

Report back from Sustainable Communities Summit Workshop – Creating communities with a low environmental impact.

February 14th 2005.

The Sustainable Development Commission and Defra's challenging and inspiring workshop at the ODPM's Delivering Sustainable Communities Summit brought together policy makers, developers, practitioners, environmental organisations and LAs to discuss how to deliver a step change in the delivery of communities with low environmental impacts. Mainstreaming innovative practices was a key theme. This workshop was the key session at the Summit where environmental impacts of the Sustainable Communities Plan were considered. At the workshop we were able to discuss some of the themes raised in the SDC web forum on the role of innovation, regulation and best practice.

With 6 speakers, interspersed with filmed 'vox pops', the participants were engaged in considering how we can build the number of houses we need over the coming years, whilst minimising the environmental impact. **Environment Minister Elliot Morley** gave the keynote speech, where he put the context of sustainable communities within the framework of sustainable development. The Minister highlighted the need for the new Sustainable Buildings Code, the framework of which had been released at the workshop, to be adopted in Government buildings procurement so that it can stimulate a real step change in building standards. **Sir John Harman**, Chair of the Environment Agency, called for the impending Code to be challenging and stretching. This call was echoed by **Alan Cherry**, CEO of Countryside Properties, who already build to the EcoHomes 'Good' standard and above, but who confirms the need for a clear, agreed standard of sustainability that can be achieved by progressive builders across all developments. He highlighted environmental achievements in the developments at Greenwich Millennium Village and St Mary's Island at Chatham Maritime, and how lessons could be learnt for other developments. **Walter Menzies**, workshop chair, Sustainable Development Commissioner and member of the Steering Group for the Code, called for the Code to be developed upwards from the baseline of the 2005 Building Regulations standards for energy, whilst also specifying minimum standards for water, materials and waste.

Nicky Gavron, deputy Mayor of London, outlined the progressive range of strategies for London's energy, waste and water use, and called for better enforcement of current building standards. She highlighted achievements in developments in London including Stratford City. **Robert Napier**, CEO of WWF, summarised the overwhelming environmental imperative of the proposed new housing developments as needing to move us from our over-consuming way of living now to a sustainable way of life. First step to achieving this will be through designing and delivering communities built on the principles of sustainability.

So what is a sustainable community with low environmental impact? New developments cannot be delivered in isolation – all proposals should consider their impact on the environment and neighbouring areas. Consensus is developing on some of the key components. Sustainable communities must be minimising their demand for energy and emissions of carbon, so high standards of energy efficiency, use of CHP, and renewable energy, are all requirements in development plans. Additionally, water demand needs to be minimised through the use of water saving devices and appliances, and water recycling schemes. Materials are currently consumed at unsustainable rates during construction, and waste generation from development

and occupation of buildings could be greatly reduced. The workshop also considered providing for sustainable behaviour. So the design of the community, development density, access to public transport, provision for cycling, local facilities and amenities, accessible and safe green spaces all contribute to making a cohesive community with minimal impact on the local and global environment.

Cost is often considered a barrier in implementing sustainable design. However, Sir John Harman revealed that their studies show it costs only an additional £800 per house to achieve a 25% improvement in the overall sustainability of that home. That's just 1.3% of a new £60,000 home, adding around £48 to the mortgage each year, but also saving the homeowner £138 on their annual energy bills!

Participants were encouraged to learn that the SDC is working with ODPM this year to develop recommendations on how the Sustainable and Secure Buildings Act can be used to raise energy, water, materials and waste standards in existing homes. Improving existing homes (99% of the housing stock) will bring radical environmental improvements for the UK as a whole, contributing to national environmental targets and our quality of life.

During the discussion session the key themes raised were:

- Disappointment that further progress had not been made on the Sustainable Buildings Code so far, as this was needed to create a recognised standard above the Building Regulations baseline;
- Sustainable buildings standards stimulate the supply chain to provide the products needed;
- Sustainable buildings make a crucial contribution to minimising the impact on climate change; and
- The existing housing stock is 99% of the total: this must be tackled and the Code must be developed to be applied to it.

The participants were asked to contribute ideas for how the existing building stock should be addressed, how local environments may be improved, and how the pace of change can be accelerated. We received a fantastic response, with many supportive and inspiring comments.

Participants strongly supported the use of **fiscal incentives** to encourage improvements in environmental performance of buildings, particularly using Stamp Duty and VAT as mechanisms to promote improvements to the existing stock. Participants also called for the integration of **sustainable infrastructure** (public transport, cycle routes, district heating and cooling systems) and better delivery of **green spaces** within new developments for improvements in the local environment. They called for Government to give **clear messages** regarding buildings' sustainability through Government leadership, tighter regulations, a challenging Code for Sustainable Buildings and importantly, promotion of best practice.

Thanks to all who contributed their views on the web forum and during the workshop. We have been encouraged to find that contributions are supportive of the work that SDC are doing and that there is clear consensus on the need for a step change in reducing the environmental impact of new communities, to set a challenging standard for the Code for Sustainable Buildings, and to address the environmental impacts of the existing building stock.