The small Somerset town of Street, near Glastonbury, remains something of a company town, with the fortunes of Clarks shoes exerting a strong influence on the fortunes of the town as a whole. Clarks own a major site close to the town centre which was in the past occupied by factories and warehouses. In 2003 it gained outline planning approval for 400 new homes and associated open space. Houndwood, as it was named, is now by far the biggest new housing development in Street, destined to influence the feel and even the population structure of this town significantly, as it provides types of dwellings – in a convenient location – not previously available.

The process

The process involved a series of workshops at particular stages of design development and led eventually to a sustainability report evaluating the qualities of the emerging scheme. The sequence of actions and events is shown in the diagram.

A complete spectrum of stakeholders, representing all the main interests in the development, was considered essential:

- the owners of the site and the prospective developers
- the planning consultants and the design team
- the local planning authority, housing and transport authorities
- the Parish council and influential civic/environment groups
- the residents of the surrounding areas

Building mutual trust and understanding

The early stages of the process are all about shared experience and building mutual understanding between the disparate groups. The values inherent in the idea of sustainable development were the starting point, specified by Clarks. The trips out to exemplary projects allowed shared learning. The initial list of 22 objectives, proposed by the WHO Centre and then adjusted through workshop discussion, were comprehensive in scope, including economic viability as well as social and environmental criteria. The essential principle was that all interests could clearly identify where their own aspirations or concerns were represented in the list, and at the same time accept the legitimacy of the other interests, even where these might conflict with their own.

Achieving consensus on the objectives – which are then used to evaluate schemes and structure the sustainability appraisal, is critical. The objectives are not weighted. Each is valued for itself, and all need to be achieved to a reasonable degree.
Triggering new ideas through the appraisal process

The evaluation workshops were structured so as to ensure everyone could participate effectively, with a combination of small group discussions around subsets of the objectives (with an obligation to reach consensual recommendations) and plenaries where each individual had a vote in relation to all objectives. This resulted in a rich diet of information which then went to inform the technical report. The aims of the discussions were not only evaluation but also shared learning and creativity. The spectrum grades identified which objectives were not being achieved and therefore needed further work or a design review. The investors and their professional team learnt from the insights and ideas of the other stakeholders. Because the discussions were about levels of impact on a given objective, not about relative importance, it was also surprising how far agreement was possible.

Sustainability appraisal

The preferred scheme, having been subject to a stakeholder appraisal workshop, was then evaluated by the UWE team. This evaluation drew on three elements: specialist reports commissioned by the developers (e.g. on transport, the housing market, wildlife and landscape); the consensual and individual arguments/votes of the stakeholders; and the ‘best practice’ expertise of the team. The report was presented to the design/development group, and formed part of the supporting documentation given to the local authority.

Figure 2.19

The six-stages of the Spectrum process at Houndwood

(Barton and Grant, 2008)