

# sustainable placemaking *forum*

A seminar series linked to [www.sustainable-placemaking.org](http://www.sustainable-placemaking.org)

Monday 28 April 2003 at the House of Lords, London.

## Breaking the Regeneration Logjam

**Ben Derbyshire** – Opened the discussion thanking all the participants and offering the apologies of David Lunts and Tony Shoults. He said that he believed the Sustainable Placemaking Forum had an invaluable role to play as a partnering network. And that he was looking forward to what people could add to eachothers understanding of the causes of the regeneration logjam and how the Sustainable Placemaking Forum could be help resolve some of those issues.

Ben looked ahead to the next Forum meeting in June in Harrogate, which will focus on Sustainable Greenfield Development.

**Richard, Lord Best** – Lord Best Opened his remarks by praising the sustainable Communities White Paper in particular for securing extra funding from the Treasury and targeting regeneration. But he expressed serious concern about the transition from good strategies and aims into delivery on the ground. Lord Best said he saw long term partnering as a solution to this problem. He hoped the SPAT had an important role to play in bringing together all partners - including private sector ones who often had different, helpful, perspectives to share but believed that they could sometimes drop out of the public sector's loop.

Lord Best saw four distinct groups of stakeholders that had to work together for a partnering approach to bear fruit.

- Residents. This was a very important group but they were not the only to be considered, and their veto, through ballots, could be damaging to the interests of a number of groups including potential or future residents. Lord Best said that he believed that a number of decisions that had been made by LAs had led to residents feeling isolated and misunderstanding the real position of their homes in relation to their lifecycle and viability.
- Local Authorities. Lord Best was sceptical of the abilities of a number of Local Authorities to consider alternatives to the way that they had been doing things. In particular he believed that the commitment of many local politicians to the Decent Homes Standard was extremely doubtful.

He proposed working through Officers but again counselled that the capacities and capabilities found in many Local Authorities at officer level were not ideal and that many lacked necessary skills and experiences.

- Housing Associations. He said that they obviously had an important role to play but that they too had serious competence issues in a whole range of fields for example in remodelling estates.
- The Private Sector. Lord Best said that he believed they could help the process by using their skills but that they had to be fully involved.

**Peter Redman** – Began by agreeing with much of what Lord Best had just said about the capabilities of Local Authority politicians and councillors. He saw two distinct private sector approaches one of which took a long term view of development and another which pitched a low price and exploited the vulnerability of the public sector to make profits.

Peter had serious concerns over the Communities Plan not least the fact that he couldn't see a strategy, other than possibly relative proximity to transport nodes, behind the designation of the growth areas. He believed that it would lead to oversupply of dormitory accommodation in the South East.

He believed that the 'Worst First' principle was often misconceived with schemes that targeted serious deprivation often under spending (such as the New Deal for Communities) or spending badly and that mechanisms, like the NDC, could label communities and drive them backwards.

**Roger Taylor** - referred to the primary object of the meeting with Lord Rooker to establish a basis for some action learning case studies to be promoted by this Group. He indicated that it would be vital to engage with Councils many of whom had demonstrated, contrary to other speakers' views, real commitment to regeneration with innovation, creativity, and inclusiveness in their approaches.

He considered that there were some excellent signs that Councils, ODPM and the private sector were all moving closer to the development of new partnership and citizen focussed models for regeneration and that ODPM had sensibly matched its plans for further devolution to Councils with a clear commitment to the improvement of their performance. There were huge opportunities in such developments as HMRF, new legislation around housing strategy and the move to joined up community based PPP and PFI.

He considered that this group could play a useful role in capturing the best practice of its members and offering itself as a formal consultee on Government's developing plans for sustainable communities.

**Richard Parker** – Said that he believed that Local Authorities were very important and that good practice was out there but that as there was no mechanism for spreading that practice it was not disseminated across the sector as a whole. He believed that Housing PFI was an example of a type of project which was really developing. This was partly because of the now

appreciated need to get Government heavily involved in regulatory change if necessary to make projects work on the ground. He added a cautionary note that project costs could soar even if they were successful, as had happened in Glasgow.

**Canda Smith** – Thanked the Forum for inviting her to attend in the stead of David Lunts. She said that she had listened with interest to what had been said and believed that the ODPM was very open to being more heavily engaged in partnering. She drew the attention of the meeting to the Egan process and the widening of that process into wider areas around regeneration than is past focus on technical issues. She acknowledged that Minister wanted to use this group but that there were problems how best to do that.

## **Discussion**

Among the issues that were raised in discussion were the value of a worst first approach; Perceptions of private sector organisations; the motivations for some Cllrs scepticism.

Several Housing Association representatives were strongly of the view that 'Worst First' policies were not desirable and that practical measurements of success were best gleaned from data on the increase in stock value. But other representatives pointed to a strong regional element in valuations and the relevance, and validity, of political judgements about success and failure.

A number of speakers raised the problems of the perception that tenants had of profit making companies and that those perceptions were clouding the issues around various mechanisms for regeneration. Trust was a vital issue in relation to social housing and regeneration and there was a reluctance to trust some private sector organisations.

A theme that emerged from the discussion was the need for peer group support in the field and it was felt that the Sustainable Placemaking Forum could be a very important contributor to that. A practical benefit of such peer support might be a best practice database, a resource that was open to forum members to enable them to draw on the experiences of other members of the Forum.

## **Conclusions**

- If Government is to achieve its objectives in the Growth Areas, in Housing Market Renewal Areas as well as in older urban areas, the logjam that has afflicted delivery must be addressed positively.
- There was some debate about the role of local authorities, but we concluded that progress could only be made in delivery with support of Local Authority

partners and that there was some evidence of good practice amongst a number of LAs (e.g. Manchester and Sunderland).

- The group was enthusiastic in offering to contribute the benefits of the considerable capacity, know how, and experience represented around the table (and by the broader SPF membership) in an initiative to promote delivery of sustainable regeneration in pursuit of government policy.
- There is no readily available pooled resource of experience, information or advice on good practice which remotely measures up to the need for feedback and pooling, considered vital to avoid the waste, delay and under-spending that frustrates delivery at the moment.

### **Future issues**

- Funding, either directly to the SPF (regarded as problematic owing to our informal status – which nonetheless contributes to our success), or via some form of collaboration with another agency
- Support from ODPM to co-ordinate the Government's response and liaise with SPF and other external agencies (such as CABI or EP) in the form of a civil servant, appropriately tasked.
- An Action learning project or a hypothetical regeneration scheme pieced together from an amalgam of members' experience.
- An expert panel drawn from SPF members and Government officials. We have already suggested that such a group would be necessary to steer the Action Learning project. However, members of the seminar group actively involved in regeneration projects suggested that it would be tremendously helpful to have access to an expert panel for regeneration projects similar in principle to the EH Urban Panel, or indeed CABI's Review Committee.