



from **community** to **policy**

Urban Forum's response to the Barker Review of Land Use Planning HM Treasury and DCLG September 2006

Urban Forum is a national membership charity for community and voluntary groups involved in regeneration. It exists to influence national urban policy so as to bring about effective change for local communities. Working from the ground up, Urban Forum takes messages from communities to Government, where it seeks to influence policy-making.

Urban Forum recognises the importance of the planning system in delivering regeneration and is supporting communities to take advantage of the opportunities that recent reforms have presented. Through collaboration with RTPI and Planning Aid, we have produced a Guide to the Planning System for community groups and are working with English Partnerships on a Guide to Community Engagement for landowners and developers.

Comments

The planning system is often viewed by developers and land-owners as extremely slow because in coming to a decision planners need to properly consider the views of all those affected by a development. Planners must deal with complex issues to come to a balanced view, and so a well considered system can, by its very nature, never be a fast system.

Significantly, the new planning system as well as speeding things up for developers and land owners, aims to enable communities to engage fully in all aspects of planning, including the preparation of plans and decisions on planning applications. The value of early and continued involvement of communities in the planning system has been recognised for some time, and working with local people has become more important with the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004). Crucially, local authorities are now required to prepare Statements of Community Involvement setting out how they intend to involve local people.

It is welcome that the report acknowledges the 'profound impact' that planning has on quality of life, and that it 'balances complex sets of competing economic, environmental or social goals within the framework of democratic accountability'. We agree that proper consultation 'is a necessary part of the planning process' and that 'there will always be a limit to how quickly complex planning decisions can be made, particularly given the importance of consulting with a number of parties and the need for democratic accountability'. In addition, the report states that the remainder of the review will take into account four 'critical' background issues including 'it is important that participation and democratic accountability is maintained within the system'. However, this rhetoric is not properly reflected throughout the report which tends to focus too narrowly on economic interests and productivity, to the exclusion of social and environmental concerns.

It is crucial to understand how planning directly affects quality of life. Most obviously, people live and work in buildings and need services. Planning also has wider impacts, for example, in relation to sense of community, in enabling regeneration and renewal, in promoting active citizenship and giving people some control over the environment in which

they live. Consultation with communities throughout the planning process is crucial in enabling planners to plan *with* rather than *for* people. In this way planners are better able to understand the needs of different groups (including those which are often marginalised) and the views of those affected by development.

The private sector often views planning in terms of economic progress or 'products' rather than encompassing wider social issues, though there is some evidence that this is beginning to change. As Clara Greed asserts in 'Social Town Planning'¹some development professionals operate as if planning were purely for the benefit of the buildings, or for cars, and as if property itself were there primarily for profit and not for use by human beings.'

Any reforms proposed by the review must deliver on the economic, social and environmental aspects of planning. Environmental and social goals can not become side issues to economics.

Public involvement and participation in the planning system, as well as local accountability (through local elected Councillors making decisions) are key parts of the planning process. Research by Urban Forum² has shown that participation has a number of benefits including:

- improving the quality of decision making by using local knowledge and avoiding unnecessary conflict.
- empowering citizens as they are given a 'voice' and a stake in decision making.
- ensuring that the public interest is upheld, and not just the interests of businesses or other groups. The current system allows for mediation between (often) competing interests.
- giving communities a better understanding of the system and its relevance.

Although many of these benefits are acknowledged by government, they are not properly analysed or explored within the interim review. It is crucial that this is undertaken if the final report is to be properly considered and balanced. Also, much of the evidence quoted in the Interim Report appears anecdotal and predominately based on private sector perspective. There is a need to carry out research with other interest groups (including the community and voluntary sector) to properly balance this view.

We are concerned about some of the conclusions drawn in relation to retail development, particularly the belief that more out-of-town shopping will make town centres more individual. The danger is that we will end up with every town having the same big retailers operating from 'efficient' chain store premises, in controlled, artificial environments, but leaving no local character, meeting places, or street life. Again, the report must consider more than economics and look at quality of life. We would question whether this is really improved by shopping in large, efficient stores. The role of local businesses goes well beyond economics and corner shops, village post offices and other small businesses play important social roles too. For example, acting as a community hub, disseminating information and signposting to public services as well as increasing local efficacy and civil renewal. Further, out-of-town stores exclude those people who do not have access to a car.

¹ *Social Town Planning*, Greed (Routledge, 1999)

² see www.urbanforum.org.uk/pdf_files/planning_research_0406.pdf

Also, where there are community owned resources there is evidence to show that money spent within the local area stays there, rather than flowing straight out again (new economics foundation's LM³ work³). This is particularly significant in deprived communities.

There must be sufficient time for the new system to settle in before looking at further proposed changes. Constant change doesn't help communities to engage with the system. It leads to people having to re-learn the system and can cause disengagement and disillusionment.

The system can seem complicated and full of jargon for communities. Work is being done to increase knowledge of the planning system to allow people to engage more effectively. For example, Urban Forum have produced 'The Handy Guide to Planning'⁴ written with assistance from Planning Aid and endorsed by the RTPI. Planning Aid also work to increase understanding of the planning system, and provide independent and professional planning advice to community groups and individuals who can not afford to pay for professional help. More effort and resources needs to be made to make sure that people are aware of the system and can engage with it effectively. Evidence from research conducted by Urban Forum demonstrates that many community groups do not see the planning system as relevant or feel they are able to influence it. Therefore much more needs to be done to inform local people about the important role they have to play in planning and the impact it has on their locality. Perhaps improving understanding is one of the ways that the system could be speeded up, whilst maintaining (and seeking to increase) participation and involvement.

In conclusion:

- 1) Community involvement in the planning system is crucial, and time must be given to allow this to bed down.
- 2) The government's calls for the balancing of economic, social and environmental priorities needs to be more clearly in evidence in policy and practice.
- 3) Support must be available to communities to better understand opportunities for engaging with planning and the benefits of doing so by supporting community capacity building.

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³ see www.pluggingtheleaks.org

⁴ *The Handy Guide to Planning*, Gaunt, Gudnadottir & Waring (Urban Forum, 2006)