

The Context and the Model of a Sustainable City

Following the 1996 Local Government Review the City now has sole control over its municipal affairs. Since 1997, the council has embarked on a programme of reform, focusing on promoting the “*Integrity and Sustainability of Leicester*”. It has embraced central government’s call to modernise, a call published under the title “In Touch with the People”. It has developed a Community Plan, and has reviewed its political management arrangements. Leicester continues to lead the way on sustainable development, following our European award in 1996, and manages a wide range of regeneration activities in partnership with local communities. At that time sustainable development was built on the following principles:

- Thought for the future – acting with a concern for future generations
- Care for the environment – protecting our surroundings for the future
- Fairness and equality – sharing of resources between people
- Quality of life – addressing the economic, social and environmental issues that affect us all
- Greater participation – giving an opportunity for all to take part in the decision making

In 1997, the council became responsible for an education service in need of major reform. This necessitated a radical re-organisation of secondary education and the removal of 4000 surplus school places. An additional £21.5m in new capital funding has been secured for schools and a new Education Partnership Board in conjunction with central government has been formed.

Throughout this period, the council has widened its role in the East Midlands regional dimension. As leader of the council, I play a key role, as chair of the East Midlands Regional Assembly Social Inclusion Task Force, and as an active member of the East Midlands Regional Local Government Association.

Whilst we have much to be proud of in our City, there remain fundamental challenges that we, as governors and leaders in our City, and indeed cities (for the problems facing Leicester in this regard are not unique), have to face. We are painfully aware of the democratic deficit. This manifests itself in three clear ways:

- Lack of engagement with the processes of government (e.g. voter turnout)
- A “them and us” attitude to government and local government in particular
- A lack of ownership and the development of a blame culture

There are many views on solutions, and in some cases an eagerness for quick fixes that fails to fully understand causes. This can be typified in this consumer led age, by a demand for solutions based on “rights”. With rights come responsibilities. The decline of ‘real’ active participation by individuals in society, the characterisation of citizens primarily as ‘customers’ and ‘clients’ foster the belief that government is ‘over there’ somewhere else doing to us and not very well at that.

The vision for the city agreed and contained in the Community Plan is for Leicester to be:
“a premier city in Europe with a thriving and diverse society in which everyone is involved and in which everyone can have a decent, happy and fulfilling life. A city with a strong economy, a healthy, caring and educated society, a safe and attractive environment and an improving quality of life – a sustainable city.”

A Theoretical Model

The model I am using is adapted from Davis (2000), which seeks to map the policy instruments necessary for sustainability, and locates the issues concerning democracy and citizen participation alongside and part of sustainability and makes explicit the role of government. Three policy mixes are proposed:

- The assets mix
- The accountability mix
- The authority mix

Assets mix

The principle is that sustainable systems (City States) accumulate stocks of five assets rather than depletes them:

- Natural capital (fauna, flora, minerals, air quality, water, etc)
- Social capital (relationships, trust reciprocity, connectedness, norms, multiculturalism)
- Human capital (capacity of individuals to engage in productive activity)
- Financial, economic capital (as represented by national income accounts)
- Public good capital (sewers to public art, parks, roads, the ‘commonwealth’ of the City State)

The loss of these assets, or the disproportionate growth of some at the expense of others affects sustainability.

Accountability Mix

Effective democratic and management accountabilities are essential to building a more sustainable future. Citizen participation, capacity for community learning and problem solving across areas of difference, politics and real community engagement are essential building blocks. Davis (2000) suggests:

“There is a subtle and still largely unresearched relationship between accountability, effective management and local control. One argument suggests, however, that where local accountabilities can be secured for key resources, trust and social capital are more likely to develop. This social capital can in turn permit sustainability objectives to be more easily achieved.”

Authority mix

Central and local government has a range of powers with which it can influence and change individual, commercial and community behaviours. These include both regulations and incentives (*carrots and sticks*).

This model is offered as a way of creating an holistic picture of a sustainable city - and the conditions necessary to create it. Each of the policy mixes alone will not move us towards sustainability – the three acting together can.

It also explains the pivotal role local government has to play.

It is through this analysis that we see that our successes and plans for a quality environment need to be equally matched by plans and actions on greater community participation, greater fairness and equality, greater economic prosperity and above all a concern for the present that does not compromise the future.

The challenge is to harness the power of local government, the assets of the city and the democratic accountability to achieve this.

Reference

Davis P 'Is the Future Sustainable?' Assets, Accountabilities and Authority in Sustainable Development. Unpublished paper presented Institution of Economic Development National Conference UK October 2000.

Modernising Leicester

Theoretical model: The Sustainable City



