

# Planning for housing in rural England: discursive power and spatial exclusion.

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## Abstract

This paper examines the discursive construction and application of concepts of sustainable communities in relation to planning for housing in rural England, highlighting the role of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) and the (now abolished) regional planning bodies. The paper draws on Lukes' 'third dimension' of power (language use) and Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic violence'. It suggests that an "unholy alliance" (Hall et al., 1973) of rural elites and urban interests have wielded discursive power to define 'sustainability' on their own terms, which exacerbates the unaffordability of rural housing, leading to social injustice and spatial exclusion.

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## Introduction

There is a well established undersupply of housing in the UK, which has been found by the economist Kate Barker to lead to high house prices and damage to the UK economy (Barker, 2004). The gap between supply and demand is often at its greatest in rural areas, resulting in a well established affordability gap in such areas. The Government's Affordable Rural Housing Commission (ARHC) and Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) identified significantly higher "affordability ratios" (the ratio between average incomes and average house prices) in rural areas than in urban areas (CRC, 2007b; CRC, 2008; ARHC, 2006). Bramley and Watkins (2009) have questioned this disparity but the majority of researchers acknowledge an issue with housing supply in rural England, though most focus on affordable rather than market housing as the real problem area. This paper presents evidence that in those rural areas the aim of increasing the supply of housing, whether market or affordable, is being frustrated, maintaining a pattern identified by Peter Hall et al. in 1973. The paper argues that the "Containment of Urban England" (Hall et al., 1973) has continued unabated since Hall's work.

Drawing on empirical research, the paper analyses discursive "constructions" of sustainability in relation to rural communities and identifies a number of arenas in which those discourses are negotiated. The paper concludes that at every level of planning/housing policy, whether national, regional or local, there is a direct conflict between the operationalisation of discourses of sustainability and any attempt to increase the supply of housing in rural areas. The paper focuses on discourse because we believe that "Our being in the world is inseparable from our perception of it" (Haugaard, 2002, p181).

The paper further suggests that anti-development interests in rural areas are using discursive power to render rural housebuilding inherently "unsustainable" in the eyes of policy makers and wider society. The theories of Stephen Lukes and Pierre Bourdieu are used to explain how this power is exercised.

## A theoretical framework

There are many theorists who seek to cast light on the exercise of power – to understand the mechanics by which the dominant can exercise their will. In terms of analysing the use of language to exercise power, Foucault is perhaps pre-eminent, but for our purposes in this paper we draw particularly on the work of Stephen Lukes and Pierre Bourdieu. Foucault and Bourdieu have many affinities (see Harker et al., 1990, pp199-200) but also some crucial areas of disagreement, including most notably Bourdieu's adherence to class-based theory which makes his ideas more suitable for our analysis.

Lukes, in his 1974 book "Power: A Radical View", identified power operating in three "dimensions". The one-dimensional view of power, according to Lukes, was based on decision making, with those who prevail in decision making identified as the powerful. The two-dimensional view of power was based on the process of decision making itself, looking at how the less powerful are excluded from meaningful decision making. The three-dimensional view of power sought to explore non-visible conflict. Lukes believed that power could be exercised to prevent people from having grievances "by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things" (Lukes, 2005, p28): because they can see no alternative, or they see it as natural and unchangeable. So Lukes argued that the powerful shape preferences as well as respond to them.

This paper focuses on this latter process, described as "the most effective and insidious use of power" (Lukes, 2005, p27). For a broad investigation of the exercise of power in the field of rural housing in all three dimensions, see Sturzaker (2010). This third dimension of power, hidden as it is, is difficult to explore. One way of conceptualising its operation lies in Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital.

Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' invokes a process of socialisation whereby the dominant modes of thought and experience inherent in the life-world are internalised by individuals, especially in their early years but also through their continuing experiences and social interactions. It is "an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted" (Bourdieu, 1977, p95). Moreover, habitus is not only embodied but is situated in relation to a 'field' or social space such as education, academia, music, art or housing (Bourdieu, 2005), in which interactions, transactions and struggles occur. Bourdieu argues that practice (or behaviour) is not wholly consciously organised and orchestrated: on the contrary, most behaviour is "necessary improvisation" informed by "a feel for the game" (practical sense). Such practice is not without purpose, for actors have goals and interests (to gain economic capital, social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital and to transmit these inter-generationally) and pursue strategies, even though these are not wholly conscious. Actors thus know instinctively – without knowing they know – the right thing to do, so long as their habitus and the field remain adapted to one another. Accordingly, Lukes understood habitus as "the embodied dispositions which yield 'practical sense' and organize actors' visions of the world below the level of consciousness in a way that is resistant to articulation, critical reflection and conscious manipulation" (Lukes, 2005). Housing is one such field which Bourdieu analysed, showing how the French housing market is bureaucratically constructed and controlled in such a way that those with better

constituted habitus and greater economic and cultural capital are able to enforce their interests through symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2005, p92).

Bourdieu's concepts of 'capital' and 'symbolic violence' are similarly relevant to understanding the exercise of power in relation to housing in rural England. As noted above, Bourdieu regards capital as both the means and the object of struggle, and his definition of capital is very wide, going beyond economic capital to include cultural capital (defined as culturally-valued taste and consumption patterns), social capital (various kinds of valued relationships with significant others) and symbolic capital (cultural capital which is further elevated through social recognition to confer prestige, legitimacy and value). Some see symbolic capital as "world constructing through the capacity to make certain interpretations of the world count" (Haugaard, 2002, p227). Crucially, Bourdieu argues that forms of symbolic capital tend to deny and suppress their instrumentalism and self-interest by presenting themselves as disinterested and of intrinsic worth, a theme we explore below in relation to urban containment in England. This misrecognition is a type of 'symbolic violence' (Moore, 2008, p104).

Symbolic violence is particularly interesting in relation to Lukes' third face of power. This is defined by Bourdieu as "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu, 1992, p167). This does not usually imply physical violence but rather refers to domination of more subtle forms. Thus,

agents are subjected to forms of violence (treated as inferior, denied resources, limited in their social mobility and aspirations), but they do not perceive it that way; rather their situation seems to them to be 'the natural order of things'" (Webb et al., 2002, p25).

So, in gender domination:

"women misrecognised the symbolic violence to which they were subjected as something that was natural, simply 'the way of the world'. Consequently they were complicit in the production of those things (bodily performances, for instance) which worked to reinscribe their domination" (ibid.).

Hence habitus relates to power, "leading those subject to it to see their condition as 'natural' and even to value it, and to fail to recognize the sources of their desires and beliefs" (Lukes, 2005, p13). So "the dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural" (Bourdieu, 2001 (1998), p35).

Bourdieu argues, and illustrates in his work, how the power of the dominant class succeeds in defining, through symbolic violence, what counts as legitimate knowledge, what social relations are valuable, and what symbols confer prestige and social honour. These symbols are socially constructed to suit the interests of the dominant class. For example, in education the power of the dominant class defines the curriculum and what constitutes success, and those who acquire through socialisation within families a cultural capital which conforms with this will appear more gifted, while others will not (Lee, 1989). Moreover they will appear to be 'naturally' gifted, so concealing the power relations underlying the outcome (Bourdieu,

1973). ‘Misrecognition’, as Bourdieu puts it, is thus at the heart of the exercise of the third face of power. As Lukes argues, Bourdieu’s work is illustrative of “aspects of power as domination that we have sought to emphasize: above all, the ways in which its effectiveness is enhanced by being disguised or rendered invisible by ‘naturalization’, where what is conventional and position- or class-based appears to the actors as natural and objective, and by ‘misrecognition’ of its sources and modes of operation” (Lukes, 2005, p141)<sup>1</sup>.

### Empirical methodology

This paper draws on a wider research project undertaken between 2005 and 2008 looking at the planning system and (affordable) housing delivery in rural areas, which incorporated: textual analysis of policy documents produced by the national Government, regional planning bodies and local authorities; and interview data.

Five local authorities in different regions of England were studied in depth during 2007 and 2008. The case study local authorities, illustrated in Figure 1, were: Alnwick District (North East region), South Hams District (South West region), Harrogate Borough (Yorkshire and Humberside region), Stratford-on-Avon District (West Midlands Region) and Wealden District (South East Region). These case study areas are different in nature, but they share a common characteristic – they face high levels of demand and need for housing, both market and affordable. They can therefore be seen as ideal areas to study for those interested in conflicts around housing provision, being largely “peri-urban”, in functional if not morphological terms, areas which it has been argued are particularly susceptible to such conflict (Murdoch et al., 2003).

Figure 1 – The case study local authorities



<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that critiques exist of both Bourdieu’s and Lukes’ work. For a review of critiques of Bourdieu see Harker et al (1990), especially the final chapter, Jenkins (1992) and Grenfell (2008). For a critique of Lukes’ work, see Scott (2001)

All but one are within the “most rural” *Rural-80* classification of local authorities (DEFRA, 2006), though all are within easy reach of major urban areas, so subject to commuting pressure, yet all also subject to pressure from retirees and second home owners.

The high levels of demand and need for housing has led to some innovative practice, with at least four of the five being highlighted as best practice exemplars in various studies (for example South Hams and Wealden in the ARHC report). However, the research concluded that despite being lauded in this way, delivery of (affordable) housing in all five local authorities continued to be disappointing.

31 Interviews were carried out with local authority planning and housing officers, registered social landlords (RSLs), parish councils, rural housing enablers (RHEs), and other parties involved in (affordable) housing delivery where relevant. These interviewees were chosen (a) on the basis of a literature review and local information that they were the key to delivering affordable housing at the local level; (b) because, their opinions on rural development issues are less often heard than those of CPRE.

Discourse analysis is a vibrant analytical field in its own right, and it is possible to undertake very detailed analysis on relatively small pieces of “text”. Text in these terms can mean a written text, or interview transcriptions, or any other manifestation of discourse (Fairclough, 2003). We are not linguists, nor experts in discourse analysis, so we have chosen to analyse texts at a fairly basic level – the policy documents and interview transcripts identified in the study have been analysed to identify what seem to us to be particularly strong examples of language use to construct particular meanings. We are following the route taken by others, including Hastings, who has attempted to “use a focus on language to show how the (policy) orthodoxies have become established and accepted” (Hastings, 2000, p136), in order to establish how “[t]he incumbents of political power can orchestrate political and social change through directing linguistic change” (Hastings, 1999b, p11).

### **The discursive construction of sustainability**

Since its inception in the 1940s, the planning system in England has prioritised urban containment, initially to prevent ‘urban sprawl’ and to protect farmland, and this continues to be justified today by the pursuit of ‘sustainable communities’, and by a belief (of urban interests) that this might facilitate an urban renaissance. Each of these justifications has been revealed by Murdoch and Lowe (2003) to originate and to have been promoted by the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). In this context it is worth reminding ourselves of Peter Hall’s analysis of who has gained and who has lost from such policies. The major gainers, Hall et al. (1973) identified as wealthy, middle-class, ex-urbanite country dwellers and the owners of land designated for development. The principal losers his team identified were non-home-owners in rural England (including future generations) and people forced to live at ever higher densities in urban areas despite the widespread aspiration to rural, or at least suburban, living. Summarising, they concluded that the effects had been regressive in that “it is the most fortunate who have gained the benefits from the operation of the system, whilst the less fortunate have gained very little” (Hall et al., 1973).

For our analysis it is necessary to identify a dominant group, whom might be exercising power. We follow the analysis of Hall, as developed in Shucksmith (1990a,b) and Sturzaker (2010), and focus on those who might “win” from a policy of restraint in rural housebuilding – principally urban local authorities (who thereby retain population and hence a council tax base) and those who own houses in the countryside already. Shucksmith (1990a,b) argued that such groups constitute classes in a Weberian sense, in that property owners in rural areas have the ability to generate income not only through employment but also through the accumulative potential of property ownership and the associated relations of exploitation. Others have also viewed planning as involving different actors and groups of actors “competing” to achieve their aims – with those who succeed being best able to use the planning system to their gain (Vigar et al., 2000; Bramley et al., 2004). Those who “lose” from this policy include those who are prevented from accessing housing in the countryside through unaffordability and/or forced to live at ever increasing densities in urban areas.

The CPRE, as its *raison d'être*, has always sought to prevent house building in rural areas, deploying a range of symbolic concepts to pursue this objective, including “urban sprawl”, “concreting over the countryside” and “light pollution” among others. Through analysis of documentary evidence and interviews with former and current CPRE staff, Murdoch and Lowe (2003) revealed the various ways in which CPRE has managed to set the agenda for rural planning since the 1940s, when they promoted the idea of a rural/urban divide and the desirability of separation of nature and society, as exemplified in green belts and urban containment policies. During the 1980s, they altered their tactics away from a preservationist argument to take advantage of a growing environmental awareness. Thus they sought to “ecologise” their arguments by arguing an environmental case for containment, essentially through the exercise of discursive power over the concepts of sustainability and sustainable communities.

Woods (2005) noted that a pro-development discourse in the countryside by 2005 was only promoted by industry groups like the Home Builders Federation, of whom the public are naturally sceptical, although subsequent challenges to the dominant discourse have come from the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), the ARHC (2006), the Matthew Taylor review (2008) and a new Rural Coalition (2009) which surprisingly includes the CPRE. These are discussed further below.

The concept of sustainability had gained currency in the work of the Brundtland Commission, which proposed a notion of sustainable development with social justice at its core, comprising three elements: (1) inter-generational equity; (2) intra-generational equity; and (3) avoiding uncompensated trans-national spillovers. In practice, however, sustainability has become understood overwhelmingly in narrower environmental terms, with little attention given to the social justice values at its heart, reflecting the capture of this concept by powerful environmental and other interests. In line with their ‘ecologising’ tactical shift, CPRE staff explained to Murdoch and Lowe (2003) how they had deployed the argument that building in rural areas was incompatible with sustainable development, since inadequate public transport in rural areas would require residents to use cars, with environmentally damaging CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Key arenas in which they were able to promote this discourse included the Rogers Commission (of which CPRE Director, Tony Burton, was Deputy Chair), the Urban White Paper, the Sustainable Communities White Paper, the drafting of PPG3, regional spatial strategies (RSSs) and local development frameworks (LDFs) – see below for an

illustration of the role of these various documents. One CPRE staff member told Murdoch and Lowe that the Urban White Paper was the key arena for ensuring anti-development policies were implemented in rural areas (Murdoch and Lowe, 2003).

The CPRE has approximately 60,000 members, which is roughly 0.1% of the population of England. There is little doubt though that they exercise a disproportionate influence on issues of rural development. A previous study of articles published by The Times found that the CPRE achieved prominence in over five times more articles on the urban containment debate than any other interest group (Pennington, 2000) so Ministers are therefore understandably eager to retain their support.

In this way, the overall stance of urban containment and prevention of rural development has been strengthened through becoming linked to new agendas of environmental sustainability. Previous Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) guidance defined sustainable communities principally in terms of presence of services and access to public transport, so discouraging new investment in rural settlements. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the last Government's successor to the ODPM, softened its stance somewhat in PPS3 and in its response to the first Barker Report, following representations by the ARHC and others. Despite this, DCLG's website on 'Sustainable Communities' until recently listed the essential characteristics of a sustainable community as including not only homes and shops, but also hospitals (DCLG, 2008).

Critics have viewed this dualistic construction of sustainable communities as an acceptance in planning policy and practice of a rhetoric of sustainability which privileges the environmental over the social, and of exclusivity over inclusion (Best and Shucksmith, 2006; Satsangi and Dunmore, 2003; Owen, 1996). A letter to the *Economist* in 2007 took this to the extreme, asserting that "villages and rural communities are inherently inefficient... It is therefore clear that we should abolish villages and make everyone live in towns of at least 25,000 people" (The Economist, May 31st 2007). The distinguished academic and columnist Germaine Greer similarly argued in 2009 that for sustainability reasons people in future should live in high-rise blocks in "groovy places downtown for preference, so you can walk to work and the shops and don't need a car" (Greer, 2009).

There is evidence that similar discursive 'clashes' are operating elsewhere in Europe – recent work in Ireland has identified "a series of competing 'frames' or beliefs" (Scott and Murray, 2009) relating to sustainable development in rural areas, with demand for housing in rural areas being "viewed as inherently unsustainable" (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010). These discourses have led to similar conflicts in the Irish planning system as are exhibited in England, albeit with different outcomes.

Worryingly, both the ARHC and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Rural Housing Policy Forum found in 2006 that English Regional Spatial Strategies were reducing the land allocations for houses in rural areas still further in the interests of promoting urban regeneration, without regard to the impact on affordability of rural housing. This tendency has been confirmed by recent work by the CRC and Three Dragons which showed no improvement in regional strategies' recognition of rural needs (CRC, 2007a; Three Dragons, 2007). In turn, LDFs are applying sustainability checklists as described below with the effect of preventing any new housing outside the towns, and these are being approved by the Planning

Inspectorate as government policy (Tynedale District Council, 2007). Both JRF and the ARHC have warned there was a real danger that the powerful role given to regional bodies in the planning system (and the ascendancy of the 'city-region' agenda) facilitated urban interests' collusion with rural elites to limit the supply of housing in rural areas, so assisting the 'unholy alliance' of urban districts and rural elites revealed by Hall et al. and others many years ago, to the detriment of affordability and the life-chances of poorer and middle income groups (Hall et al., 1973; Newby, 1985). The capture of the concept of 'sustainable communities' by urban districts and rural elites, can be conceptualised as Bourdieu's misrecognition and symbolic violence and as Lukes' third dimension of power. Moreover, the planning system is the crucial arena for the exercise of this form of power.

The example of the use of symbolic violence in education, summarised above, has parallels with our discussion of how discursive power is used in constructing meanings of sustainable communities. Drawing on Bourdieu, Harker argues that classical theories of education tend to mask the function of *social* reproduction:

“...that is, they treat the cultural heritage as being the undivided property of the whole society, rather than as belonging only to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves. Such appropriation involves the mastery of a code of interpretation which is the result of systematic education – facilitated by an appropriate socialisation in the family. Thus the school tends to reinforce and consecrate the initial inequalities...”

(Harker et al., 1990, p89)

Similarly to this exercise of discursive power in education, it can be argued that constructing the meaning of sustainable communities as self-evidently those which have a broad range of services and frequent public transport masks the way in which the real objective is to prevent development in rural areas, and that those who benefit most from this are those who already have privilege and wealth. Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic violence thus offers an explanation of how the deployment in planning arenas of a partial concept of sustainable communities may be a means of not only furthering the interests of a dominant class (and so exacerbating inequalities and exclusion), but also of masking the power relations implicit in this process and making it appear legitimate to those who 'misrecognise' it.

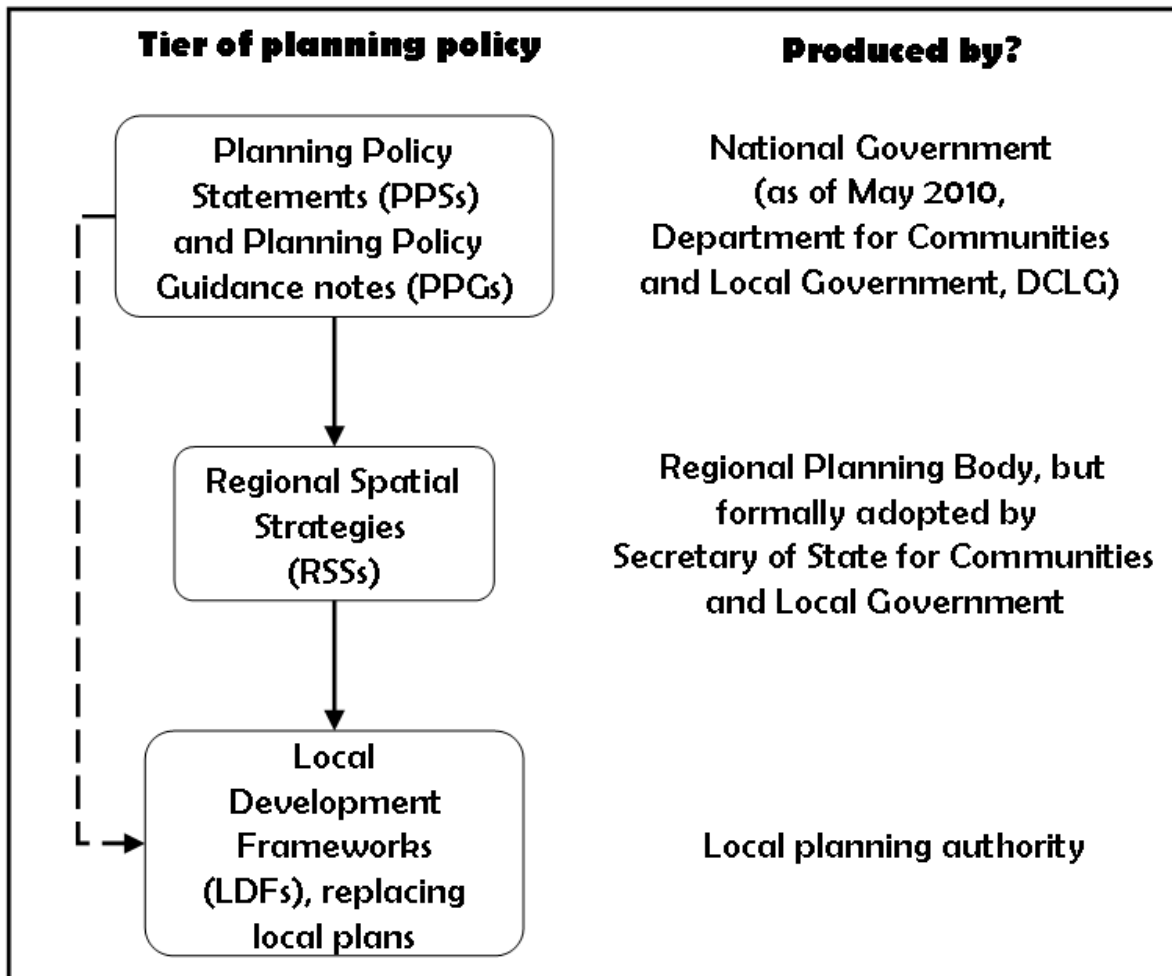
The remainder of this paper now explores the exercise of discursive power at various levels of governance in rural England.

### **The English planning policy framework in May 2010**

The new coalition Government has started to “reform” England's planning system since May 2010, but during the period covered by this research (2007-08) the framework for planning policies in use in England was as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2 – The planning policy system in May 2010



The 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act created a new framework for planning policy in England. The “top” tier of that framework was national policy advice, in the form of Planning Policy Statements (PPSs), which contain policy advice which subsequent tiers of the planning system are expected to follow, subject to local variations. Prior to 2004, these were known as Planning Policy Guidance notes (PPGs), and the suite of PPGs are being only gradually replaced by new PPSs.

Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs), which were expected to conform to PPSs, were part of the statutory “development plan”, in accordance with which local planning authorities (LPAs) were statutorily obliged to make decisions on planning applications. RSSs were abolished shortly after the new Government took up office, but prior to this they were central to the policies adopted by LPAs, so are briefly reviewed here as vital context to those local policies.

LPAs themselves were responsible for producing Local Development Frameworks. Prior to the 2004 Act these were known as local plans, and in many areas the old local plans are still the decision making tool as LPAs work on LDFs to eventually replace them. LDFs were required to be in “general conformity” with the relevant RSS.

## Expression of discourse at the national level

Government publications, specifically PPGs and PPSs, are the first arena within which the manifestation of discourses around sustainability can be observed. As discussed above, the last Government's DCLG identified some "key requirements" of sustainable communities. Others have debated the appropriateness of these requirements, and what they actually mean, but what is of interest here is how they are operationalised, i.e. how these requirements were translated into Government policy advice and action.

As identified above, there was an ongoing programme of replacing old PPGs with new PPSs. Exploring the discourse present in national government policy at a point in time is therefore a matter of examining some of the topic specific PPGs and PPSs, produced at different times, with a consequent variation in approach depending on Government policy at the time (though the documents remain in force unless replaced or specifically withdrawn). This section focuses on four documents produced since 2000, some of which have now been superseded, but because of the long timescale for the production of regional and local planning policies still influence outcomes.

The four documents, in sequential order, are: PPG3 on *Housing* (published in 2000); PPG13 on *Transport* (published in 2001); PPS7 on *Sustainable development in rural areas* (published in 2004); and PPS3 on *Housing* (a replacement for PPG3, published in 2006). These four key documents set out the last Government's policy (and remain in force until the new Government removes or updates them) on the appropriate location of new housing, with which regional and local planning policy documents are expected to comply. PPG3 and PPS3, with Housing as their focus, are clearly key, but there are elements of the other two documents which merit consideration. As discussed above, a full critical discourse analysis of just one of these documents could be the focus of an entire paper, so by necessity here we extract key quotes. As might be expected, there are contradictions within and between these, and other planning policy documents, but we argue that overall there is a clear and powerful dominant discourse. This matters because, as others have noted, language use determines meaning in the policy process: "Language constitutes or produces the concepts and categories we use to make sense of the world" (Hastings, 1999b, p10). Hastings, in a later article, explores how language is used by actors to "construct" a particular "problem" in relation to a specific policy (in this case urban regeneration). She argues that the way policy problems are constructed is central to the rest of the policy process, particularly to the nature of the solutions proposed:

All conceptions of social problems invoke a theory of causation... Causal theories about social problems can be understood as discourses in the broadly Foucaultian sense, in that they are selective explanations of the nature of a phenomenon, and are productive of knowledge and action in the policy processes"

(Hastings, 1999a, pp94-95)

So the way a problem is constructed, i.e. how the causes of that problem are identified by actors, is central to what solutions are proposed to solve that problem. So if "sustainability" is identified as a problem in a particular way, this will shape how actors seek to solve that "problem".

### PPG3 and PPS3

As discussed above, the CPRE lobbied to ensure that PPG3 required that “most new housing should be concentrated in existing conurbations... One CPRE policy officer claimed: “We invented all the key planks in PPG3. PPG3 is basically CPRE policy”” (Murdoch and Lowe, 2003, p327). The influence of the CPRE is less evident on PPS3, which included the requirement on regional and local authorities to consider affordability and demand for housing in their area when producing plans. This change in policy derived from the intervention of the ARHC, established jointly by DCLG and DEFRA in response to the growing electoral importance of the unaffordability of rural housing manifested during canvassing in constituencies for the 2005 general election.

There were two further aspects of PPG3 which could be argued to discourage housing in rural areas – the key settlement policy, and the “sequential approach”.

The key settlement policy can be summed up by the following extract from PPG3:

“Villages will only be suitable locations for accommodating significant additional housing where:

- it can be demonstrated that additional housing will support local services, such as schools or shops, which could become unviable without some modest growth. *This may particularly be the case where the village has been identified as a local service centre in the development plan [our emphasis]... “*

(DETR, 2000, Paragraph 70)

The key settlement policy, which has been advocated in some form by successive Governments, is the idea that particular settlements, because they have a critical mass of “services”, should be the foci of residential development in a local authority. The Affordable Rural Housing Commission (ARHC) found that most rural local authorities had interpreted this guidance to mean that they should categorise rural settlements into those which they regard as ‘sustainable’ (and therefore suitable for new housing and investment) or ‘unsustainable’ (effectively red-lined), on the basis of crude checklists of service availability (ARHC, 2006).

PPS3 did away with this explicit discouragement of additional housing in villages, again following advice from the ARHC (see also Satsangi et al., 2010) . It restricted itself to statements such as:

“The specific outcomes that the planning system should deliver are:

- Housing developments in suitable locations, which offer a good range of community facilities and with good access to jobs, key services and infrastructure.”

(DCLG, 2006, Paragraph 10)

Although this does not mention settlements explicitly, this has still been interpreted as essentially a key settlement approach, but PPS3 explicitly permitted housing in villages which

are not designated as local service centres, “in order to enhance or maintain their sustainability” (DCLG, 2006, Paragraph 38). The Government’s response to the Matthew Taylor review took this even further, with the then Secretary of State for the Environment categorically rejecting sustainability checklists and stating that “there is no such thing as an unsustainable place, only unsustainable ways of living” (Benn, 2009).

There are also significant changes in the abandonment of the “sequential approach”. PPG3 introduced that approach into housing policy, bringing in a target for 60% of all new housing development to be on previously developed land, and stated that “the presumption will be that previously-developed sites (or buildings for re-use or conversion) should be developed before greenfield sites” (DETR, 2000). This presumption was excluded from PPS3. Instead, local authorities were expected to carry out sustainability appraisal of potential sites for new housing. Whether the land is previously developed formed part of this consideration, but there was also be an opportunity to consider the social and economic sustainability of housing in rural areas.

Authors such as Adams et al (2002) have criticised a blanket approach of assuming that previously developed land is inherently sustainable as a location for new housing development whereas greenfield land is inherently unsustainable, and pointed out that areas with a low previously developed land supply also tend to be the areas with the highest demand for new housing (i.e. rural areas), so constraining greenfield development in such areas could have a disproportionate effect on housing affordability (Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones, 2007). It seems that PPS3 recognised that a more balanced approach to the prioritisation of previously developed land is to be commended.

### *PPG13*

At the same time as publishing PPS3, the Government cancelled paragraphs 12-17 of PPG13, on transport, which referred to PPG3 and carried forward its policy of the presumption against housing in villages. The rest of PPG13 remained in force, and in it the Government advocated a similar policy approach for urban and rural areas alike, stating “...local authorities should focus most development comprising jobs, shopping, leisure and services in or near to local service centres...” (DETR, 2001, Paragraph 41).

### *PPS7*

PPS7, published in 2004, provided a neat summary of the Government’s attitude towards the countryside:

“...the Government's overall aim is to protect the countryside for the sake of its intrinsic character and beauty, the diversity of its landscapes, heritage and wildlife, the wealth of its natural resources and so it may be enjoyed by all.”  
(ODPM, 2004, Paragraph 1 (ii) & (ii))

These documents can be seen both as reflections of dominant discourses and beliefs amongst English people and as examples of “world constructing” (Haugaard, 2002), given the influence they wield in the English planning system. The interpretations they make of what constitutes sustainability, and appropriate development in the

countryside, are examples of Bourdieu's symbolic violence against those who wish to live and work in rural areas.

### **Expression of discourse at the regional level**

The second arena in which discourses around sustainability were reflected is at the regional level of planning policy making, as shown in Figure 2. It is possible to find examples of a skewed interpretation of sustainability at several of the various stages of RSS preparation, both before and after the advice in PPG3 was superseded by PPS3.

The draft RSS for the North East, for example, contained the following paragraph:

House prices, housebuilding and migration *show a trend away from the creation of sustainable communities to a more dispersed pattern of development*. This is influenced by people's greater willingness to travel; their increased financial mobility; and the availability of housing and living environments that people aspire to outside of the region's conurbations.

(North East Assembly, 2005, Paragraph 3.56)

The language used here is clear to see – a dispersed pattern of development (i.e. living in smaller rural settlements) is not sustainable. This paragraph emerged unscathed in the final RSS in 2008 following the various revisions (Government Office for the North East, 2008, Paragraph 3.73). This is despite the updated advice regarding housing in the countryside contained in PPS3 by then having been in force for two years.

The Yorkshire and Humber draft RSS refers similarly to the (un)“sustainability” of rural development. Increasing mobility and “increasing dispersal between places where people live, work and shop” (Yorkshire and Humber Assembly, 2006, Table 2.5) was highlighted as a “Key Sustainability Issue” in the region, “issues” apparently being a euphemism for “problems” in this context – other examples including social inequality and slow economic growth. To solve these ‘issues’, the plan's spatial vision stated that the RSS would “Achieve a more sustainable pattern and form of development...” (Yorkshire and Humber Assembly, 2006, Table 3.2). These extracts demonstrate an assumption that an increased dispersal between places where people live, work and shop is a ‘bad thing’, and that a “more” sustainable pattern of development is necessary.

The North East and Yorkshire and Humber RSSs were by no means unique in this kind of discursive labelling of rural living as unsustainable. Indeed this is characteristic of most regions' spatial strategies (Sturzaker, 2010). It is also telling that these discourses, and policies to back them up, remained essentially unchanged throughout the process of RSS preparation, including their endorsement by national government, against specific advice to Ministers from the ARHC and CRC. Again, we see the strength that Bourdieu's concept of habitus has – the assumption that *rural living = unsustainable living* runs so deep within Planning Inspectors, civil servants and perhaps Ministers, that they feel unable to amend policy even when presented with evidence to the contrary.

## Expression of discourse at the local authority level

The third arena where we can observe discursive power being exercised around sustainability is at the local planning authority level. As identified above, the part of the statutory development plan produced by LPAs is now known as the local development framework (LDF). The LDF is a portfolio of planning documents, the most important of which for us is the core strategy, usually the first LDF document to be produced. Some of the local documents studied were published before PPS3, but most were published after, with no obvious change in approach. Some might question whether when we get to the stage of implementing a policy “on the ground”, discourse really matters. Several authors have tried to demonstrate that it does. Green (2007) argued that there is “no conceptual or practical discontinuity between discourse and delivery” (Green, 2007, p151) for policy workers. She contended that discourse is actually delivered – it is the product of policy work processes. Policy is not distinct from implementation and practice – practices around implementation are shaped by and shape policy discourses. So the content of local planning documents, in our case, feeds into practice when determining planning applications, and vice versa.

Alnwick District Council (ADC) adopted in October 2007 its core strategy LDF document. The North East Assembly objected to the submission draft core strategy (in December 2006) as being unsound as it contained the potential for housing figures in this rural district to be higher than those in the RSS. The North East Assembly stated in its objection that “it is important that the LDF adopts the final RSS figures to ensure that the RSS housing strategy is achieved” (Alnwick District Council, 2007), or in other words to concentrate development in the urban areas of the region and to prevent growth in unsustainable rural areas. At the EIP (in July 2007) ADC argued for higher levels of development, but the EIP Inspector decided that

Representations in favour of more or less housing have not generally been supported with the kind of evidence-based reasoning I would expect to be necessary to justify departing locally from regional policy... It would therefore be unsound to allow for housing levels above the RSS figures...

(The Planning Inspectorate, 2007)

This suggests that the North East Assembly and Planning Inspectorate both considered RSS figures to be maxima. The Housing Green Paper (2007), which as mentioned above emphasises that RSS figures are in fact intended to be minima, was partly an attempt to change this perception amongst planning professionals. Anecdotally, this has not had the effect of changing local planning policy, with some aggrieved areas (notably the South East) objecting to what they see as the Government’s attempt to “force” them to accommodate more housing by changing the parameters of the game (or the field, in Bourdieu’s terms).

For the case study LPAs, the housing figures in their respective RSSs were usually significantly lower than estimates of need/demand illustrated. Three of the five – ADC, Harrogate Borough Council (HBC) and Stratford-on-Avon District Council (SDC) had already granted planning permission for numbers of houses which indicated that they would have an “oversupply” of housing as compared to their RSS figures. To reduce this oversupply, all three LPAs introduced “moratoria” policies through their local plans and LDFs. These policies meant that they would not grant planning permission for new housing developments, except for a limited number of exceptions (including 100% affordable housing schemes). ADC started

using such a policy in 2004, and intended to run it until at least 2011; HBC in 2004, running until at least 2010, and SADC from 2006 until at least 2011. So for five-seven years, and possibly longer, these local authorities were/are granting planning permission for virtually no new houses.

Wealden District Council (WDC) had no such moratoria, but issued a press release condemning the proposed increase in its RSS housing allocation (Wealden District Council, 2007). It is unclear what effect the RSS revocations will have on the approaches adopted by these local authorities and others in a similar position.

It is worth noting that these policies of restraint were not (only) applicable to land which is the subject of some form of designation – Green Belt, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, etc. – they applied to *all* land within the local authorities, designated or not.

The moratoria and general opposition to additional housing development are despite affordable housing provision being one of the corporate priorities for all five of the LPAs studied. There is scepticism, though, that the published corporate priorities do not necessarily accord with the practices of local authorities. One LPA housing officer commented “I don’t think Members have the will to develop housing or affordable housing – environmental protection is their number one priority”. A rural housing enabler<sup>2</sup> in one area complained

“It always rankles a little bit, local authorities have a corporate priority to provide more rural affordable housing, but they actually don’t put any money behind it. If you looked at [case study LPA]’s contribution, putting in [several thousand pounds] a year into it, whereas if you look at some of their other corporate priorities they’re probably putting hundreds of thousands of pounds in.”

In addition to these general issues about overall levels of housing provision in the case study LPAs, discourses around sustainability are expressed in relation to the “key settlement” approach. All the LPAs studied have such an approach in their local plans, and the evidence thus far is that key settlement policies are being maintained in LDFs.

There seems to be a divergence of opinion between local authority planning staff and local authority housing staff – something previously noted by others (Hoggart and Henderson, 2005). This can be summarised by these two contrasting quotes, the first from a local authority planning officer, the second from a local authority housing officer:

“People in housing need stand the best chance of a more sustainable, included lifestyle, in slightly larger settlements, where there may be a shop or there is a little bit more in terms of service base.”

“Sustainability is not a bus stop... If you’re talking rural areas, sustainability is about keeping local people living and working in their local area – keeping the villages alive, keeping the local areas alive.”

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<sup>2</sup> Rural housing enablers are semi-independent staff, usually employed by the Rural Community Council in an area, whose role is to promote the provision of rural affordable housing.

The former quote is a common justification by planning officers for the PPG3 approach of focusing development on larger settlements – suggesting a paternalistic attempt to protect the poor (or the old or less mobile) from themselves and their desire to live in places which are patently unsuitable for them. The corollary, of course, is that smaller settlements become increasingly exclusive and sought after by those who can afford to live there. Housing officers, by and large, have a different perspective: that people are already living in so-called unsustainable villages, and that their priority should be to maintain those villages, and to meet the identified need for (affordable) housing there. This latter approach identifies other factors such as kinship networks as being equally important as service provision in rural areas, and reflects a modernist discourse – that the focus should be on improving service and public transport provision to try and make rural settlements more “sustainable” in Government terms.

These extracts from policy documents and quotes from planning officers demonstrate the impacts that assumptions around what sustainable development means in a rural context are having. The high levels of need and demand for housing in smaller settlements in the countryside are not being met, which systematically excludes those on lower incomes from these communities – the only people who can access housing there are those who can compete in the inflated housing markets. Thus, Lukes’ exercise of power in the third dimension, or Bourdieu’s symbolic violence, result in the powerful minority maintaining their position at the expense of the dominated majority.

### **Discourse in the public domain**

The operation of an anti-development discourse has impacts in national, regional and local planning policy fields, but decisions on planning applications are made by elected bodies, representing their constituents. If they were making decisions that did not have broad support in those constituencies, they would not remain in power for very long. So these discourses clearly also have an effect in the public domain.

As noted above, lobby groups such as CPRE have an important role in shaping policy, but are also involved in shaping discourse. The CPRE website states that “Around 21 square miles of countryside, an area larger than Southampton, are lost to development each year” (CPRE, 2010). 21 square miles is approximately 0.04% of the total land in England – not a large proportion, given how little land is currently developed. Indeed, the recent “Foresight” study on *Land Use Futures* by the UK Government Office for Science found that only 9.95% of land in England is developed, nearly half of which is domestic gardens (Foresight Land Use Futures Project, 2010). In marked contrast, a survey commissioned for the Barker Review in 2006 found that 54% of people believe that half or more of all land in England is developed (Barker, 2006, p43). Given these perceptions it is unsurprising that a 2007 study by DEFRA found that 79 per cent of those questioned were worried about the loss of UK countryside (DEFRA, 2007).

That the CPRE and other similar groups succeed in generating alarm about rates of development is another demonstration of the power of discourse, and how it can be used to further the objectives of certain sections of society.



## Subsequent Developments

Since the empirical work described in this paper was undertaken there have been further developments, referred to briefly above. The Affordable Rural Housing Commission's report was published in May 2006, and at the launch of this the Chief Executive of the CPRE called for more affordable rural housing, with "every CPRE member becoming a rural housing enabler".

In 2008 the Matthew Taylor review of rural housing and rural economies was delivered to the then Prime Minister. The Taylor review arguably followed in the tradition of rural development rather than planning literature, arguing for diversification and multifunctionality, concepts which the planning system in rural areas has struggled to facilitate. This tradition of promoting development, particularly economic development, has in the past had little impact on planning policy and practice, in part perhaps because it did not engage with what we have argued is the real problem – discursive power. The Taylor review, however, did engage in these issues. It argued that the use of sustainability checklists "cannot be sound planning, since it makes such communities less not more sustainable... This narrow view of sustainability is far too simplistic and wrong" (Taylor, 2008, p44). In response, as noted above, the then Secretary of State for the Environment categorically rejected sustainability checklists. Despite this, while the latest planning advice in PPS4 in 2009 generally encouraged a much more active and less precious approach to development in rural areas, it contained an almost unchanged overarching statement from that in PPS7 from 2004 cited above:

"Local planning authorities should ensure that the countryside is protected for the sake of its intrinsic character and beauty, the diversity of its landscapes, heritage and wildlife, the wealth of its natural resources and to ensure it may be enjoyed by all.

(DCLG, 2009, Policy EC6.1)

Meanwhile, a remarkable 'Rural Coalition' (2009), chaired by Taylor and animated by CRC, and including the Royal Town Planning Institute, Town and Country Planning Association, Country Land & Business Association, Action with Communities in Rural England, Local Government Association and CPRE, has pledged itself to the pursuit of a "sustainable future for all rural communities".

"'Sustainability' doesn't mean a slavish adherence to what exists – no development at all can lead to the local school, shop and pub closing for lack of custom as the community ages, or as commuters and holiday homes displace local families. Villages need to be encouraged and empowered to make the changes needed to sustain them."

(The Rural Coalition, 2009, p4)

It is not clear what has led to these changes in discourses of sustainability, both on the part of the previous Government and more remarkably CPRE, but this question is beyond the scope of this paper and must be left for further research. Perhaps 'misrecognition' has been diminished by the challenges of the ARHC, CRC and others? What remains to be seen is whether these and other developments at national policy level will lead in time to changes in policies and implementation in local planning. There is little evidence of such changes so far, and a crucial question is whether this merely reflects the long lags endemic in development planning processes or if it demonstrates the enduring potency of Lukes' third face of power.

There is now a new Government in the UK, which has committed to localism and “distribut[ing] power and opportunity to people” (H M Government, 2010). As part of a new policy drive, the regional tier of the English planning system (the Regional Spatial Strategy) has been abolished, along with the mechanism for producing it (the Regional Planning Bodies). In some areas there are legitimate fears that this will reduce the supply of housing, as local authorities in parts of the South East abandon policies which sought to deliver higher housing targets in RSSs. It remains to be seen whether in some of our case study areas, where there was unwelcome pressure from the regional level to *reduce* housing supply, the local authorities seize the opportunity to confound expectation and actually strive to deliver *more* housing in the short term. In the longer term, the new Government has pledged to make planning increasingly local and community based, to allow local communities to meet their own needs. This may, as the coalition hopes, increase the supply of housing as local communities feel more in control; conversely, it may allow NIMBYism, and the attitudes towards sustainability and development in the countryside we have identified in this paper to flourish, with no opportunity for challenge.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that at national, regional and local levels, there is a direct conflict between the operationalisation of discourses of sustainability and attempts to increase the supply of housing in rural areas. This in itself is not necessarily a new discovery, but we have traced discourses from the national, through regional to local levels, demonstrating how successfully they have become part of mainstream planning ideology in the UK. Further, we have argued that these discourses are used by those who, for their own ends, wish to see rural housing development limited, and how that can disadvantage others.

The practice of discourse analysis teaches us to try and identify “naturalised” assumptions, i.e. assumptions which come to be seen simply as common sense, rather than ideological representations. The discourse of sustainability in the context of housing development is so dominant that it has become taken-for-granted by most planners, academics and practitioners that rural areas are fundamentally less sustainable locations than urban areas for building new houses. This means that those arguing for more houses in the countryside, including some rural LPAs, are forced to place increasing emphasis on any such housing being an exception to a general approach of restraint, as to argue otherwise would invite criticism that they were promoting an unsustainable form of development.

This would be immediately recognisable to Pierre Bourdieu as *symbolic violence*, and to Lukes as an example of power being exercised in the third dimension. The dominant class, in this case the rural elite, concerned with maintaining the rural status quo, and hence the value of their land and property interests, have succeeded in defining what development is legitimate (sustainable). They have done so in such a way that those disadvantaged by this definition are unaware that they have been disadvantaged; indeed they support the definition as being the only sensible way to proceed. This could be so-called “thick acquiescence” (Dowding, 2006) – those who are being oppressed by the dominant actively believe in the values that are used to oppress them, rather than being merely resigned to them.

This thick acquiescence manifests itself in several ways: the moratoria adopted by many rural planning authorities, despite the very large numbers of households in need of rural housing within their own boundaries (if we assume that decisions made by local authorities reflect the views of their constituents); the common view, expressed above by a planning officer that “People in housing need stand the best chance of a more sustainable, included lifestyle, in slightly larger settlements” (although in several areas other planning officers challenged this view); and the difference between actual rates of development and public perceptions and fears. A limitation of this paper, and the research it draws upon, is that we have not explored in depth the views of those most affected by this symbolic violence – i.e. those prevented by unaffordability from accessing housing in rural areas. A possible avenue for further research could be to address this issue, perhaps investigating whether these people demonstrate thick or thin acquiescence, or indeed do not acquiesce at all!

While the idea that rural communities are not sustainable because their residents use cars appears only too plausible to a populace concerned about environmental threats, it violates the social justice requirements of sustainable development, and it rests on a false dualism between sustainable and unsustainable settlements. An alternative discourse of sustainable communities might promote the idea that the true challenge is not to red-line smaller settlements as unsustainable but instead to work with residents everywhere to seek to make all communities more sustainable. Such a place-shaping discourse would be inclusive and participatory, in tune with recent developments in planning theory and practice, and would challenge the power of rural elites by opening up the possibility that development in rural areas might assist sustainability. We will have to wait and see if this emerges at regional and local level, following recent changes at national level.

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