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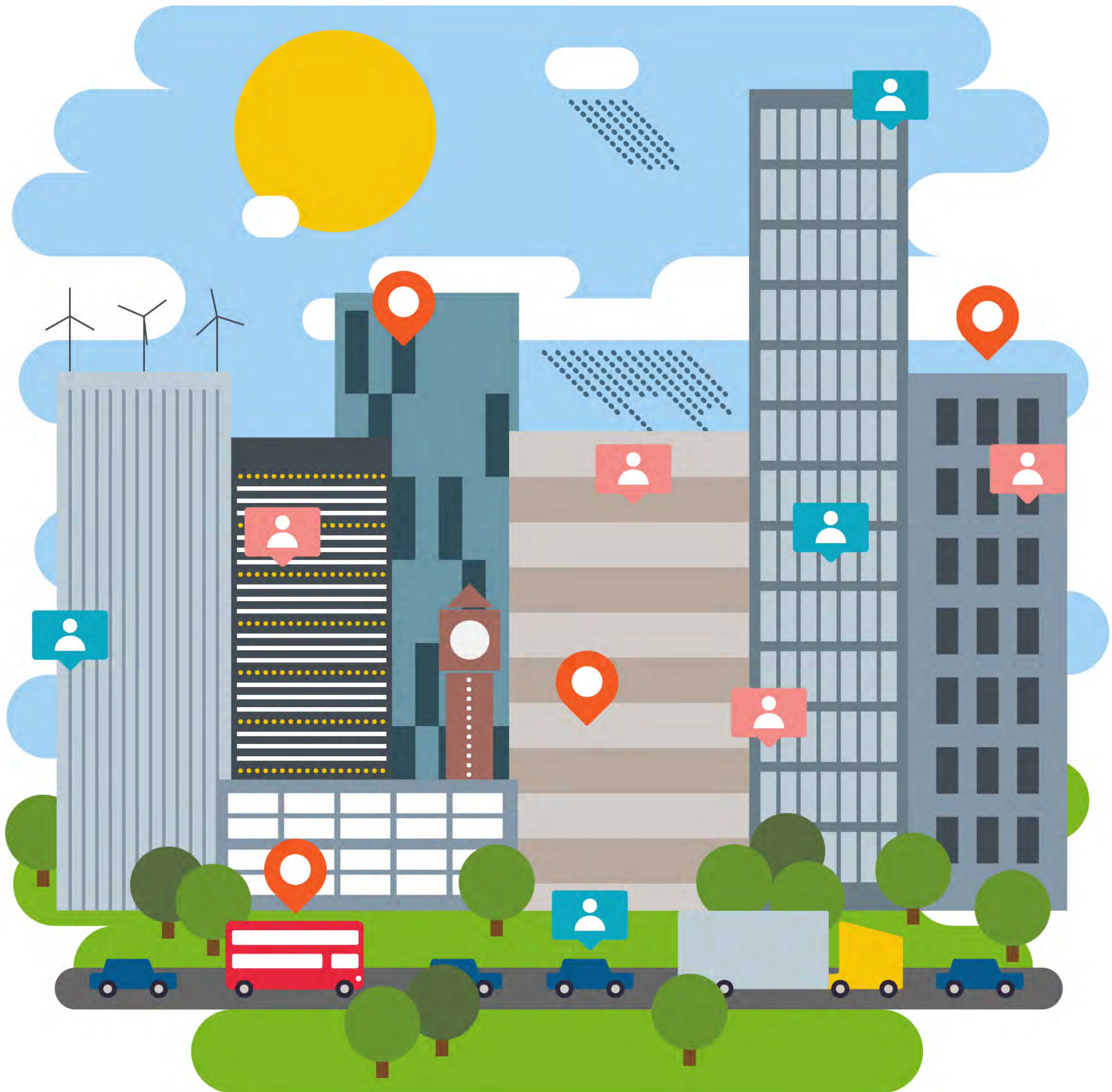
# Negotiating sustainability with sustainability assessment

Hayes, SJ

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# Dialogues of Sustainable Urbanisation

Social Science Research and Transitions to Urban Contexts

Edited by  
Jenna Condie and Anna Mary Cooper

DIALOGUES OF SUSTAINABLE URBANISATION:  
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND  
TRANSITIONS TO URBAN CONTEXTS

EDITED BY JENNA CONDIE AND ANNA MARY COOPER

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## CHAPTER 5.

### NEGOTIATING SUSTAINABILITY WITH SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT

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This blog post come book chapter presents reflections from my research on the prospect of negotiating sustainability within formal assessment processes which form part of strategic development planning in the UK. My starting point is an observation from my empirical data that issues like climate change are identified as problematic or difficult to take action on in strategic planning. My aim in writing this post is to consider, *in brief*, how this observation might act as an example of how action to tackle complex sustainability problems might, or might not, be negotiated.

The research which forms the basis of my thinking on this subject was concerned with two somewhat different assessment processes conducted in the UK, referred to as Sustainability Appraisal in England and Strategic Environmental Assessment in Scotland. An understanding of the detail of these processes and their specific similarities and differences is not of vital importance for this discussion. It is, however, important to understand that when Local Authorities in the UK prepare strategic planning documents they must also conduct these assessments with the aim of ensuring that their plans contribute to sustainable development. These assessments therefore open up potential space to negotiate what sustainability might look like.

Looking first to the broader climate change literature, Anderson and Bows (2012) provide a useful starting point by describing the disconnection between the issue of climate change and our economic system or economic development. They write:

*“Acknowledging the immediacy and rate of emission reductions necessary to meet international commitments of 2°C illustrates the scale of discontinuity between the science (physical and social) underpinning climate change and the economic hegemony.”*

*“Put bluntly, climate change commitments are incompatible with short- to medium-term economic growth.”* (Anderson & Bows, 2012, p.640).

More central to development planning and the associated assessment processes, the following authors summarise what I argue are the most relevant and pertinent points. Gibson (2013) posits that sustainability assessments seeking to contribute to sustainable development need to be concerned with significant change and transition rather than minor adjustments. At this point, it is crucial to note the central and influential position held by the definition of sustainable development that a planning system might be aligned with and is therefore notionally aiming at.

In addition, Owens and Cowell (2002, p.44) describe development planning in the UK as providing a “*somewhat cramped opportunity for dialogue about what constitutes sustainable development*”. More recent changes, particularly in England, have created the mantra “*presumption in favour of sustainable development*” (DCLG, 2012, p.3) and have perhaps hardened this cramped environment. Central to my argument, therefore, is the suggestion that sustainability assessment could enable dialogue around the meaning of sustainable development and possible actions. Indeed, this has been argued by others, including Sheate and Partidário (2010) and Morgan *et al.* (2012).

This discussion also requires acknowledgement of the difficulty in negotiating change in an established system such as planning. Meadows *et al.* (2004, p.270) illustrate the difficulty of bringing new information to a system structured to favour existing information with the following preposition:

*“Just try, sometime, to question in public the value of more growth, or even make a distinction between growth and development, and you will see what we mean. It takes courage and clarity to challenge an established system. But it can be done.”* (Meadows *et al.*, 2004, p.270).

These arguments are, of course, had more fully in the academic and policy literature. However, I argue that the overview rapidly provided here captures some key ideas. These are;

- that significant change to our economic growth trajectory is required in order to avoid the most serious impacts of climate change;
- that assessment processes aiming to contribute to sustainable development need to be concerned with transition rather than minor adjustment;
- that the planning system of the UK itself provides little opportunity for debate of what form sustainable development might take; and, related to the previous point,
- it is acknowledged that presenting new information to an established system like planning (which in some form has existed in the UK for over a century) is extremely difficult and it cannot be assumed that new information can simply be assimilated and acted on within established systems.

By way of connection between the argument outlined above and my own research, I conclude with discussion of two possible issues for negotiating sustainability – scale and dialogue – and a final reflection from my research.

Firstly, scale. Here scale is considered in two ways; in terms of large scale problems such as climate change and also finding the ‘right’ scale or using the available planning scales to negotiate change. I argue that one potential barrier to negotiating change may be a mismatch of scales between issues and actions. Taking climate change as an example, we can see considerable complexity in how we understand climate change as both global in scale and yet local and individual (discussed in greater detail by Lindseth, 2006). Therefore, building action on climate change into planning requires careful negotiation and brokering of the various imperatives present at different scales.

Secondly, and building on this point, I argue that sustainability assessment could, or should, enable dialogue in planning. In so doing it could contribute to this complex negotiation, present new information and act as a means to question existing practice.

In my own research I looked for examples of planning policy which may be in conflict, such as that described by Anderson and Bows (2012) between climate change imperatives and short- to

medium-term economic growth, to understand if sustainability assessment was able to identify, analyse, debate and/or resolve such conflicts. However, I found little evidence to suggest that sustainability assessment enables dialogue which might provide such functions. It is suggested here that the difficulty of presenting new information to established systems, as described by Meadows *et al.* (2004), is a considerable barrier to realising the potential of sustainability assessment as a way to enable dialogue and aid the process of negotiating sustainability.

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## Author Biography



Dr. Samuel Hayes is currently involved in researching and teaching environmental assessment, planning and management in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Liverpool. He has worked on environmental assessment in consultancy and academia since 2008, with a specific focus on Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Assessment, as well as Environmental Impact Assessment. He is a member of the Town and Country Planning Association, the International Association for Impact Assessment and an associate

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