

URBAN TASK FORCE - PROSPECTUS 07.98

A response by the Institution of Environmental Sciences - September 1998

This response is based on the collective knowledge and views of a group of environmental practitioners which in turn are derived from a varied experience of work carried out in separate organisations. They are therefore a synthesis of opinion on particular issues rather than individual pieces of recorded research.

Comments have been generally concentrated around a central theme relating to the scale, nature and importance of individual communities although the consultation obviously covers other considerations and other details.

Why is there a problem?

The underlying reasons for the movement away from urban areas is varied and complex. However, we perceive that amongst the most significant of these is the breakdown of the sense of community. Belonging to and taking part in the activities of a living community is fundamental to civilised life. The lack of this sense leads, in the extreme, to feelings of isolation, loss of safety and security and growth in crime rates. These more extreme situations have been exacerbated by the deterioration in family structures and have a particular effect on the elderly. This is a social, rather than a physical, problem and can only be ameliorated by improved facilities.

What sort of places do people want to live in?

Following on from the comments above, obviously one of the most important things that people are seeking is the physical closeness of an active community life to which they can relate. This is most likely to occur in small-scale areas - the 'village' or in urban terms, the 'neighbourhood'. These must be large enough to support reasonable self-sufficiency in terms of employment, education, shopping, and recreation but still retain geographical compactness and short travel distances.

Modern trends in development have been to separate residential areas from employment centres, expanded schools, recreational facilities and most of all shopping. Together with the social influences noted above these are destructive influences.

The post-war era saw the development of new planning principles (New Towns, neighbourhood - Radburn - planning, etc) and strong support for good innovative design at local planning levels. Through the '80's and '90's this initiative has largely been lost. Positive planning initiatives by County and District authorities have been singularly lacking and commercial considerations have been paramount. The only marked advance has been the abandonment of the 'high-rise housing' solutions which have been self-evidently a failure (both socially and structurally!)

We need a positive return to good planning principles of well designed, traffic segregated, low rise mixed-use housing: clearly identified neighbourhood units with adequate support infrastructures of local employment, education, shopping and

leisure: and good local public transport. These principles need re-application in the existing urban context with the development of techniques for re-utilising brownfield and/or contaminated sites. (A very large number of urban areas all have derelict gas holder sites, for example, which need re-developing). Cost of re-development is high, but new thinking in terms of social costs and benefits need to be applied to demonstrate long term viability.

In terms of management for urban communities (or any community for that matter) the solution can only lie in devolvement of responsibility. The District Council system does not work in this context being too remote and not sufficiently involved or caring. The old demographic areas covered by Parish Councils should be revived as neighbourhood units with considerable delegated powers to manage their own local affairs and promote local initiatives. Again, the economic thinking and rationale will be difficult, even painful, as significant financial investment will be required.

How can we achieve our goal?

The current planning system is reasonably structured albeit with the fundamental flaw of the missing tier at grass roots - the neighbourhood level. Initiatives to promote voluntary involvement, such as LEAPS, are excellent but these lack administrative functions and responsibility and tend to be advisory rather than predominately functional in their own right.

Ensuring that the right skills are available to carry forward good development or re-development should NOT be a difficult task. Any major planning scheme, however, requires a team effort comprising the skills of town planning, economics, architecture, engineering, surveying, environmental science, sociology and management (not necessarily an exhaustive list). Other contributing specialisms will also be needed encompassing traffic engineering, landscape design, acoustics, graphics, etc. - the list is extendable! The selection and briefing of an adequate and integrated team is the function of the relevant planning authority and success in this area is rare. Often it is not attempted, a reduced number of un-related professional appointments being made. Cut-price competitive fees from independent and uncoordinated consultants are now the norm rather than the exception leading to inadequate performance.

When attempted, the selection process is often uninformed and faulty and lacking in one essential component - the right leader. Individuals with the wider range of knowledge of the varying skills involved, leadership qualities, management ability and relevant experience, are hard to find. Such appointments are, however, a key to successful implementation. Areas commonly neglected in major scheme plans are a proper attention to environmental issues and an appropriate consideration of the economic rather than purely financial implications.

How do we finance this?

As noted above, financial considerations, i.e. capital cost, is the normal criteria applied to decision making in the public (and private) sector. Urban re-development is, by its nature, capital cost intensive. Economic justification and validation of schemes have therefore to look wider and take into account social benefits, life cycle and long term costs, cost benefit (i.e. alternative cost scenarios) and accrued long term

value (asset growth). Techniques of this nature were developed and applied in isolated cases during the '70's but have largely lapsed or been abandoned. We would propose the revival and application of these principles. The demonstration of economic viability can be a strong factor in the attraction of enabling finance whether from public or private sources. The Institution is working on the creation of suitable economic models based on previous work in this field but this is still in an early stage of development.