

Neighbourhood Renewal and the Sustainable Development Agenda

21.09.01



Sustainable
Development Commission

There is a big overlap, often unrecognised between neighbourhood renewal and sustainable development. We offer four key areas for collaboration.

1. Urban decay and social exclusion:

One of the key themes where the SDC feels we can add value to existing discussions and research on regeneration is the link between the state of the built environment and social exclusion. Specifically, the relationship between urban decay, urban sprawl and the growing polarisation of communities is a key concern of both neighbourhood renewal and sustainable development. These unsustainable trends manifest themselves in a number of ways. For example, poorer communities left behind by the process of urban sprawl are left to bear the ‘costs’ of inner city traffic congestion or lose of investment in the local infrastructure and services. These can entail social inequalities in quality of education or health services or employment opportunities. Furthermore, deterioration of the built environment diminishes civic pride in the local area and fosters vandalism and crime, drives people out, wastes existing investment and damages the urban environment. Unless we stop overbuilding outside the affected areas their abandonment and deterioration will continue. Demolition is an expensive and environmentally unsustainable last resort.

The PAT 7 report on Unpopular Housing highlighted the strong link between decline of the built environment, urban sprawl and social exclusion. With 20% of social housing and 2.6% of private housing located in low-demand or unpopular neighbourhoods the report calls for greater integration of planning, economic and housing policy at the regional, sub-regional and local levels.

The NRU has set Public Service Agreement targets with local authorities and Registered Social Landlords, which aim to address this issue of unpopular housing in some of the worst effected neighbourhoods. The National Strategy Action Plan (NSAP) also states a series of commitments on behalf of the Government which will support the development of sustainable communities.

Raising the standard of social housing

One of the most significant measures is the Government’s commitment to investment an extra £1.6 million in housing over the next three years.

Local housing strategies

The NSAP builds on the recommendations of the PAT 7 report by stating the creation of ‘local housing strategies’ which will articulate how local authorities will tackle and prevent low housing demand. The commitment to improving information on the scale of neighbourhood abandonment across the country will be invaluable in addressing low demand and targeting resources (Commitment 67).

Creating mixed communities

The NSAP’s commitment towards encouraging more mixed communities is particularly welcomed and will form a crucial element in creating sustainable communities. These include



social landlords being encouraged to introduce choice-based housing letting policies which can, in turn, help a broad band of people to live in improved neighbourhoods. The PAT 7 report also calls on local authorities in creating and sustaining mixed neighbourhoods to take special measures to make it safe and attractive for minorities to access council housing, while respecting cultural preferences. It also recommends that use of intensive housing management services and neighbourhood wardens in developing strategies to tackle low demand, especially where crime and anti-social behaviour is a factor. Generally, the plan advocates a more flexible role for local authorities and RSLs in using letting policies to create more mixed sustainable communities. This is crucial to stopping sprawl and redensifying depleted inner communities.

Regenerating the wider environment

In terms of regeneration of the wider physical environment of urban areas the NSAP supports a number of fiscal measures (many of which were raised in the Urban White Paper). For example, an exemption stamp duty on all property transactions in Britain's most deprived communities (Commitment 76). Other commitments include, the creation of Urban Regeneration Companies in a selection of the most deprived communities, the New Millennium Communities (Commitment 77) and the £100 million pilot English Cities to invest in mixed-use developments in priority regeneration areas. These initiatives could prove instrumental in acting as a catalyst for regeneration of the most deprived neighbourhoods and it will be important for both the NRU and SDC to push for uptake of these programmes.

The New Planning Guidance:

The New Planning Guidance calls for the sequential use of land (with brownfield land first), higher density and better urban design. This guidance will help both the NRU and the SDC, and should be an area we work together on promoting.

2. Energy efficiency, Waste Management and improving the urban environment.

Protecting the environment requires commitment and effective action at the local level. Whereas LA21 formerly had the lead role in co-ordinating local action on improving environmental conditions, including energy efficiency and waste management, the Local Strategic Partnerships and neighbourhood management programmes will play a vital role in the future. This will involve agreeing local priorities and actions and co-ordinating with local agents to deliver environmental management programmes. These structures will be critical in enabling local authorities, community and voluntary sectors to collectively protect and enhance their local environment and contribute to the sustainable development agenda.

Air Quality

Traffic control, anti-congestion, anti-pollution measures help poorest areas and sustainable development, so we therefore need to adopt a common strategy for tackling this.

Waste Management

A target of 17% of household waste to be recycled or composted by 2004, as stated in the NSAP, needs serious follow-through. At the moment most green waste collection ends up unrecycled through lack of an efficient follow-on system.

Neighbourhood Environments



Poorest neighbourhoods often have dirty and poorly maintained environments. Tackling the management and maintenance of these environments would help both NRU and the SDC.

3. Transport

Transport poses one of the most significant challenges and opportunities for achieving sustainable development. Not only does it pose important environmental issues in terms of energy consumption, land-use patterns and congestion and pollution, it also presents social issues in terms of access to transport services and the link between transport and social exclusion.

Buses

Buses, which are easy to expand and cheap help the poor by linking every neighbourhood into areas with job opportunities.

Home Zones

Home Zones, proposed in the Transport Act 2000, aim to create more liveable ‘people-friendly’ streets where precedence is given to pedestrian over cars. They could happen all over the country – they are popular, cheap, an proven success in Germany, Netherlands and Scandinavia and hugely help air quality. The NRU could play an vital role in pushing for the implementation of these.

Cycle and pedestrian priority:

Ensuring cyclists and pedestrians and given priorities is essential in poorest areas where 50% of households have no cars. This programme would be complementary to the Homes Zones and Bus programmes and again many proven models operate in Europe, for example in Denmark.

4. Sustainable Regeneration - Community empowerment

If communities are to improve in the longer-term a sense of community ownership and self-help has to be installed to encourage communities to move away from a grant-dependency and more towards a sustainable, self-helping culture. Such progress is unlikely to occur automatically but will require capacity building within the community.

Self-Help:

The PAT 9 report on Community Self-Help recognises the need to build the capacity, opportunities and tools within communities in the most deprived neighbourhoods to enable them to help themselves. The introduction of the ‘Community Resource Fund’ – a one-off grant of up to £500 to small and emerging community groups in 30 deprived areas - will act as a springboard to get these groups up and running. The Community Empowerment Fund, worth £35 million, will provide funds to support community and

voluntary sector involvement in LSPs in 88 areas eligible for the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

Joining it up locally:

Sustainable regeneration will require creating added value through the joint working of all agents at the neighbourhood, local, sub-regional and regional levels. The NSAP identifies lack of joining up at the local level as one of the key reasons for the lack of progress in tackling neighbourhood deprivation.

The concept of the LSP – that the public, private, voluntary and community sectors should come together in a single overarching local co-ordination framework – may help. But crucially to do what the NRU proposes, neighbourhood level structures are vital. The neighbourhood management pilots could be a tool for supporting environmental improvements, community self-help, cleaner environments and attractive a more diverse community.

5. Conclusions:

This briefing paper illustrates the strong parallels and relationship between neighbourhood renewal and sustainable development. Successful neighbourhood renewal will require a comprehensive approach which addresses social, economic and environmental factors to tackle the needs of our most deprived neighbourhoods. In particular, the role of the built environment in addressing social exclusion and creating mixed and sustainable communities, is a shared agenda for both neighbourhood renewal and sustainable development.

The emerging work of the NRU in tackling unpopular housing, encouraging wider regeneration of deprived areas and addressing local environmental concerns around energy efficiency, waste management and transport, present major opportunities for contributing to sustainable development. Furthermore, the inclusive and forward-thinking nature of the NRU regeneration programmes, including the Neighbourhood Management fund, provide a valuable model for progressing towards sustainable regeneration. Consequently, through collaboration between the NRU and the SDC we can lever the most socially and environmentally sustainable neighbourhoods.