prepared and in whose interests places and spaces are supposed to be developed. Both ventures have been fraught with uncritical conceptualisation, simplistic analysis, unexpected findings, and frustrated encounters. They have also been characterised by a slow maturing of understanding and the development of realistic and sensitive approaches and conceptual frameworks. Many contemporary writers and practitioners now see public participation in planning as a constrained but potentially socially progressive vehicle for 'opening-up' decision-making processes to a wider range of interests, particular the citizens who have to use the environment which is planned and produced. They realise that this process, like the society within which planning is embedded, is complex and needs a reflective approach which builds dialogue over time.

Much of the participation literature has concentrated on local planning practice and the involvement of local community groups in these planning exercises. Some (e.g. Saunders 1979; Cawson, 1986; Healey et. al., 1988; Low, 1992) have emphasised the fragmentation of planning regimes and the (imperfect) hierarchical power relations which are one of the major constraints on the freedom of local planning. Often these studies stress the inequality in access to the higher levels of governmental decision-making and different 'modes of operation' apparent at the various levels of state policy-making and implementation.

This paper aims to overview the main conceptual frameworks for understanding and, in some cases, building participatory approaches to land use planning and explore their utility in analysing the experience of a recent regional planning exercise in South East England. In particular it examines the contribution of recent 'new institutionalist' ideas to our understanding of participatory processes and the implications for practice of using them to build strategies of public involvement in policy-making and implementation.

The use of a regional level case study, particularly in the light of recent UK experience,

provides its own problems. Regional planning and governance in the UK has long been placed in the background as centralised policy objectives (usually expressed in the form of Central Government Circulars or, more recently, Planning Policy Guidance Notes) have fought with the priorities set at the local (district or county) level of government. It has been local government which has been given the responsibility of producing statutory development plans (structure and local plans) whilst regional planning policy was steadily whittled away, ending up (by the early 1990s) as brief and anodyne statements included in centrally drafted Regional Policy Guidance Notes (RPGs). This was not an environment in which ‘public participation’ was either given much weight or, to be honest, deserved to be given it!

However, the Labour Administration which came into power in 1996 put regionalism and devolution firmly on the political agenda. Alongside the proposals for separate Assemblies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was a commitment to have (indirectly) elected Regional Assemblies for the regions of England and a related devolution and strengthening of regional planning (and related) policy. This was the more supportive political and policy environment which correlated with the review of the regional planning guidance for the South East of England (RPG9), on which the case study material is based. However, as we will see, the immaturity of the new arrangements and inevitable tensions and negotiations involved in this, as in **any**, planning process meant that the input of stakeholder groups and the general public was not straightforward.

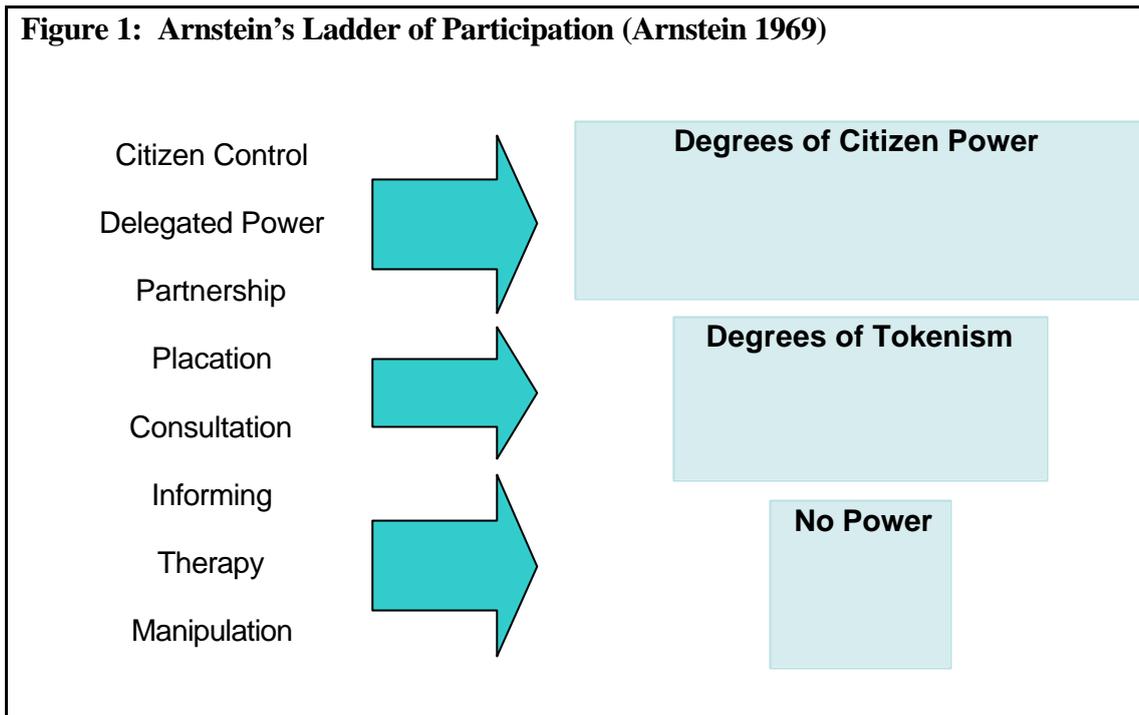
Before we consider this regional planning process, it’s worth briefly overviewing some of the key ideas and frameworks which have been used to understand and explain public participation in planning practice at all levels.

2.0 Theoretical Perspectives on Public Participation in the Planning Process

Sherry Arnstein was one of the first to examine planning practices and conclude that public participation could occur in a number of different ways and involve different levels of influence. Figure 1 illustrates this ‘ladder’ of opportunity and serves as a constant reminder of the many definitional elements which go to make-up the simple idea of ‘public participation’. In the same way that there can be variation and inequality in the type of process undertaken, so can there be inequality of input from different groups in society.

The study of social inequality and the distributional implications of planning practice was given considerable attention by academics and practitioners during the 1970s and early 1980s. David Harvey’s ‘Social Justice and the City’ (Harvey, 1973) became the pioneering work which applied radical liberal and then Marxist ideas to the nature of state policy making and urban development. Harvey and other Marxist writers drew attention to the ‘structural’ constraints on state intervention and the legitimisation role of public participation. A debate developed (initially between Poulantzas and Miliband) about how much autonomy the state apparatus had from the capitalist mode of production and, within government policy-making, how much influence could be exerted by non-capitalist interests or individual factions of capital.

Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (Arnstein 1969)



The debate was joined by neo-Weberians who challenged the 'functionalism' of structuralist theory (Saunders, 1979 and 1981). This opened-up a significant body of work which merged (to some extent) the insights from Marx and Weber. Writers in this vein (e.g. Healey et. al. 1988; Harloe et. al. 1990) acknowledged the existence of structural (economic, political and ideological) constraints on individual actions but saw the outcomes of real life 'struggles' and encounters as contingent upon the balance of political forces at any one time.

It was but a small step from this kind of eclecticism, around the ideas of 'structure' and 'agency', to more recent approaches to public participation which emphasise 'communicative action', 'structuration' and 'discourse'. Almost inevitably the simple dichotomy between structure and agency was theorised and developed in more subtle ways. Giddens (1984) contributed the idea of 'structuration' which conceptualised structure as the product of thousands and millions of everyday actions which reproduce, enforce, challenge and change the structural constraints we live our lives within. Habermas (1987) took the linguistic turn and inserted the principle 'communicative action' into the explanatory framework. This stressed the negotiation of shared understandings through a process of discourse with the potential for 'emancipatory transformations'. It was John Forester (1989) who applied Habermasian ideas to the day-to-day work of planners by emphasising the communicative role of planning. Thus planners are involved in defining, framing, arguing and negotiating issues, problems and solutions during the formulation and implementation of policies, albeit within an existing, but dynamic, set of constraints and power relationships. Forester and others (e.g. Fischer and Forester, 1993) have given us a rich body of research on the deliberations involved in public participation and interest inter-mediation.

Patsy Healey has worked in a similar vein on the other side of the Atlantic. Drawing on a range of theoretical ideas, especially those of Habermas and Giddens, Healey has outlined a 'new institutionalist' perspective which emphasises a number of key dimensions of

contemporary society including:

- The important role of *individual action and interpretation* in social and political processes, albeit worked-out in relation to other individuals and often leading to '*cultural communities*' of shared meanings and understandings;
- The construction of *discourses* within and between groups and organisations which build, consolidate, challenge and modified those shared meanings and understandings;
- The *dynamic* nature of social, economic and political change in which knowledge, experience and images are exchanged between people and communities in a series of inter-connected *networks* and '*nodes of activity*' (e.g. households, leisure activities, firms, community organisations and government agencies);
- The exercise and negotiation of *power relations* within and between communities which can develop into *structural driving forces* which shape, and are shaped by, the relevant communities over periods of time;
- The *contingent* nature of the inter-play of these facets as they work themselves out in different places and social milieu with varying *institutional capacities*;
- The increasingly fragmented and partial contribution of *formal governmental* organisations to urban management strategies; and
- The subsequent struggle of government agencies to adapt to these new conditions by restructuring themselves in terms of organisational structure and responsibility; accountability; and *policy processes* or 'ways of doing things'.

The importance of 'networks' in locking different interests into the policy-making and implementation processes of the state has a moderately long pedigree in political science theory (e.g. Lindblom, 1977; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992). It's use by Healey is currently being extended and deepened by writers using 'Actor Network Theory' (ANT) to structure their explorations of policy making and implementation (e.g. Callon, 1986; Murdoch, 1997; Parker and Wragg, 1999). ANT is a theory of 'translation', explaining how an innovation or set of ideas 'translates' spatially and temporarily to multiple destinations and into the day-to-day language of key 'decision-makers or shapers'. In doing this it can displace or transform existing ideas and become (for a time) the dominant 'framing' reference point.

It is this 'package' of theoretical insights provided by the post-structuralist writers of the last decade which will be given centre-stage in this paper. From the perspective of regional planning interventions this means that consideration should be given to:

- how the participation processes and policy discourses are constructed through this level of planning activity;
- what institutional arrangements are developed to mediate and structure these processes and what impact they have on interest representation, policy-making and the quality of debate and decision-making;
- what networks are brought into being, how they operate, what ideas they develop and how they interact with existing networks; and
- what impact they then have on the political, economic and cultural relations and 'structures' which have evolved in the particular regions under scrutiny.

As Healey and her colleagues (Healey et. al. 1995, pp. 19-20) suggest:

For those concerned with a democratic agenda - that is, forms of urban management which aid the flourishing of the diverse cultural communities which co-exist in the urban region arena while enabling the discussion and implementation of ways of identifying and acting on shared problems - a critical issue is how to identify what actions pursued in what way might make a difference....(S)uch actions are likely to focus not just on the provision of goods and services, as city governments did in the past, or the enabling of others to do so, but on the building of links both in social relations and in discourses, between the relational webs in the urban arena.

From the standpoint of SD, regional planning provides an important relational web which has the potential to generate new policy discourses directed at the restructuring of social relations between 'cultural communities' and the actor networks they engage in and, as ANT emphasises, between these and their natural environment. An initial and tentative exploration of these ideas is carried out in relation to the south east of England. Although the theoretical ideas alluded to above have not been used to construct hypotheses to guide the research into the case studies, it has helped the author reflect upon the experience of being involved with the process in different ways.

3.0 Public Participation in Regional Planning: The Case of 'A Sustainable Development Strategy for South East England'

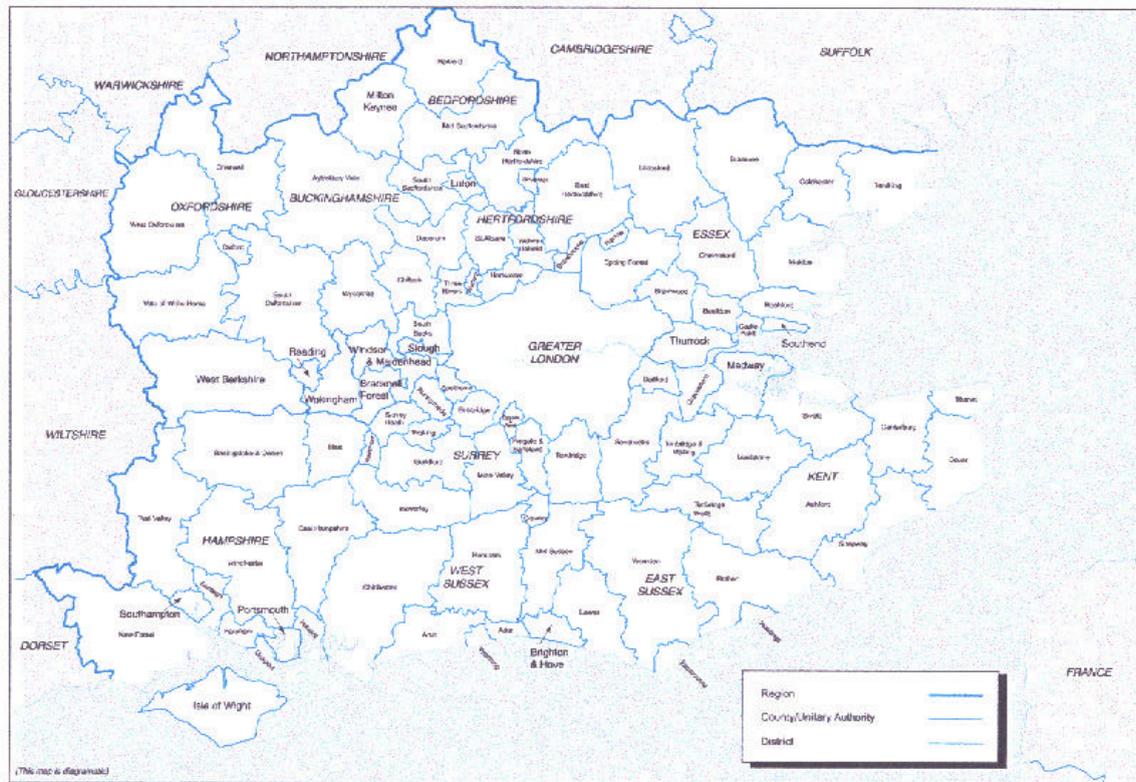
The South East of England covers the core commuting area of London (see Figure 2). It includes the national capital; its satellite New Towns (e.g. Milton Keynes, Stevenage, Harlow, Crawley, Bracknell, etc.); and free-standing towns and cities such as Oxford, Southampton, Reading, Brighton and Colchester. It also contains the capital's Green Belt, a number of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and wedges of (more or less) open countryside.

As mentioned earlier, the current Labour central government is attempting to regionalise the structure of government responsibilities and intervention by establishing devolved government systems for Scotland and Wales, and creating Regional Development Agencies and encouraging representative regional assemblies in England. The proposals for England build on the recently established Government Offices for the Regions and the growth of regional conferences, which are made-up of local authority representatives. Local government itself has recently been reorganised (for the third time in twenty five years!) and the previous two tier system of county and district councils has made way for a patchwork quilt of two tier and single tier authorities, sometimes sitting side by side inside the same county boundary!

These reorganisations and regional initiatives are just beginning to have an impact on the arenas of planning and transportation policy making. Central government still prepares its own planning guidance (Planning Policy Guidance Notes; PPGs). Until very recently, it took advice from regional conferences on regional planning policy and prepares Regional Planning Guidance Notes (RPGs). These filter down to guide County Councils (or groups of Unitary Councils where no County Council exists) in the preparation of County Structure Plans and these in turn provide the framework for District and Unitary Councils when preparing Local

Plans (which allocate specific sites and contain detailed policies and standards).

Figure 2: The SERPLAN Area (Source: RPG9)



The London and South East Planning Conference (SERPLAN) was, until April of this year, a regional planning body which represented the views of over 140 local authorities and provided advice to central government and its members on regional planning issues for the region. It's role has now been incorporated into The South East of England Regional Assembly (SEERA), although this paper will concentrate its attention on the work of SERPLAN in the regional planning process, rather than that of SEERA which has only just begun.

The 1980's saw the low point for regional planning in England. The South East had three thin and scantily clad RPG's covering London (RPG 3), the Outer South East (RPG9) and the Thames Gateway (RPG9a). The Thames Gateway (the Thames estuary down-river from London) was given its own Policy Guidance because it was an area for regeneration and renewal in RPG3 and RPG9. Central Government had taken the lead in producing these policy guidance notes and their ideology of minimal planning intervention was replicated in their contents. Indeed, apart from strategic housing allocations for each county, readers of the guidance would be hard pressed to find a specific policy statement in any of them!

The 1990's saw the thawing of the monetarist hard-line developed by Margaret Thatcher and the 'conversion' of all major political parties to the concept of sustainable development. It was this changing context which hastened-up the review of the three RPGs and resulted in SERPLAN kick-starting their 'normal' policy review process in 1994.

The whole process took from December 1994 to April 2000, although the final version of the new RPG9 (which incorporates RGG9a, but not RPG3 which was reviewed at the same time by the London Planning Advisory Committee in close co-operation with SERPLAN) is still to be published by central government. The policy-making process was progressed in three phases and these relate broadly to three different mechanisms of public involvement in policy development:

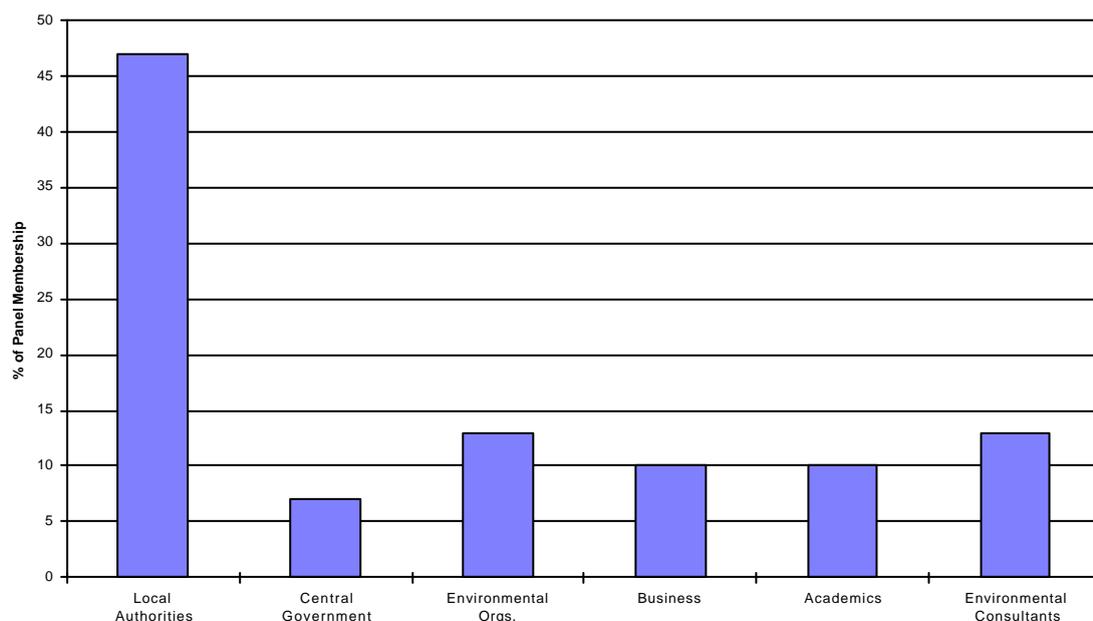
- The use of a ‘Sustainability Panel’ to guide the initial process;
- The detailed drafting of policies by SERPLAN and the production and debate of a ‘Consultation Draft Strategy’; and
- The Public Examination of the (amended) Draft Strategy in front of an independent panel of experts.

The final stage of the process has involved central government taking the Public Examination Panel’s report and making amendments to the strategy in the form of a draft (and, in due course, final) RPG9 document. The ‘story’ of the strategy-making process will use this three-stage structure to analyse the public participation mechanisms which were used and the differential dynamics, interest configurations, actor networks, discourses and policy proposals which characterised them.

3.1 Phase 1: The use of Fora

In order to incorporate the principles of sustainable development in to its regional planning strategy (i.e. it’s ‘advice’ to central government) SERPLAN established a Sustainability Panel in 1994. This Panel drew its membership mostly from local authorities but also included representatives and experts from the private sector, voluntary (NGO) sector and local universities (see Figure 3). The Panel sat along side

Figure 3: Membership of the Sustainability Panel



a number of other (policy-drafting) Working Groups, most of which were staffed by SERPLAN and local authority planners. The task of the Panel was to develop a framework which could be used by the other groups to develop and appraise the emerging regional strategy.

Between 1994 and 1996 a number of tasks were completed by the members of the Panel including the preparation and formal approval/adoption of:

- a framework document of 'Sustainability Principles' (SERPLAN, 1995a) which provided an holistic and relatively robust outline from which to build sustainable regional planning policies. It placed emphasis on five main principles (futuraity; environment; development; equity and participation) applied through seven features of sustainability (including demand management; carrying capacity; diversity; and quality of life);
- a participation strategy (SERPLAN 1995b) which emphasised the need to target representative groups at the regional level, but also to feed-in the inputs from various fora already established at the sub-regional and local levels; and
- a methodology document (SERPLAN, 1996a) entitled 'Strategic Environmental Assessment: A Methodology and Appraisal Framework for the Review of the Regional Strategy' which was intended to be used to appraise the policies contained in the Regional Planning Strategy and monitor its subsequent implementation.

The Sustainability Panel contained a selective range of stakeholder groups but, despite the stated aims of the 'Participation Strategy', the membership remained skewed towards local authorities. Nevertheless, the Panel did bring together the energy and expertise of a number of individuals from non-governmental organisations to support the development of policy-making frameworks aimed at sustainable development. Furthermore, the Panel used a relatively open system of informal meetings in which brain-storming and debate were the main means to progress action (Doak et. al. 1998) and that this led to some intense periods of creative debate in which power 'flowed' through the group, depending on the quality of the arguments constructed (Innes and Booher, 1998).

However, it was not without its problems. It was difficult to keep people interested and involved in the work of the Panel and a core group slowly evolved who were responsible for developing the Appraisal Framework. It was significant that no business representatives were involved directly in this stage of the work although they were not critical of the broad framework, especially when the principle of 'development' was included in the working definition of sustainability. A portent of the conflict which was to arise later was provided when initial appraisals of the evolving policies showed that some of the working groups (especially the Economic Studies Group, which had significant business representation on it) were not 'in tune' with the principles suggested by the Panel. Within the Panel itself much debate and argument took place around the definitions and criteria to be used in the Appraisal Framework. However, in the end a broad (socio-economic) definition of sustainable development was constructed and a moderately holistic set of criteria were applied in the Framework which was to guide the policy-making process.

1996 saw a new Labour Government take power and ironically this was to contribute to a

'squeezing' of the range of interests involved in policy-making and a truncation of debate. Richard Cabourne, the Minister put in charge of Regional Planning, requested the speedy production of the new Regional Strategy and this necessitated a 'centralisation' of policy drafting in the hands of the planners in the SERPLAN Secretariat. The Draft Strategy was required by the end 1998 in order to set the planning framework for the proposed Regional Development Agencies and Assemblies being proposed by the new Government.

3.2 Phase 2: Public Consultation

In October 1996 the Sustainability Panel was terminated and its core members were incorporated into one of SERPLAN's new working groups; the Assessment, Monitoring and Implementation Group (AMIG). The relatively open, but time-consuming, policy-drafting process being undertaken by the other working groups was inverted and their role changed from drafting policies to checking the output from the SERPLAN Secretariat. Interesting enough it was the framework provided by the Sustainability Panel which became the structuring device for the Secretariat's work.

The draft strategy (SERPLAN 1998a) was organised around the principles and themes of sustainable development and aimed at urban renaissance and regional re-balancing. This was expressed in six key policy themes or packages and supported by eight key targets or indicators. The key themes were:

- Environmental enhancement and natural resource management;
- Encouraging economic success;
- Opportunity and equity;
- Regeneration and renewal;
- Concentrating development; and
- Sustainable transport.

Part of this regional re-balancing was to be achieved by the designation of seven Priority Areas for Economic Regeneration (where development would be encouraged) and three Areas of Economic Consolidation to the West of London (where further development would be restrained).

The level and distribution of new housing development was dealt with, very late in the process, by outlining three options for accommodating the forecast housing needs of the region. All three options under-provided in relation to Government forecasts, with SERPLAN arguing that 20% to 25% of new households would not be able to afford market housing and that programmed social housing supply would be inadequate to cater for their needs. This left a range of housing provision (of between 875,000 to 914,300 for the 1991-2016 period) which the three options sought to distribute between the twelve counties making-up the region. Option 1 went for the lower level of 875,000 whilst options 2 and 3 provided for the upper figure of 914,300. Option 2 distributed the housing allocation more towards the western Areas of Economic Consolidation whilst option 3 targeted more development towards the Priority Areas for Economic Regeneration.

The public consultation exercise was undertaken over a three month period in mid-1999 and involved:

- the distribution of 3000 copies of the Consultation Draft Strategy to member local authorities and regional-level organisations;
- the circulation of 25,000 copies of a summary document to local organisations (via member local authorities);
- 11 sub-regional meetings requested by local organisations;
- 2 regional seminars on economic issues (organised by the Government Office for the South East); and
- a press conference, held to launch the publication of the Draft Strategy.

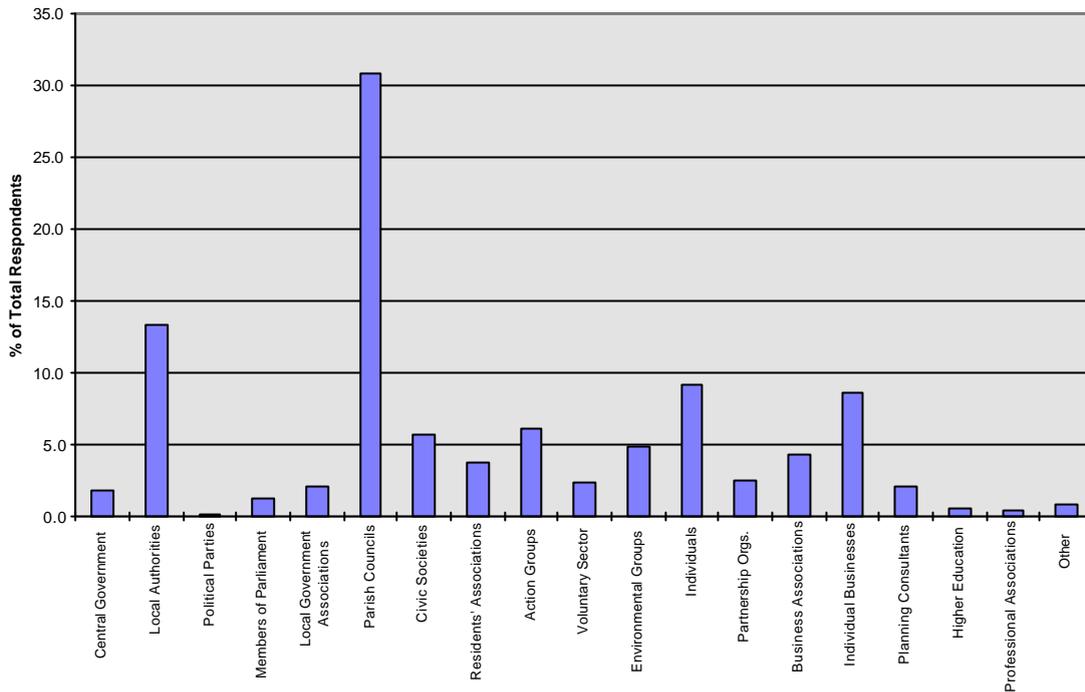
The consultation process was ‘structured’ to some extent by sixteen questions which SERPLAN had set. These questions trod a fine line between focusing on the key issues and closing down debate. For instance the opening question asked “Are there ways in which the strategy could do more to meet the stated objectives of sustainable development?”. This suggests that the model of sustainability advocated by the Sustainability Panel was now an established and uncontested basis for the regional strategy!

Many local authorities organised their own consultation on the Draft Strategy. For instance, Reading Borough Council held four Area Consultative Workshops and a Borough-wide Summit Meeting to draft out a ‘community response’ to the SERPLAN document. This process focused on the local implications of the regional strategy at the neighbourhood level and utilised a network of community and environmental groups which is well-developed in the town. The ‘quality’ of this local consultation on the SERPLAN draft strategy has been applauded in a recent report prepared by a coalition of Local Agenda 21 groups in the borough (The Reading Globe Alliance, 2000). However, it is likely that the Reading experience is rather exceptional and that a good proportion of local authorities undertook only limited consultation with their local communities.

The response to the consultation exercise was quite impressive. Figure 4 shows the range of organisations who produced written responses to the Draft Strategy. In total there were 840 responses including 117 from local authorities, 281 from parish or town councils, 83 from members of the public and 359 from various other representative organisations. The significant input from local interests, led by parish councils, can clearly be seen. After local authorities (with their variable levels of consultation with local communities) and individual members of the public come business interests, often ably supported by private planning consultants.

Most respondents were supportive of the principles of sustainability which underpinned the strategy and with the key themes and policy packages. Most respondents supported the designation of Areas of Economic Consolidation and Priority Areas for Economic Regeneration and a majority backed the lower housing provision option. However, a significant minority of those responding (mostly, but not exclusively, business interests) expressed concern with the economic and housing policies outlined in the Draft

Figure 4: Respondents to Consultation Draft



Strategy. These centred on the under-provision of housing in relation to forecast needs (which was seen to be against the principles of sustainable development) and the overall economic impacts of restraining business (and housing) development in the buoyant western areas of the region. Thus, the concept of sustainability was once more being opened-up and contested, both on its own terms and in relation to alternative priorities provided by concepts of ‘economic competitiveness’. Despite the broad support for the principles and many of the detailed policies in the Draft Strategy, it was this debate that was taken-up and explored at the subsequent Public Examination.

3.3 Phase 3: Public Examination

The final version of the Regional Strategy (SERPLAN, 1998b) submitted by SERPLAN in December 1998 was, in essence, little different from the Consultation Draft document; the general support provided by the consultation exercise legitimised the broad strategy and many of the detailed policies. A few changes in emphasis and wording were made, but most of the key policy themes remained the same. The main additions to the submitted document were the clarification, detailing and justification of the housing and economic policies at the centre of the strategy. In particular, SERPLAN rationalised the cautious approach to housing provision (still set below Government forecasts and proposing a minimum level of 861,700 dwellings) using a ‘plan, monitor and manage’ approach which had been aired by Government Ministers. The Priority Areas for Economic Regeneration had been extended to include rural areas suffering from economic and social decline and Areas of Economic Consolidation were renamed Areas of Economic Pressure. A new ‘Spatial Implications’ chapter provided more detailed policies for these areas.

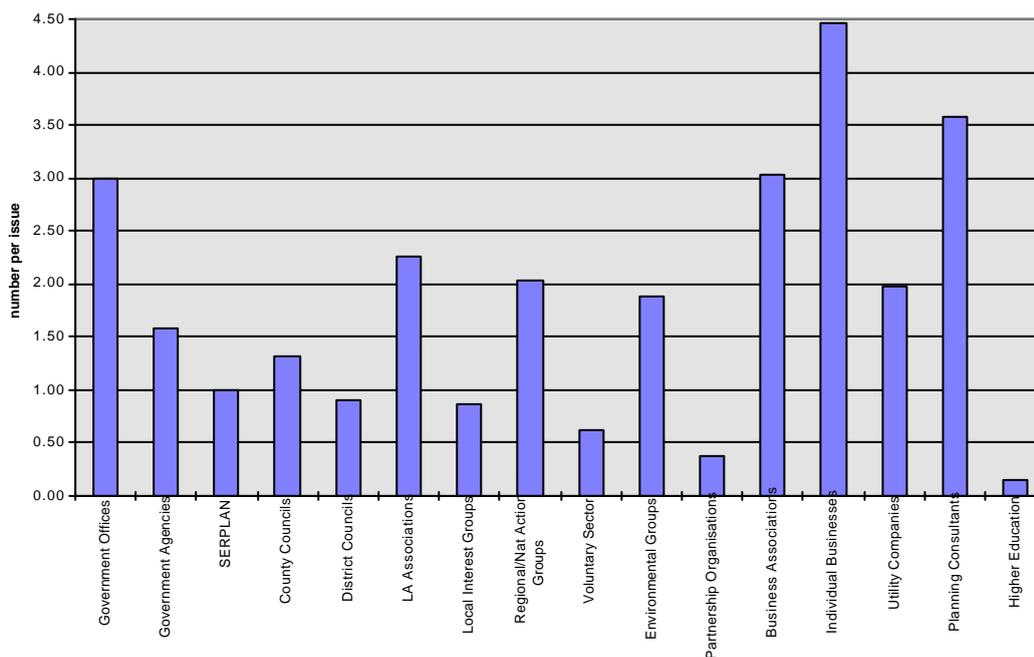
The Public Examination into the Draft Strategy was held during May and June 1999. In line with Government guidance (DETR 1999), it provided an opportunity for a Government-appointed panel and selected participants to informally discuss and test a number of themes and issues arising from the (Panel's) consideration of the draft guidance submitted by SERPLAN. The Panel was made-up of an independent chair (Stephen Crow) and 3 members drawn from the Government's Planning Inspectorate. After some discussion with the Government's Regional Offices and SERPLAN, the Panel focused down on eleven issues and invited a number of organisations and individuals to take part in the Examination, which was open to the general public.

The issues chosen for discussion were quite wide-ranging, although most time was inevitably given over to the main components of the strategy and the objections which had been made to it. The issues covered at the Examination were as follows:

- The Role and Purpose of the RPG;
- Core Strategy;
- Regional Economy;
- Environmental Strategy and Countryside;
- Housing and the Environment;
- Quality of Life in Town and Country;
- Development and the Supply of Infrastructure - Waste and Water;
- Mineral Resources and Other Development;
- Sustainable Transport Patterns;
- Spatial Implications for Seven Specific Sub-Areas; and
- Implementation and Monitoring.

The types of organisation invited to attend the Examination is show in Figure 5. It

Figure 5: Organisations Attending Public Examination (average number per issue)



indicates the *average* number of organisations attending the Examination for each issue. Although the Panel sought to select participants to, “reflect the whole spectrum of opinion on each topic, and...wherever possible (to) include some people or organisations representing the ordinary residents of the region” (GOSE, 1999; para. 1.12), the dominance of business interests (or their hired planning consultants) is evident. The decision of the Panel to use SERPLAN as a surrogate or representative for the local authorities of the region also meant that SERPLAN was often left without the ‘usual’ wall of local authority support to help them argue the case against business organisations who were objecting to the submitted strategy.

Given the constellation of interests alluded to above, it is possibly not surprising that the submitted strategy received something of a mauling at the Public Examination and in the subsequent report produced by the Panel. Given the complex process of compromise and consensus it tried to achieve across the region, it was bound to have its fair share of anodyne and less than coherent policy statements. However, the Panel made it clear in their report that they did not buy into SERPLAN’s view of sustainable development with its precautionary ‘plan, monitor and manage’ approach to housing provision. The Panel’s recommendations included:

- increasing the overall housing allocation by 25% to 1,098,500;
- deleting reference to Areas of Economic Pressure and replacing it with a policy focusing on smaller areas where congestion and labour supply problems should be tackled positively;
- taking a more selective approach to the Priority Areas for Economic Regeneration so that resources can be targeted on those with most potential;
- proposing the designation of Areas of Plan Led Expansion (APPLE’s...to go with the PAERs!) including locations near to the airports at Gatwick and Stansted and further development at Milton Keynes and Ashford, Kent;

In response to those who might criticise their report, the Panel posed, “two of the questions that were never far from our minds as we conducted the examination -

- *do you want the economy of the South East to stagnate, or at any rate to perform at its less than full potential, and*
- *do you want the planning process to frustrate or at any rate do less than it could to assist, the desire of people to have a decent home to live in?”*

To those that might say ‘no’ to both these questions, the Panel felt, “that there was no alternative” but to change the strategy in the way they recommended.

The Panel’s report was considered by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and a final draft version of RPG9 was published for consultation in March 2000. This was, of course, Central Government’s version of the Regional Strategy and, although it rejected the Panel’s recommendation to substantially increase the housing allocation, it did suggest a ‘compromise’ figure above SERPLAN’s. Furthermore, it did respond to the ‘economic competitiveness’ argument (much of it promulgated by the newly established South East of England Regional Development Agency; SEEDA) by including the Areas of Planned-Led Expansion advocated by the Panel. Thus, although Central

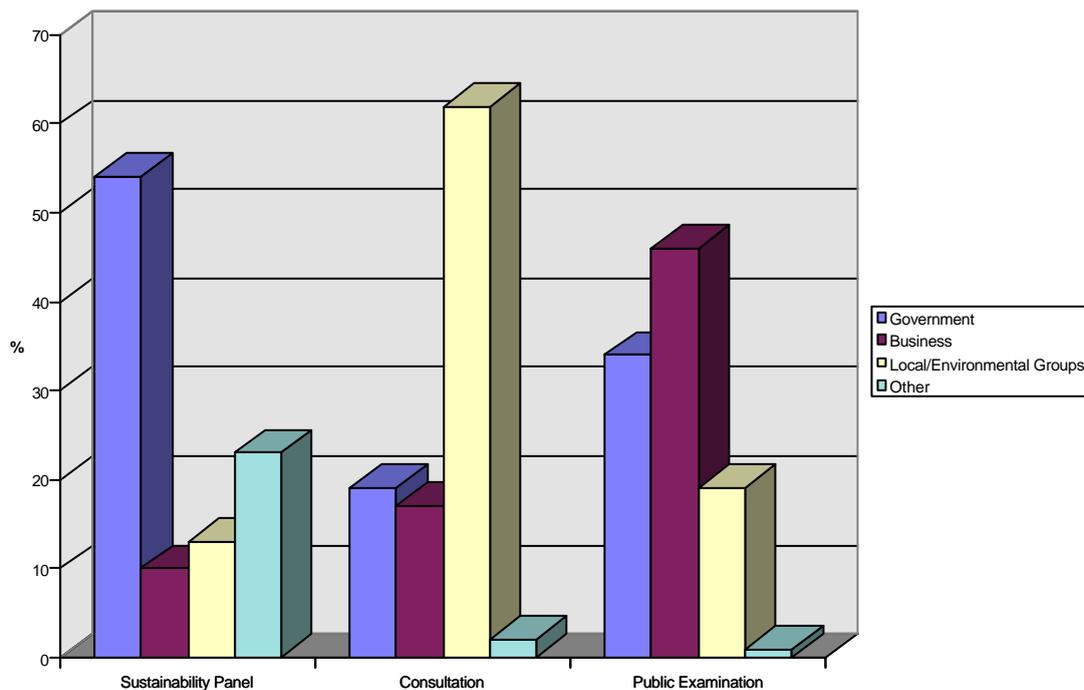
Government has accepted and supports the sustainability discourse developed by SERPLAN, it has modified that policy package to incorporate (in a much stronger way) the alternative discourse being pressed by the Region’s business and development interests. One other change of note in the Government’s Draft RPG9 is the restructuring and pairing-back of the regional strategy into standard topic areas (e.g. housing, employment, transport) with a distinct land-use ambit. The ‘holistic regional strategy’ prepared by SERPLAN (and indeed requested by the Labour Government when it was elected) has given way to the ‘normal’ land-use focus of planning policy guidance.

Consultation on the Government’s Draft RPG9 has now ended (SERPLAN’s last act before it was abolished was to issue a total rejection of the proposed housing figures) and a final version of the Regional Planning Strategy is due soon. Meanwhile, the new Regional Assembly and SEEDA are busy trying to integrate the proposed planning strategy into their other strategies which they are developing (the most relevant of which are the Regional Economic, Transport and Sustainability Strategies). It remains a dynamic time and one in which institutional relationships, interest representation, actor networks and policy discourses continue to be created and restructured.

4.0 Conclusions

As we have noted, the process of ‘public participation’ in the development of the new regional planning strategy for South East England has been characterised by distinct phases of activity. Each phase involved different approaches and styles of engagement with varying configurations of interest. The dynamic balance of interest involvement in the three phases is summarised in Figure 6 below. This illustrates, or at least suggests,

Figure 6: Interest Representation During the Three Stages of Public Participation



the increasing ‘opening-up’ of the policy-making process to business interests and the ‘closing-down’ of participation opportunities for local interests that occurred at the Public Examination. It also serves as a background for our discussion of each of the three phases in relation to some of the ideas overviewed in section 1 of this paper.

The Sustainability Panel was a bold attempt to build consensus amongst some (but certainly not all) of the key stakeholder interests in the region. It did this by developing a framework of sustainability principles and appraisal criteria which could be used to structure and guide the policy-making process. It’s style was relatively open and informal and it utilised brainstorming and task group workshops to forge a range of documents which became key ‘texts’ in the development of SERPLAN’s ‘sustainability discourse’. That discourse was contested both from within the Panel and from without, and the eventual framework used by SERPLAN reflected that process to some extent. By the end of the process the officers and elected Members of SERPLAN felt confident enough to use this definitional framework as the basis for the Consultation Draft Strategy (SERPLAN 1998). It could be argued that the collaborative efforts of the Sustainability Panel has had a profound impact on the shared understanding of key stakeholders at the regional level.

It is notable that the ‘economic competitiveness versus sustainability’ debate first arose during the time of the Sustainability Panel. It was unfortunate that this debate was not fully aired either within the Panel or, as suggested in the Panel’s Participation Strategy, in a wider Regional forum of stakeholder groups. However, the pressure placed on SERPLAN to develop their regional strategy quickly fore-closed this more extensive type of consensus-building. The failure to resolve or reduce this tension was to come back and haunt SERPLAN at the Public Examination.

The formal consultation stage of the draft strategy remains the key period in which a range of local and community interests were invited to make a contribution to the development of policy. As regional level participation goes, it was a relatively thorough exposure and discussion of the issues. Some local authorities went out of their way to take regional issues down to the neighbourhood level and explore the implications of the proposed strategy. However, the final results made a rather indirect impact on the submitted strategy, being aggregated up in the form of supporters and detractors from the policies that SERPLAN were advocating.

The ‘democratic mandate’ that SERPLAN took into the Public Examination from the consultation exercise was quickly eaten away by the structure, style and organisational biases evident in the Public Examination. The ‘sustainability discourse’ was dissected by an astute and unconvinced Panel, in front of a less than sympathetic group of attendees. The political compromises and fudges required to build consensus between local interests in the region were exposed without much opportunity for those interests to rescue their case. Although the overall framework of sustainable development held firm, the detail which had been added, belated, to the strategy did not always sound convincing. The lop-sided configuration of interests attending the Examination were able to re-establish and progress the ‘competitiveness’ discourse to such an extent that it became the question which

underpinned the Panel's daily deliberations.

Although the Government's response to the Panel's report was more of a (political?) compromise than anything else, it has taken on board the competitiveness arguments advocated at the Examination and watered-down the precautionary restraint policies proposed and supported by the local authorities and local citizens of the South East. The tensions between and within these two discourses are likely to continue. The new Regional Assembly will be grappling with this as it tries to integrate the various regional strategies into a coherent whole; something that defeated SERPLAN. The Assembly (SEERA) has at least the advantage of having a representative structure which is required to include a proportion of key (economic, environmental and social) stakeholder groups in decision-making. Whether consensus can be built around these competing world-views, is something we can watch (and hopefully 'act' in) with interest.

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