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The Politics of Transition

Innovative Place-Making and Alternative Development Models Under English Localism

Amy Burnett

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Ethical Considerations

Participants have been informed about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research. The researcher has no conflicts of interest that affect the ethical soundness of the research.

Abstract

The widespread, global recognition of climate and ecological emergencies indicates that the way we plan for our communities needs to change. For too long, development has compromised low-carbon and nature-sensitive, quality design. Meanwhile, people are turned off by the technocratic rules of the planning process, meaning that the wider community may not always have a seat at the table. Too often we hear the power of developers can undercut local interest. The book aims to contribute to discussions on sustainability transitions (that is, purposeful, meaningful shifts towards sustainable futures), using the vehicles of community-led planning (such as Neighbourhood Planning) or other new forms of citizen–government collaboration in the context of climate and ecological emergencies (e.g., such as the UK Government's 25-Year Environment Plan as well as proposed Citizen Assemblies). This is set within wider debates on 'levelling up' social and economic disparities within English 'regions', just transitions and the contribution local government and communities can take towards 'nature-positive' development.

In this book, we explore how communities are using the planning process to shape where they live in the context of the English localism agenda. This policy agenda, instigated by the Conservative party and solidified in the 2010–2015 Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition through the 2011 Localism Act, has been the pinnacle in shaping the rights communities have to influence where they live and local government (in theory at least) to respond to these needs. However, the relevance of this study is more than just the English context.

Localism has also been seen by some as a means to solicit more radical forms of placemaking and place-shaping, able to cast new approaches to a more community-centred, sustainable, resilient and experimental local participatory landscape. Since the localism agenda came into force, the UK has contended with Brexit, heightened climate action and awareness, the COVID-19 pandemic and a rising cost-of-living crisis. These multiple crises are not unique to the UK but the configuration of power at the local level to think creatively about how to cope with them and 'build back better' invites a critical assessment of what legacy the Localism Act has had on the bottom-up capacity to dream, and enact, a more sustainable, inclusive form of prosperity in the context of a 'New Economy'; that is, an economy that embraces environmental issues at its core, fosters inclusive governance and generates innovative and appropriate place-based solutions.

We focus on the interaction between the domains of planning, politics and placemaking to explore how development alternatives can become embedded into the fabric of local (state) governance. We do this by examining the relationship between the social movement the Transition town movement ('Transition') and a town council in England through the lens of the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) process, critically assessing how radical approaches that seek to challenge mainstream planning—and politics—are crafted and contested in, and beyond, the planning process. Notably, has localism enabled grassroots, 'niche' influence on mainstream, 'regime' institutions?

As well as reviewing the potential of localism to facilitate inclusive climate action and the role of planning to effect sustainability transitions, we take an in-depth account of how the English market town of Frome in Somerset came to buck a recent trend of a decline of engagement in politics. Frome's Town Council (FTC) has gone from being a relatively 'normal' town with elected representatives from political parties on the town council to become a strong political and social movement under an independent group, Independents for Frome (IfF). Since 2011, IfF has committed to a progressive agenda that seeks to circumvent, subvert and renegotiate the political terrain. IfF is actively constructing a new political model, drawing on the discourse of localism (a policy directive of the central government) as a means to orchestrate the scaling up of parallel infrastructure in the everyday politics of the town. Notably, under IfF, FTC has established many bold and ambitious initiatives both inside and outside the remit of urban planning—including several pioneering approaches that address local action on climate change and the environment; many of

which have roots within Sustainable Frome (the local Transition Initiative, part of the wider *Transition* movement).

The relevance of how these initiatives came about is even more urgent as 83% of county and unitary authorities have declared a climate emergency, although less than 15% have declared an ecological emergency (Inkap, 2021). As of September 2022, 340 councils from the district level and above had made climate emergency declarations (Climate Emergency UK, 2022). There has been a scramble of interest in local-level responses to climate change, but the longevity of the response can broadly mirror political interest and the capacity of local stakeholders to craft and own their response to it. At the very local level, few town and parish councils have declared climate and ecological emergencies—partly because many have struggled with obtaining the confidence to do so, and act on such declarations (NALC, 2021)—though interest to address this by local councils themselves is steadily growing.

In this book, we explore what factors explain local environmental and socio-political innovations and the extent that Frome's experience can be deemed as a sustainability transition towards relocalisation; that is, encouraging localised, reinforcing sustainable feedback loops that support effective community organising, political citizenship and economically resilient places. The *Transition* movement has been key to championing relocalisation to develop 'parallel infrastructure' from business-as-usual, neoliberal societies. We ask whether rights bestowed to local authorities under the Localism Act offer a mechanism to lock in (subversive) sustainability and community-led agendas within mainstream development processes. Notably how 'formalised' policies, practices and spheres of governance relate to 'bottom-up' activities in pursuit of new models of socio-political development in and around the planning process.

Using a multi-level and longitudinal perspective, the case study of Frome can help reveal the intersection between place, power and politics and the relationship planning has to broader sustainable development pathways. Linked to this, the book also explores the role of social movements (such as Transition Initiatives) in clustering, transmuting and channelling networks of alternative socio-political pathways and the extent to which different 'tribes' of development alternatives (such as cohousing and regenerative economic thinking) might be 'coming together' under the guise of New Economy discourse and practices (see Real Economy Lab, 2016).

Key debates in sustainability transitions research are invoked and challenged, such as unpacking grassroots 'niche' and mainstream 'regime'-led

drivers and inhibitors for sustainable action, the governance of transition arenas (spaces where sustainable outcomes are actively cultivated) and the notion of transition itself to explore the politics of placemaking dynamics that generate or contest 'sustainable' development alternatives. In particular, the study explores the conditions for the influence of relocalised (New Economy) actors and entities on Frome's placemaking and politics; whether 'niche' protagonists possess and retain this identity when occupying formal spaces of power and the role of the 'regime' in cultivating and contesting or development alternatives and broader shifts in environmental, social and political arrangements.

By exploring placemaking (the act of 'making places'), the research gives a spatially-situated account of the role of place in defining and shaping the selection environment for protagonist actors who seek development alternatives and how these definitions are mediated through and within the institutions of the state. For instance, by revealing the specific entities that provide a foundation for protagonist actors to craft and use for their own (politicised) ends. The findings point to how autonomy and independence justified an orchestration of transition governance, with both emergent and strategic foundations (see Burnett and Nunes, 2021).

The book appeals to academics across several disciplines with theoretical and practical implications for planning theory and practice, political science and democracy in a post-Brexit and post-pandemic recovery context, and the role of social movements in breaking down, or co-creating, institutions. The book is also timely for practitioners seeking a critique of the politics involved in advancing alternative political and development approaches at a local level or hoping for a more in-depth account of Frome's apparent recent successes.

Keywords • Climate and Ecological Emergencies • Frome• Independent Politics • Localism • Neighbourhood Planning • New Economy • Relocalisation • Sustainability Transitions • Planning Transitions Theory • Placemaking Transitions • *Transition* Movement.

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Neighbourhood plans are often produced with and supported by the dedication and effort of committed community members as a means to positively shape where they live. This book, I hope, sheds light on the politics of trying to use neighbourhood plans as a tool to encourage sustainable societies. It is dedicated to people everywhere who want to use community planning tools to make where they live places people enjoy now and in the future and offers some insights into understanding the importance, and complexity, of transformative environmental, political and social innovations. Taking a critical view in unpacking how this happens does not undermine my own belief that neighbourhood plans can be powerful tools to do this, together with other, complementary, placemaking strategies. Through the course of writing this book I have also learned a lot about the channels through which a 'greener' politics flows and how social and innovative political movements can rise, and sometimes fall or transmute their energies into unexpected courses. This research has been an exciting pursuit of a fascinating research topic, navigating the complexity of the strands through which Frome's story can be told and its implications for scaling out some of its 'niche' experimentation in environmental politics and planning. I am truly grateful to everyone who has supported me on this path, particularly my family, who have given so much as I have drawn on them for time and space. I am sincerely grateful for all the precious time my PhD supervisors, Dr Richard Nunes and Prof Gavin Parker from the University of Reading's (UoR's) Henley Business School (HBS), and the Examiners, Prof Jane Wills (University of Exeter) and Dr Emma Street (UoR/HBS), who contributed to helping me bring forward

an improved thesis and to refine fuzzy ideas. Thank you to the respondents of Frome who shared their fascinating stories, feedback and their patience. I'd also like to thank the people who have met with me to discuss ideas about the measurement and incentivisation of sustainable action and I look forward to these ideas manifesting in some form or another. This includes including those involved in the expansion of the Flatpack Democracy model who have informed the IfF+ story outlined in this book in the context of climate and ecological emergencies. A special thanks to Peter Macfadyen who always made himself available for fascinating catch-ups on developments in the New Economy and Flatpack Democracy movements.

The publishers have also been incredibly patient with me as I have waited for various ducks to align so that I can finish my manuscript, including taking stock of the pandemic that was nowhere on the horizon when I conducted my initial empirical research and other recent administrative changes in Somerset and beyond. While I have endeavoured to ensure that what is published has been appropriately fact-checked, if anything has crept in that is disputed then I apologise. Please get in touch to let me know if anything needs to be corrected in any later iteration of this work. For the sake of readability, acronyms are reintroduced in each chapter (considering that some chapters may be read online or in isolation). I hope this doesn't seem too repetitive for those of you who read this book in full.

I'd like to express thanks to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for recognising the value of my work and funding a one-year post-doctoral fellowship, based at the University of Surrey's Centre for Environment and Sustainability (CES) and co-hosted within the Centre for the Understanding Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP), which has a fabulous cohort of researchers and practitioners advancing cutting-edge research on sustainable prosperity and how to design an inclusive future. I am also grateful to all my colleagues at the Middlesex University's Centre for Enterprise, Environment and Development Research (CEEDR) for surrounding me with inspiring ideas and fascinating research projects, from which I learn a lot daily and the insights I have gained from working at CEEDR have strengthened the overall insights that have further refined the content of this book. Special thanks to Prof John Sturzaker for responding to a last-minute fact-check request and Prof Nick Gallent for giving me some writing tips on how to stop procrastinating and write with a sustained effort after having stopped-started in my attempts to finish this book, waiting for a block of time to write that never comes. Thankfully, there is now a tangible output.

Praise for *The Politics of Transition*

"A timely exploration of the politics of placemaking and the limits of localism in meeting radical ambitions for community-led resilience. It offers important insights to communities and councils wanting to generate novel ideas and challenge the status quo, based on a balanced account of the conditions that led to Frome becoming a hotbed of ideas aiming to realise the New Economy."

—Peter Macfadyen, instigator of Sustainable Frome and the Flatpack Democracy movement, author of *Flatpack Democracy: a DIY Guide to Creating Independent Politics and Flatpack Democracy 2.0: Power Tools for Reclaiming Local Politics*, and former Leader of Frome Town Council

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Abbreviations

25-YEP	25-Year Environment Plan
AGM	Annual General Meeting
BACCC	Bristol Advisory Committee on Climate Change
BIES	Department of Business, Industry, Energy and Strategy
BNG	Biodiversity Net Gain
BREEAM	Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method
CO_2	Carbon Dioxide
CCC	Committee on Climate Change
CEE	Climate and Ecological Emergency
CEEDR	Centre for Enterprise, Environment and Development Research
CES	Centre for Environment and Sustainability
CfSH	Code for Sustainable Homes
CIC	Community Interest Company
CIL	Community Infrastructure Levy
CLT	Community Land Trust
CoP	Conference of the Parties
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CRtBO	Community Right to Build Order
CSE	Centre for Sustainable Energy
CUSP	Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity
DCLG	Department of Communities and Local Government
DECC	Department for Energy and Climate Change
DfL	'Down from London'
DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
EIP	Environmental Improvement Plan
ELMS	Environmental Land Management Scheme

EPC	Energy Performance Certificate
EU	European Union
FFCC	Food Farming and Countryside Commission
FFN	Frome Neighbourhood Network
FiT	Feed-in-Tariff
FoE	Friends of the Earth
FRECo	Frome Renewable Energy Co-op
FTC	Frome Town Council
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
GFI	Green Finance Institute
GI	Green Infrastructure
HCA	Homes and Communities Agency
HSR	Housing Standards Review
IfF	Independents for Frome
ISSB	International Sustainability Standards Board
IUC	International Urban Cooperation
LCN	Local Community Network
LDF	Local Development Framework
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LGA	Local Government Association
LGS	Local Green Spaces
LNPs	Local Nature Partnerships
LPA	Local Planning Authorities
MAP	Multi-Actor Perspective
MCTI	Market and Coastal Towns Initiative
MDC	Mendip District Council
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
MLP	Multi-Level Perspective
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
$MtCo_2e$	Million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents
NA	Neighbourhood Area
NALC	National Association of Local Councils
NAO	National Audit Office
NDCs	National Determined Contributions
NDO	Neighbourhood Development Order
NDP	Neighbourhood Development Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHS	National Health Service
NIMBY	Not In My Back Yard
NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
OEP	Office of Environmental Protection

OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
OIF	Outcome Indicator Framework
ONS	Office of National Statistics
OPL	One Planet Living
PCPA	Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act
PD	Permitted Development
PES	Payments for Environmental Services
Ph.D.	Doctor of Philosophy
QCA	Qualitative Content Analysis
R2o	Route to Zero
RDAs	Regional Development Agencies
RICS	Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
RQ	Research Question
SCC	Somerset County Council
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDR	Sustainability Disclosure Standards
SEA	Strategic Environmental Assessment
SMEs	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
SNA	Social Network Analysis
SNM	Strategic Niche Management
SPDs	Supplementary Planning Documents
SWIMBY	Something Wonderful in my Back Yard
TCFD	Taskforce for Climate-related Financial Disclosures
TCPA	Town and Country Planning Association
TDS	Town Design Statement
TI	Transition Initiative
TN	Transition Network
TNFD	Taskforce for Nature-related Financial Disclosures
ToR	Terms of Reference
UK	United Kingdom
UoR	University of Reading
US	United States
V4F	Vision4Frome
WoW	Ways of Working
XR	Extinction Rebellion
ZCH	Zero-Carbon Homes

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Political Fragmentation and Opportunity for Climate Action in a Changing World

Navigating the Climate Challenge: Moving Beyond Business-as-Usual

We are living in an age of accelerating awareness of our need to reduce our environmental impact. If the news headlines, multiple reports and academic articles are to go by, to put it lightly, as a species and with us the many flora and fauna upon which our actions are inextricably tied, we are in trouble. The current rate of environmental destruction, species decline, population growth, the use of fossil fuels, pollution, declining food security, drought, flooding and obesity are all trends that, left unchecked, will adversely impact human and environmental well-being.

The book is set within growing attention to the 'political' within sustainability transitions—the extent to which societies are moving towards more sustainable forms of living and where social and technical re-orderings result in sustainable goal-directed pursuits (Schot & Geels, 2008; Kemp et al., 1998). The need to radically transform our economy and relationship to nature has led some commentators to suggest that 'globalisation is over', or at least on its descent (Larry, 2015). If true, this could also bring with it a challenge to liberal democracy in the evolution of planet-positive (democratic) systems. As the political theorist Francis Fukuyama (1992) predicted, democracy is in crisis in many parts of the world, reflected in the rise of the right-wing government and the ascent of war in Europe with Russia's

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invasion of Ukraine. There are also promising signs of political experimentation that might realise democracy exercised within planetary boundaries, the politics of which is the subject of the chapters that follow.

Times of crisis create opportunities for a shift in how we perceive ourselves and our relationships with others and to image alternatives (Jackson, 2009; Escobar, 2015). At different scales, there is an increasing convergence of frameworks and institutional architecture to respond to climate change, such as the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is now widespread global recognition of the need to act on climate change. Even some countries previously resistant to climate action have followed suit, such as China and the United States (US) now committing to net-zero 2060 and 2050 targets. The Biden Administration has secured large-scale investment in decarbonised energy through the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act. Europe's European Green Deal aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. Such ambitions are also reflected in the Club of Rome's planetary emergency plan, which sets out the foundations for long-term economic and societal shifts, underpinned by human and planetary prosperity and well-being.

Awareness of environmental issues is on the rise. According to a YouGov survey in May 2019 (YouGov, 2019), climate change was the third most pressing issue for respondents in the United Kingdom (UK). A quarter (27%) of Britons cited the environment as their top three issues facing the country, putting it behind only Brexit (67%) and health (32%). The awareness of climate change is particularly high among 18- to 24-year olds, rising to 45%, making it their second biggest concern behind Brexit (57%). This surge was also mirrored by the widespread direct action by Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Greta Thunberg in 2019—who appealed to much of the global youth population. These events, together with the Conference of the Parties in Paris in 2019, stimulated a cascade of climate (and a lesser amount of climate and ecological) emergency declarations. In May 2019, the UK government also declared a climate emergency.

The recent war in Ukraine is having detrimental ripple effects across the globe, ranging from food shortages to oil price hikes and energy shortages. Inflation is rising, leading to a cost-of-living crisis. The political upheaval of Brexit and the war in Ukraine will change the UK's political and economic structures within Europe and globally. These trends will likely take their toll on having the means to deliver on climate action as households, businesses and government seek to rebalance priorities in the wake of the fiscal tightening. Globalisation has arguably left many scars on nature and our political and economic systems.

A 2021 Accenture report which mapped the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on SDG targets and indicators concluded that the pandemic posed severe near-term challenges and hinders longer-term progress against all 17 goals (O'Reilly et al., 2021). In June 2020, the Committee on Climate Change (CCC, 2020a) published its annual Progress Report to Parliament, which assesses UK's progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It recommended that the UK Government "seize the opportunity to turn the COVID-19 crisis into a defining moment in the fight against climate change" and that more action needed to happen in the following areas (see CCC, 2020b):

- Low-carbon retrofits and buildings that are fit for the future.
- Tree planting, peatland restoration and green infrastructure.
- Energy networks must be strengthened.
- Infrastructure to make it easy for people to walk, cycle and work remotely.
- Moving towards a circular economy, for example, reducing waste, upcycling, sharing and local production.
- Investing in the UK's workforce, lower-carbon behaviours and innovation (e.g., reskilling and retraining programmes, encouraging positive behaviours, innovation funding).

How might one begin to demonstrate how these shifts take place, which actors and institutional shifts have caused it, and what role might planning play in encouraging a net-zero society? What role do our local institutions play in upholding neoliberal practices or preventing development alternatives from breaking through?

How much and what type of growth has also been questioned by those pursuing a degrowth agenda (Escobar, 2015) or the need for a different kind of socio-economic framework in the context of a green recovery and the urgent need to address the climate and ecological crisis (UKGBC, 2021). Recent UK policy has actively sought to remodel the relationship of key sectors, such as agriculture and the planning process, to nature and the environment in legislation such as the Agriculture Act 2020 and the Environment Act 2021. Yet what constitutes sustainable development is something of a hot topic. There are often different 'shades' of what is meant by being 'green' (Muir et al., 2000; Dryzek, 2005) yet sustainable development often mirrors the widely cited definition in the Brundtland

Report of economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainability (The Brundtland Commission, 1987).

There is potential for new political identities to be forged and with those new structures and institutions to be created (although it is recognised that new is not always progressive). This is a book about the potential to transform our political landscape, and through this, our relationships with each other through placemaking—the art of making places—and the role of planning towards these ends. For instance, how can we design systems that are inclusive and sensitive to designing resilient and empowered communities, at scale?

As well as probing these issues through a discussion of UK environmental and planning policy and approaches, we home into these by examining a particular case of Frome, an English market town in the county of Somerset that is experimenting with a new kind of ultra-participatory, inclusive, socially and environmentally orientated politics that eschews traditional party politics.

Indeed, it appears that a new wave of eco-political discourse is gaining traction, emphasising notions of degrowth and socio-cultural experimentation, including a movement towards cultivating a New Economy based on collaborative and progressive governance and culture. This highlights what Purcell (2009, p. 144) terms the "cracks and instabilities" within neoliberal modes of governance.

Peer-to-peer technologies, such as crowdfunding and internet-based movements are helping to link disparate actors through networked platforms, which could give rise to more rapid diffusion and uptake of new development models. For instance, the Global Covenant of Mayor's initiative and related working platforms are encouraging global networks to promote local government action on climate change and peer support to achieve these goals.[1] In the European Union (EU), cities are also paired with cities from regions facing related sustainable development challenges; here they are encouraged to share knowledge and best practice on sustainable urban solutions and the development of local action plans through a knowledge-exchange programme, the International Urban Cooperation (IUC). For others, grassroots players are seeking in some cases to circumvent mainstream players, such as corporations and government, and to develop radical solutions to common issues such as housing, energy

[1] https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/