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TECHNICAL ARTICLE

How do Sustainability Ideologies Manifest in Local Planning Decisions?

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability underpins planning within the United Kingdom and is applied to all scales of development management decisions, ranging from small-scale householder planning applications to major urban regeneration schemes. Although sustainability has long been a guiding principle in spatial planning, no academic research exists on how sustainability manifests across development scales within planning decisions in England. This research applies Davidson's novel typology for an exploratory categorization of sustainability ideologies within 21 planning reports from three outer borough London local authorities. It aims to advance an understanding of how sustainability manifests across development scales and to contribute to the literature at the junction of sustainability and development management. The research finds that sustainability adopts different sociopolitical ideologies across development scales. In large schemes, planners adopt a neoliberal approach where technology and the substitutability of capital justify sustainable outcomes. While in smaller householder and minor schemes, planners adopt radical (micro) and social democratic (macro) approaches that insist on limits to growth and follow traditional authority-applicant power relationships when justifying sustainable outcomes. The paper argues that sustainability in planning practice is not a fixed concept but a fluid and negotiated discourse. This has significant implications for policy coherence, democratic accountability, and the legitimacy of planning decisions. By illuminating the interpretive flexibility of sustainability within planning decisions, the research provides an inroad to better governance for the practice-led sector and offers recommendations to improve outcomes for private and public sector planners in England.

KEYWORDS Sustainability, Development Management, Planning

1. Introduction

Local authorities across the United Kingdom have adopted sustainable development policies within their planning documentation in response to the global climate crisis and socio-political challenges (Revell 2013). These policies to respond to a wider sustainability discourse in academia, business, and popular culture, as well as directives issued by national and supra-national organisations that have substantial environmental, social, and economic capacities to envision and direct change (Raworth 2017; McManners 2024). By comparison, local authorities in England have constrained environmental, social, and economic capacities. However, one pathway they can deliver sustainable outcomes is by issuing planning permissions for private developments (Yu and Fischer 2019).

This research applies Davidson's novel typology for an exploratory categorization of sustainability ideologies in local planning decisions (Davidson 2014). It comprises a cross-case study of 21 officer reports issued by three local authorities in Greater London: the London Borough of Ealing, the London Borough of Merton, and the London Borough of Redbridge. It reveals that sustainability manifests differently across development scales, council planners encounter the complexities inherent in the ubiquitous sustainability discourse, different sustainability ideologies alter the

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traditional power relationships in development management exchanges, and sustainability and planning are heavily informed by context. The research also contributes to and expands the sparse academic literature at the intersection of sustainability and development management in England. The conclusion includes a reflection on applying the typology, avenues for future research, and recommendations for private and public sector planners to improve the reliability of decision processes, determinations, and overall organisational governance.

2. A brief history of the sustainability discourse, development management frameworks, and related academic research

2.1. A brief history of the sustainability discourse

The Western concept of sustainability, containing the intersecting economic, environmental, and social circles or co-dependent pillars, has roots in maintaining European forestry yields against the backdrop of depleting natural stocks in the 17th and 18th centuries (Purvis *et al.* 2019). The environmental conservation dimension stems from natural scientists and ecologists in the 19th and early 20th centuries advocating for sustainable practices to combat urbanisation and conspicuous consumption. The social dimension traces to a call for a 'sustainable society' within 'A Blueprint for Survival', an unpublished manuscript of The Limits to Growth, by The Club of Rome (The Ecologist 1972).

Since then, interest in sustainability has permeated throughout society. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) recognized the term 'sustainable development' as '[meeting] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). This definition remains at the core of sustainability today.

A report by the British Antarctic Survey in 1985 detailing a hole in the ozone layer initiated the supra national Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (United Nations 1987). Throughout the 1990s and 2010s, the United Nations recognized the need to balance economic, social, and environmental concerns to sustain human life on the planet (McManners 2024). The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change entered into force in 1994 (United Nations 1992). The Millennium Development Goals, a set of eight goals to be delivered through a global partnership by 2015, were adopted in 2000, with Goal 7 aiming to "ensure environmental sustainability" (United Nations 2000). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which replaced the Millennium Development Goals, were adopted in 2015 and are to be delivered by 2030 (United Nations 2015).

In the past decade, sustainability has entered mainstream consciousness through policy and governance initiatives of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and international and national climate activist organisations, such as Fridays for Future, Generation Zero, Extinction Rebellion, and Just Stop Oil, who advocate for further action. The Environmental, Social and Governance movement, criteria for evaluating an organisation's performance against sustainability's three pillars, has also entered the popular discourse (Bradle, 2021). As such, the present sustainability discourse is arguably applicable to all organisations, individuals, discussions, and actions, including those in the development management sector.

2.2. Sustainability and development management within England

Within England, sustainability is at the core of development management. The National Planning Policy Framework sets the national policy direction and states that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2025). It identifies the provision of homes, commercial development and supporting infrastructure as the means through which this purpose is to be delivered. In doing so, the framework contributes values to the planning system that are to be applied through the functions of legalisation and guide ministers and local authorities when they determine

planning applications. It references the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development's definition of sustainability quoted above, and specifies the economic, social, and environmental objectives of sustainability. The economic objective is to, in summary, to help build a strong, competitive economy by ensuring the right land is available at the right time and coordinating infrastructure provision. The social objective seeks to support strong, healthy communities by providing sufficient, diverse housing and creating well-designed, safe places with accessible services and open spaces that meet current and future needs. The environmental objective is to protect and enhance the environment through efficient land use, biodiversity gains, prudent resource use, and climate action. The framework makes clear that the objectives underpin plan making and decisions, relying on them to guide the planning permission decisions when there are no relevant development plan policies to implement.

This position and reference to sustainability have been present within the National Planning Policy Framework since its inception in 2012. Prior to the framework, sustainability was present in Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development prepared by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which set the policy direction on different aspects of land use planning in England (2005). This statement also positioned sustainable development as a core principle of planning in the country, cited the 1987 report, and referred to the intersecting economic, environmental, and social circles or co-dependent pillars of sustainability. Earlier planning initiatives throughout the 1990s witnessed the expansion of sustainability in political and then statutory contexts. The British Government published Sustainable Development: The UK Strategy in 1994, which examined how Agenda 21, a United Nations action plan on sustainable development, could be implemented nationally (H M Government 1994). It identified land use planning as a key area of implementation. The United Kingdom Round Table on Sustainable Development was then established in 1995 with the aim to further discussion on sustainable development with the input of industry sectors (Rostron 2001). At the end of the decade, statutory adoption was more or less achieved via clause 2 in the Local Government Act 2000, as enacted, that empowered local authorities to promote or improve the three pillars of sustainable development for the wellbeing of their communities.

Planning acts within England are the statutory mechanisms that deliver the sustainability objectives. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 instructs local authorities to form documents relating to the development and use of land in their area, resulting in the creation of local plans. Section 19 of the Act requires local plan documents to have regard to national policies and advice, including achieving sustainable development via the previously stated economic, social, and environmental objectives under the National Planning Policy Framework. Additionally, Section 39 of the Act requires local plan documents to function with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development. This results in sustainable development discourses, justifications, and policies forming throughout local plans. In the name of sustainability, such instances encourage small convenience shops to locate within five minutes of residential areas, new build properties to achieve low-emission standards, and adaptable town centre rejuvenation, among other similar outcomes (London Borough of Merton 2025).

The Town and Country Planning Act 1990 grants local authorities the statutory power to determine planning applications and directs them to have regard to relevant provisions in planning documents, any local finance considerations, and any other material considerations. Within this context, development management decisions intersect with the sustainability discourse formed in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and the National Planning Policy Framework and can introduce financial and other considerations that relate to sustainability but are not explicitly stated in these documents via material considerations.

2.3. Related academic research on sustainability and development management

Academic planning literature contains little research at the intersection of development management and sustainability in the United Kingdom, highlighting the need for further research into this topic. The few exceptions are detailed here.

Cartwright (1997) engaged local authorities in the south east of England via a self-completion, postal questionnaire followed by interviews to document how they implemented sustainable development. They found that local authorities responded best to clear, actionable guidance relevant to their operations, with some citing the Friends of the Earth's Environmental Charter (1989) as a direct influence on their strategies. The local authorities' sustainable development strategies largely focused on environmental issues and often neglected economic and social dimensions. When addressed, social aspects were tackled through community education and local partnerships. Most sustainability officers were environmental specialists rather than planners. Cartwright recommended that planners and all council staff undergo targeted education and training to deliver sustainability more holistically.

Lombardi et al. (2011) examined sustainability in the regeneration of Eastside, Birmingham, and found that despite the use of policies, advisors, and checklists that directed meaningful sustainable outcomes, the regeneration project followed a 'business as usual' approach. The vague definition of sustainability led to ecotechnological solutions attached to a standard design. Measures like green roofs and alternative energy were seen as superficial, with more meaningful actions—such as social diversity, support for local businesses, and building retention—overlooked. The authors attributed the limited outcomes to conflicting stakeholder interests, political short-termism, and weak commitment. They called for further case studies to validate their findings.

Other researchers have engaged sustainability through a housing-provision lens. Sayce, Walford, and Garside (2012) studied responses to residential development in gardens across England as a means of delivering sustainable communities and local housing. They concluded that the devolution of decision making to council officers and inconsistencies in policy presence, interpretation, and application varied the rate of garden development, the processes regarding how to assess and manage it, and its local acceptability. Ferm et al. (2021) found that office to residential conversions under permitted development, some on industrial estates, were not in sustainable locations, i.e., being close to public transport, jobs, and social and green infrastructure. As such, this form of permitted development was deemed not satisfactory to meet the government's objective of delivering 'much needed homes' in the right places and the fundamental sustainable development objective in the National Planning Policy Framework. The authors endorsed the position that an unfettered free-market planning approach is a form of utopian market fundamentalism and would not deliver the innovation that neoliberal market advocates promise.

Recently, land use planning law and policy in the United Kingdom has been strengthened to address sustainability vagueness. Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) was introduced through the Environment Act 2021 with the aim of a minimum 10 per cent biodiversity uplift post-development (Environment 2026). At the time of enactment, it was voluntary. In 2024, BNG became mandatory for all major developments in England and then extended to small sites soon afterwards. Small exceptions to meeting this requirement remain available, including householder applications, development that does not impact a priority habitat and impacts less than 25 square metres of on-site habitable or 5 metres of linear habitats such as hedgerows, and some infrastructure. Government guidance directs local authorities to assess BNG in their determinations, providing a framework that inserts sustainability into their processes. However, despite the statutory requirement, research revealed a bias to protect larger and more charismatic species such as mammals and birds over herpetofauna and invertebrates influencing decision-making (Thornhill *et al.* 2025). Officer reports most often cited submitted biodiversity and landscaping plans in relation to BNG, but less frequently mentioned everyday features hedgerows, trees, and shrubs for biodiversity-specific reasons. These

findings suggest that development size and officer's perspectives are critical junctions for sustainability in practice.

3. Davidson's typology of the sustainability discourse

This research applies Davidson's (2014) novel typology that categorises the sustainability discourse by the ideologies of its actors. Davidson defines an ideology, in accordance with Stilwell (2002), as "a system of belief that shapes behaviour, individually and collectively". This novel categorisation is useful to unpack the sustainability discourse in organisations, such as local authorities, as it illuminates the socio-political ideologies that define decisions rather than critiquing the actions themselves, which local contexts and capabilities may influence. Davidson contends that explicit and implicit ideologies of social actors, including how actors frame the role of the market and innovation and how they accept the influence of institutions and context, are valuable inputs for understanding sustainability discourses as they define how individuals and organisations frame issues and solutions.

Table 1, presented on the following page, summarizes Davidson's novel typology of the sustainability discourse. It identifies six ideologies and applies a three-tier tick system for the strength of each attribute as considered by their policy actors. The table shows a low-to-high continuum between neoliberalism and radical ideologies regarding relationship power dynamics and a reverse trend for substitutability of capital. The neoliberal position that market-based economies drive sustainable outcomes and ignore to limits to growth contrasts with the two radical positions that contend that growth is inherently harmful to sustainability and power imbalances lead to failings. The role of technology also decreases from neoliberalism to radical ideologies.

Table 1. Structure of typologies. Modified table sourced from Davidson (2014).

Categorisation	Summary	Recognizes limits to growth	Role of technology	Substitutability of capital	Considers power relationships
Neoliberalism	Sustain economic growth and the human species. Favours the profit motive and high growth rates. Assumes that market-based economies will protect the environment and optimal social outcomes. Disregards the role of the state or communities, only favours individuals and families.	-	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
Liberalism	Sustain humans through an economic system. Favours market signals (tax/incentives) to change behaviour. State has a role to signal the market.	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓

Table 1. (continued)

Categorisation	Summary	Recognizes limits to growth	Role of technology	Substitutability of capital	Considers power relationships
Social Democratic (Marco)	Sustain norms through institutional redistribution and control of humans and markets. Transfer technology and funds to the poorest nations to aid development. Concerned with environmental scarcity, population growth, and inequalities.	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Social Democratic (Micro)	Sustain through small autonomous bioregional communities with less trade. Disregards the social structure of ownership and the use of technology.	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Radical (Macro)	Sustain through reducing/ removing hierarchies and violence. Seeks redistribution, less conspicuous consumption, and society as the resource allocator, not the market.	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓✓
Radical (Micro)	Sustain the earth, biosphere, and all living things through restructuring in favour of small communal societies living with nature.	✓✓✓	✓	-	✓✓✓

Academic researchers value Davidson's typology and have applied it across various fields. Ferguson and Wollersheim (2023) adopted the typology in an analysis of the ideological underpinning of the related term "resilience". They found that resilience was often conceived as an extension of neoliberalism as it shifted the responsibility for welfare and security from the state to the individual. They also deduced that resilience, like sustainability, morphed when applied in macro and micro institutional contexts. Salmivaara and Kibler (2020) discussed how Davidson's typology contextualized "sustainable entrepreneurship" and illuminated the rhetoric and motivations for policymakers. They suggested that controversial solutions often emerged when policymakers' rhetoric followed neoliberal and liberal paradigms. Kemper and Ballantine (2019) utilized Davidson's typology to analyse and categorize "sustainability marketing." They identified that a neoliberal marketing approach promoted sustainable productions, social democratic marketing highlighted lifestyle and behavioural changes, and radical marketing emphasized institutions and norms with critical reflection.

Other researchers applied Davidson's typology in analyses of healthcare, community stakeholder cooperation, and national political elections (Rizvi *et al.* 2020; Timofejevs 2020; Luoma *et al.* 2024).

In the wider literature, academic researchers often employ categorisations to rationalize ubiquitous discourses. Goffman (1974) described how categories, also called frames, act as cognitive filters that "enable individuals or groups or organisations to locate, perceive, identify, and label." These categories can operate as discernible systems, entities, and rules, while others may have no tangibility. Feldman (2011) stated that categorisations are "sets of shared assumptions, values, and frames of reference that give meaning to everyday activities and guide how organisational members think and act." Cornelissen and Werner (2014) identified micro-level cognitive frames, meso-level organisational frames, and macro-level social frames (institutional logics) occurring simultaneously. Therefore, Davidson's typology of sustainability discourses is an insightful method to assess how sustainability manifests in organisations.

4. Methodology & limitations

This research adopted an inductive qualitative methodology that engaged non-numerical data sources via a cross-case method to understand how sustainability discourses manifest in planning decisions across three Greater London local authorities. In accordance with Yin (2003), a cross-case method was chosen as it retained the unique contexts of the cases and enabled the induction of general findings, enriched by subtext from each case.

The research engaged three phases: data collection, coding, analysis and synthesis. In the data collection phase, the cases were read, and sustainability references were extracted from the text. Sustainability was referenced when it was explicitly stated or when a comment in the report reflected the WCED definition. In the coding phase, the references were tabulated and color-coded to surface ideological alignment with Davidson's typology. The coding relied on the primary researcher comparing the extracted references to the Davidon's typology descriptions, summarised in Table 1. Comparisons with key words and ideological perspectives, i.e., whether a market justification was given and relied on for a development, underpinned this coding phase; refer the active researcher involvement is acknowledged as a limitation. The coding was checked by the secondary researcher to ensure rationale coding outcomes. Duplicate statements were removed, and long statements were truncated. A cross-case analysis through the lens of Davidson's typology was then conducted between cases within an application type (householder, minor, and major) and between the three application types to identify patterns, differences, and emerging themes. A synthesis process followed, where findings were generalized to answer the research question.

The cases were 21 reports issued by different planning officers at the London Borough of Ealing (243341HH, 243350HH, 243343HH, 243250FUL, 242997FUL, 242272FUL, 232967FUL), London Borough of Merton (23/P2751, 23/P2757, 23/P2860, 23/P2452, 23/P2512, 23/P2524, 24/P0368), and London Borough of Redbridge (0134/24, 2925/23, 3259/23, 1782/24, 2130/24, 3646/23, 1161/21). The cases were downloaded from the councils' publicly available planning portals; the portals can be found via searching the council and the term 'planning portal' (London Borough of Ealing 2026; London Borough of Merton 2026; London Borough of Redbridge 2026).

The cases from each borough comprised three householder applications for residential extensions and similar small developments, three minor applications for constructing up to nine new residential units, and one major application comprising ten or more residential units. These categorisation of applications followed the definition of application types in planning law, policy, and practice; refer to The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015. The reports were issued between October 2022 and October 2024 and determined by delegated authority to capture regular planning processes. The applications were selected based on reverse chronological order where they met the research criteria. To avoid doubt, the political preferences of the councils are not relevant to the research, resulting in the exclusion of planning decisions made by political committees.

The three local authorities are classified as Outer London Boroughs in The London Plan (Greater London Authority 2021). The London Plan describes Outer London Boroughs as comprising mostly

residential land uses and having significant potential for appropriate intensification over time, particularly for additional housing. The inclusion of Outer London Boroughs is justified as being similar to most urban environments across England. All the selected boroughs operate under the National Planning Policy Framework and London Plan, allowing for comparison.

The London Borough of Ealing is in west London, Greater London's fourth largest borough, and home to approximately 300,000 inhabitants (London Borough of Ealing 2025). Its urban form is largely low-density two-storey houses spread around seven town centres. The London Borough of Merton is in south west London and home to approximately 220,000 inhabitants. Its urban form mostly comprises two-storey houses surrounding small retail and town centres (London Borough of Merton 2025). The London Borough of Redbridge is in north east London and has approximately 279,000 inhabitants. Two storey dwellings are common across the borough, and Ilford serves as the primary town centre (London Borough of Redbridge 2025).

The chosen method limited the research depth as it categorised the ideologies within the officer reports but did not identify the justifications for why the determinations aligned with certain ideologies. Interviews with the contributing planning officers would be a means to uncover this knowledge in a future research stage.

Another limitation was the number of cases within each application type, the assumption that each case was prepared to a similar quality under like circumstances, the total number of cases, and the restriction to three London boroughs. This ignores confounding variations, such as regional characteristics and pre-submission project conditions. Regional and other London borough may engage the studied ideologies differently across development scales. These limitations resulted from the resource parameters of the researcher and their focus on testing the application of Davidson's novel typology on planning determinations. The results should not be interpreted as precise for all developments, locations, and contexts. However, due to the exploratory function of the research and the inclusion of three Outer London Boroughs with similar characters and typical urban forms, there is sufficient data to form an initial proposition that could translate to other urban areas in England and further research can test.

Lastly, the case study method was limited by the absence of a routine, as acknowledged by Yin (2003). Instead, it relied on an interpretation that is subject to the personal capabilities and context of the researcher. The absence of a routinized procedure, such as in a laboratory setting, was minimized by providing text extractions from the officer reports in this publication to enable scrutiny and replication.

5. Findings

5.1. Householder applications

Officer reports for determining the householder applications aligned with the Radical (Micro) ideology. Most of the householder cases primarily justified granting planning approval because the applications recognized the limits to acceptable growth by not seeking to exceed the existing thresholds of the site and setting.

For example, officer report 243341HH from the London Borough of Ealing stated, "It is not considered that the proposal has any significant notable impact on the character and appearance of the host building or the wider area." This trend was also present in the London Borough of Merton and London Borough of Redbridge householder cases, where the recognition of the limits to acceptable growth was a key determining factor.

Power relationships were the second most prevalent means of justification as the cases used planning officer discretion, including the consideration of previous officer decisions, and to rationalize determinations. Officer report 23/P2757 from the London Borough of Merton stated, "There are a variety of rear and infill extensions at single storey level at the rear of properties in Stuart Road and the proposal would not be out of keeping."

Each borough featured one reference to the role of technology within their householder cases. Officer report 3259/23 from the London Borough of Redbridge referred to technical tree protection measures. Officer report 2433341HH from the London Borough of Ealing identified how policy directs good design as a tool of sustainable development, and officer report 23/P2751 from the London Borough of Merton required the application of frosted glass to prevent cross views. These technologies were knowledge-based and non-digital, speaking to the limited role of these interventions.

Across the householder cases in the three boroughs, no substitutions of natural resources in favour of capital or another resource were present.

5.2. Minor applications

The minor applications for constructing up to nine new dwellings reflected the Social Democratic (Marco) ideology due to containing a balanced sample of the four attributes.

The officer reports recognized limits to growth in statements that considered whether the proposed developments would integrate with the settings. For example, officer report 243250FUL considered whether the development would result in "safeguarding and improving the environment and ensuring safe and healthy living conditions".

The minor applications from the London Borough of Ealing emphasized the role of technology through design solutions and electronics, such as following a "design-led approach", installing photovoltaic panels, and the use of expert arboricultural interventions to mitigate potential harm to the environment. The increased complexity of the technology was evident compared to the householder applications.

The minor cases often justified the substitution of open land and existing houses in favour of new housing and urban densification through phrases that described proposals as the "best use of land" and a need to "increase housing supply to meet demand".

The minor applications reflected traditional power relationships between local authorities and the applicant in situations when internal council consultees required proposals to meet prescribed design standards or for the consultees to authorize exceptions. Other power relationship justifications occurred where local authority planners used their discretion to compare developments to previous planning approvals and permitted development rights to approve irregularities based on their professional opinions.

5.3. Major applications

Major applications for large housing developments embodied the Neoliberalism ideology through few references to limits to growth while prioritising technological fixes to resolve issues, the substitution of existing resources and land for new housing and development, and a power-balance in favour of the developers.

In officer report 232967FUL from the London Borough of Ealing, recognitions of growth limits were mostly constrained to heritage considerations caused by proximity to a listed building. Officer report 24/P0368 from the London Borough of Merton and officer report 1161/21 from the London Borough of Redbridge lightly recognized limits to growth in the form of the developments positively relating to the surrounding buildings and existing street patterns, but the officers provided little analysis, indicating negligible reliance on this aspect.

A significant portion of the major development planning reports detailed technical solutions. For example, officer report 232967FUL from the London Borough of Ealing resolved social inclusivity by stating, "A wheelchair lift would be provided within the entrance lobby to meet the inclusive design requirement". The report for 1161/21 from the London Borough of Redbridge stated, "The submitted Energy Assessment demonstrates that the proposed development would satisfy the London Plan target of 35% carbon reduction in regulated carbon dioxide emissions over Part L 2013". These statements highlighted the uninhibited use of technology for overcoming complex issues.

Regarding the substitution of resources for capital, officer report 1161/21 from the London Borough of Redbridge provided the application with substantial weight due to the council failing to deliver the borough's housing supply need, stating, "Housing development now has the "presumption in favour of sustainable development". In planning law they call this the "tilted balance" towards housing development – basically more positive weight is given to housing development. The officer report also accepted financial payment for other sustainability harms, "In order to achieve a zero-carbon impact an offsetting payment of £19,346 is offered which will be secured via S106 Agreement." Officer report 24/P0368 from the London Borough of Merton similarly stated, "whilst car free there is still an impact on additional traffic e.g., deliveries as such a highway contribution of £30,000 is being sought." Other money contributions to offset the absence of sufficient volumes of affordable housing and for monitoring were also present in the major application cases.

Power relationships, where council officers traditionally wield their discretion, served as broad-brush residual justifications. Comparisons to previously approved but not yet constructed intensive schemes vindicated the substantial change to the landscape. These justifications contrasted with the care given to preserving the precise existing urban thresholds in the householder applications. For example, officer report 1161/21 stated "[the] building line would be consistent with the approved development at no.7 Morland Road", which favoured the future context over the existing setting. The officer reports also signalled that local authorities recognized major developments' power to deliver new homes on the site, and that the local authorities partly ceded governance control when issuing planning permission that relied on the discharge of planning conditions post-substantial construction when development would be difficult to alter and their ability to reduce carbon emissions at the source.

6. Discussion

The primary trend in the findings is that the sustainability discourse manifests differently across development scales within local planning decisions. Householder applications are considered sustainable when they respect the existing environment and community, minor applications gain planning permission when they balance disturbing the existing environment with new benefits to the site and setting, and major applications obtain planning permission when they deliver high future benefits that offset evident harm to the existing environment and leverage technological fixes to divert residual adverse effects. This phenomenon highlights the fluidity of the sustainability discourse within the development management context.

Another trend is that development management officers face the same challenges that researchers and practitioners encounter when engaging with the sustainability discourse, specifically, how to make the broad World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) definition applicable to single applications situated within complex local contexts. There is substantial discretion afforded to local authority planners in this determination process and little statutory and policy direction. The discretionary basis of the planning system in England, encapsulated by the ability to consider material considerations that can override and augment local plan directions, complicates the situation. It raises questions about how local authority planners adopt or are directed to favour, consciously or unconsciously, specific ideologies when making decisions. Also, whether the need for officers to create convincing justifications in their reports that can withstand planning appeals and judicial reviews results in the exhibition of more dogmatic ideologies. It is considered unlikely that planners assessing applications at different scales would hold distinct ideological positions that neatly align with Davidson's typologies. The findings of Lombardi et al. (2011) from the Eastside regeneration project in Birmingham support this hypothesis as those interviewed expressed concern regarding the validity of some design justifications after decisions were issued. This research recognizes that interviews with planning officers would reveal the actual level of belief in the justifications and personal ideologies.

Regarding power relationships across the three development scales, local authorities are more accommodating to innovation and compromises in larger developments than in smaller developments. A potential cause for this trend is a recognition that larger developments often have significant financial backing, higher design quality, and good stakeholder involvement. Refusing or overly prescribing outcomes for large developments risks political backlash through councillors and communities who are in favour of the projects as well as generating industry hesitancy for future investment and development in the borough. The ability for financial contributions to the borough may also form a subtext that inverts the usual power balance in the authority-developer relationship. In contrast, smaller developments are not offered the same scope to dictate an acceptable outcome because their impact is localised, there is less community interest and benefit, and the development incrementality alters the environment rather than transforms it.

A further trend is that sustainability, within planning determinations in England, is heavily context driven. It is positioned in relation to its application rather than as a distinct and rigid framework and does not benefit from strict national and local guidance. As such, a hypothesis is that organisational norms primarily facilitate how sustainability manifests in local planning decisions. Academic support for this hypothesis comes from Lozano and Barreiro-Gen (2023) who identify that organisations often adopt a compartmentalised approach to sustainability. It likewise gains support from the findings of Besharov and Smith (2014) and Schuler et al. (2017) who provide evidence that organisations justify dissimilar approaches through rules, laws, and norms. Further research into the influence of organisational norms over planning officers' agency in relation to sustainability policies and determinations would be required to further illuminate and test this claim.

A final reflection is that neo-liberalism holds the capital position in England's planning landscape, as major developments, which have the greatest influence on places, are subject to neo-liberal approaches rather than other political ideologies. Can the national need for mass house building be achieved through other ideologies while staying true to their ethos? Or are large scale urban transformations exclusively neoliberal products?

7. Conclusion

This research investigated how sustainability manifests in local planning decisions. Through the lens of Davidson's typology, it is evident that sustainability manifests differently across planning decisions, planners in local authorities encounter the complexities inherent within the sustainability discourse, larger developments are more able to engage in neo-liberal sustainability practices than smaller developments, and local authorities wield discretion to choose how they seek sustainable outcomes on a case-by-case basis.

The exploratory categorisation method benefited the research by offering clear lenses for the deduction of knowledge at a research junction that is lacking established frames. It proved that such a method can be applied to planning officer reports, offering a new approach for the critique of the practice-led sector. The research also profited from the certainty of Davidson's typologies as the findings and themes are distinct. However, due to the rigidity of the method, the research lacked nuance that revealed why each determination adopted a specific ideology and the actual strength of these convictions. The legitimacy of the sustainability categorisations should also be questioned before knowledge can be generalized. The authors view Davidson's typology as anchored in historical ideologies and largely theoretical, which risks reductionism. By framing all sustainability positions as ideologically driven, the approach risks flattening more nuanced or hybrid positions. It also cannot be assumed that the categorisations reflect the dominant local political administration in each of the three studied authorities. As such, the authors consider the categorises to be legitimate only when viewed through Davidson's specific process and relevant for discussion purposes without further research.

Further research should interview planning officers to understand how organisational, personal, and application contexts influence determinations. Subsequent research could investigate how local

planners balance the environmental, social, and economic objectives in their decision making, and which policies in the local plan they see as addressing these three dimensions of sustainability. Similar to Thornhill et al. (2025), a tally of sustainable development key terms and solutions, such as off-setting, green roofs, and biodiversity net gain, in officer reports could explore the related question of 'what aspects of sustainable development are commonly found authorities' reports, where they differ, and why or how do they differ?' This question would supplement the ideological stocktake of this present research.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that private sector urban development professionals design their proposals to align with the distinct sustainability ideologies applied across the development scales. Adherence to these categories will improve the likelihood of obtaining planning permission. Public sector planners and those employed within local authorities should recognize the varying sustainability ideologies and determine whether to adopt a unified approach when assessing sustainability or formalize their existing approach of applying different ideologies depending on the development scale via revised policy. It is the view of the author that the direction in national policy should be clarified regarding planning permission decision making to create a consistent approach across the development scales. If offsetting is acceptable for large schemes, small-scale developments should equally benefit, or large schemes should also be required to not exceed existing environmental thresholds. Recent biodiversity net gain policy could become model that is expanded to include economic and social aspects of sustainability. This approach would create a fair and holistic approach to sustainability that minimises some complexities when balancing the three pillars of the discourse. However, as with issues surrounding biodiversity net gain, training programmes may be required to help planners better understand the complexities inherent in sustainability, how ideological biases may influence determinations, and how to express or curtail ideologies in officer reports to better justify decisions. By making the sustainability ideologies more visible in planning processes, local authorities could improve the reliability of decision processes, determination periods, and organisational governance.

Declarations

Author contributions. David Batchelor: Conceptualisation: Developed the overarching themes and objectives of the review. Methodology: Designed the review framework and criteria for literature selection. Writing – Original Draft: Wrote the initial manuscript draft, including key sections. Literature Review: Conducted a comprehensive search and analysis of relevant literature. Data Curation: Organized and synthesised data from selected studies for inclusion in the review, Read and approved the final version of the manuscript. **Lindsay Bremner**: Writing – Review & Editing: Assisted in editing and refining the final manuscript, ensuring accuracy and completeness. Supervision – Supervised the study, Read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Ethics. No ethical approval was required or obtained.

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