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River basin management, development planning, and opportunities for debate around limits to growth

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SUMMARY

Some of the latest global paradigms in sustainable water governance revolve around ideas of promoting greater integration within policy implementation processes that impact on land and water. The EU Water Framework Directive (WFD), seen by many as a ‘Sustainability Directive’, reflects this trend, and places particular emphasis on building linkages between water management and land use planning. This paper presents the results of a research project that examined this integrative vision in a real world setting – the emerging relationship between the WFD’s river basin management planning (RBMP) framework and the development planning (DP) system in Scotland. The project’s approach draws from interpretive policy analysis, and the results are based on analyses of key policy documents, as well as in-depth interviews, primarily with land use planning staff from local authorities, as well as other relevant public agencies such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). The results show how an overarching political objective of ‘increasing sustainable economic growth’ is significantly affecting stakeholders’ understandings of the RBMP-DP relationship, as well as their own roles and responsibilities within that relationship. This has created barriers to the deliberation and potential operationalisation of environmental limits to growth in the built environment, which may be skewing decision-making processes in a way that undermines the RBMP framework and its objectives of protecting and improving the water environment.

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1. Introduction

The need to build stronger ties between land use planning and water management decisions has been recognised globally (Newson, 1997; Carter et al., 2005; Mitchell, 2005; Page and Susskind, 2007), and this recognition is beginning to become manifest in policy instruments. One example is the European Union’s Water Framework Directive (WFD). The Directive’s overall purpose is to achieve ‘good ecological status’ for all European water bodies by 2015 through the implementation of river basin management planning (RBMP) processes in all Member States (EC, 2000). The implementation of this new planning regime has required complex shifts in governance and institutional arrangements, and there has long been widespread recognition that the WFD’s ultimate success will depend considerably on how effectively it interacts with the governance of land use and the development of towns and cities

– referred to herein as development planning (DP) (White and Howe, 2003; Carter, 2007; Kidd and Shaw, 2007; Howes, 2008).

When the WFD became law many saw it as a turning point in European environmental policy, as it reflected a shift towards an ‘ecological’ approach to water management and was underpinned by principles of sustainable development and integrated management (Kallis and Butler, 2001; Kaika, 2003). Indeed, one of its underlying drivers was the desire to overwrite the fragmented and (in some cases) ineffective suite of directives that had previously characterised European water policy, replacing them with a single coordinated approach (Kallis and Nijkamp, 2000). Similarly, integration across sectors is seen as a ‘recurring and important underlying theme’ (Kidd, 2007, p. 161) in the concept of spatial planning, which has become a dominant theme in European planning literature (Nadin, 2007; Newman, 2008). Spatial planning envisions a more strategic outlook in DP (often at the regional level) and encourages planners to have a ‘wider regard’ for the issues and objectives of other policy sectors – i.e. economic, environmental and social objectives (Thompson, 2000; Harris and Hooper, 2004). These integrative visions are broadly in keeping

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with wider ideals such as environmental policy integration, which calls for environmental objectives to be integrated within decision-making processes across all policy sectors, and is broadly accepted as ‘essential and indispensable’ to sustainable development (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003, p. 2).

The extent to which such lofty conceptual ideals are being achieved is certainly debatable. For instance, critical reviews of the WFD’s progress have highlighted numerous challenges that are often centred on the vast amounts of hydrological research that are needed to inform the preparation of RBMPs. There is also growing recognition that the goal of ‘good ecological status’ by 2015 is simply unachievable for a large proportion of European water bodies, despite the relative high profile status accorded to water management issues in many member states (Hering et al., 2010; Albrecht, 2013). Furthermore, while the procedural aspects of the WFD can be considered successful (in that countries have successfully adopted river basin management plans) the extent to which these reflect an ‘integrated’ approach is questionable (Nielsen et al., 2013). We seek to embellish this socio-political perspective on environmental policy integration by exploring and critiquing the emerging integration between the RBMP and DP policy regimes in Scotland. Specifically this contribution shows that both regimes are underpinned by sustainability objectives and the idea of seeking balance between competing issues and interests. The first objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine how this idea of balance has been framed by an overarching aim of sustainable economic growth (SEG), and how this frame may be influencing the overall trajectory of integration between the two regimes.

In addressing this aim, this study has exposed one of the fundamental tensions at the heart of the relationship between water management and DP – i.e. the extent to which the need for improvement in the water environment can present a limit to growth and development of the built environment. The debate around ‘limits to growth’ was first popularised in the 1970s, as the result of a computer modelling exercise which predicted economic collapse midway through the 21st century (Meadows et al., 1972), and the idea has been frequently revisited since then (e.g. Goodland, 1992; Ekins, 2000; Turner, 2008; Meadows et al., 2009; Bardi, 2011; Jackson, 2011). Within this larger debate, Ekins (1993) identified three types of potential limits on the growth of economic activity – limits to the level of economic welfare that can be derived from growth, social limits, and ecological limits. In these debates, economic growth is often intertwined with the physical expansion of the built environment, since building activity is often a key pillar of overall economic activity. It is no surprise, therefore, that a particular strand of debate within planning literature has coalesced around understanding potential ecological limits to growth in the built environment. Indeed, the notion of limits has become a vexed issue for planning, in theory and in practice, and a challenge to addressing sustainability objectives (as argued notably by Owens, 1994; Owens and Cowell, 2011). For example, it has been argued that there is now sufficient evidence of environmental impact from development to conclude that such limits do exist, and though they may not be absolute, they may provide an intuitively powerful justification (from a public perspective) for planning decisions. As a result it has been argued that “ideas of ‘enoughness’ and ‘fullupness’ are likely to need explicit operationalisation in planning decisions” (Kelly et al., 2004, p. 315). Given that water resources have long been recognised as having a dual nature, providing “both an opportunity for, and a barrier against, economic development” (Mitchell, 1990, p. 1) it is important to consider whether impacts on the water environment (both actual and potential) could help to crystallise such concepts of ‘enoughness’ in a planning context. A second objective of this paper, therefore, is to contribute to this debate by exploring whether integration between the RBMP and DP regimes might

create space for developing a better understanding and articulation of ecological limits to the growth of the built environment.

To achieve these two objectives, the paper begins by reviewing conceptual understandings of integration in a policy context, before briefly outlining the methodological approach adopted in the study. Section 4 then outlines key results from the study, including an overall depiction of the integrative relationship and how it functions, as well as more specific discussions of the overarching influence of SEG, and the potential to consider the water environment as a limit on the built environment. Section 5 then presents an overall discussion and conclusions.

2. Understanding integration

Since the emerging relationship between RBMP and DP, as well as the wider links between land and water management that are encouraged under the WFD, can all be characterised as processes of integration, it is useful to examine the wider analyses of integration (as a concept and a practice) that have been developed in academic literature. Several authors have tried to unpack and categorize the dimensions of integration in various policy contexts (Mitchell, 1990; Jonch-Clausen and Fugl, 2001; Kidd and Shaw, 2007; Turnpenny et al., 2008; Derkzen et al., 2009). Their analyses show that integration efforts can have multiple aspects, such as developing holistic understandings of natural systems; developing linkages between organisations, agencies and policy sectors; developing linkages across geographic boundaries; or, broader still, linking the ‘three pillars’ of sustainability (economic, social and environmental). In more constructivist views, integration between policy regimes has also been described as “the development of shared understanding of issues, agendas, and program choices” (Healey, 1999, p. 114), as well as a process of “negotiative problem definition” (Brand and Gaffikin, 2007, p. 291).

In a policy setting, it is useful to characterise the structures and mechanisms that underpin integration as either ‘hard’ infrastructure (laws, rules and formal responsibilities) or ‘soft’ infrastructure (everyday practices, informal rules and cultures) (Vigar, 2009). It is also useful to examine how integration is used as a normative concept, as the term often “implies improvement by making whole what was previously (and mistakenly) separated” (Derkzen et al., 2009, p. 145). However, such assumptions of improvement must be treated with caution, as they can ignore the fundamental practical challenges associated with bridging entrenched differences between policy sectors – differences in knowledge, approaches and values. Similarly, in development planning, enthusiasm for integration has been described as ‘well-intentioned but naïve’, and initiatives to support integration often fail to appreciate the ‘deep differences’ between the facets they aim to unite (Owens and Cowell, 2002, p. 68). These differences present deep-seated, structural barriers to the delivery and maintenance of integrated approaches (Derkzen et al., 2009; Stead and Meijers, 2009). Therefore, there seems to be a growing appreciation, particularly in planning literature, that the zeal for integration must be tempered and critically assessed in light of the operational realities of practitioners (Newman, 2008). Additionally, there are concerns that ignoring these ‘deep differences’, through superficial or tokenistic efforts to support integration, can create further structural barriers. For instance, in the drive towards ‘joined-up government’, a strongly espoused ethos of partnership can generate consensus around abstract goals, while still legitimising the avoidance of real political value conflicts (Davies, 2009). In other words, rather than diffusing conflict, integration efforts between policy actors could simply facilitate the displacement of conflict.

This potential for conflict displacement becomes particularly concerning when integration is portrayed as a mechanism for

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