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Building Sustainable Communities: Developing the Skills We Need



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Foreword – Sir Stuart Lipton

I am always struck by how bad we are as human beings at learning the lessons of history.

Our Government is committed to developing sustainable communities, and yet in reality very few people and organisations are going to be able to deliver those communities. There is a huge gap in capacity and competence.

How can this be? The Georgians knew how to lay out our towns and cities to stand the test of time. The Victorians clearly understood the importance of the ‘civic’ – the public buildings and spaces that tied communities together. The great industrialists – Rowntree, Salt, Bourneville – provided living communities for their workforces that prioritised decent standards. The garden villages and new towns highlighted the importance of spatial planning to realise our ambitions.

Where are the 21st century equivalents – Greenwich Millennium Village, Hulme, the Gorbals? They are few and far between. Yet we have great architects, landscape architects and engineers – perhaps even the best in the world. How is it that their talent is not bearing fruit in the shapes and pattern of our urban landscape?

The quality of the environment in which we live and work has a significant impact on our quality of life. Every public survey shows that we all share this knowledge. Our inability to translate this impact into something more positive has major consequences, in loss of economic, social and environmental value. It detracts from our ability to turn around failing communities, to attract inward investors, to reduce crime rates and to retain committed residents.

There are many contributors to the problem including those who seek to regulate our environment, for example the planners and the traffic engineers. But the buck stops with the client. A committed client will listen to the local community, understand their values, engage a high quality team and produce a high quality product. By contrast, too many clients take the easy way out, avoid the risks, avoid mistakes, go with what they know, even though they also know that in the long term it will fail.

Sir John Egan has now been asked to review how we turn this situation around and get more skilled people liberated to deliver great new communities. I look forward to working with him in this endeavour in the months ahead. Over the last three years CABE has looked at this question in some depth. And so in this short document, we seek to kick start the process by describing the nature of the problem and by offering five priorities for solving it:

- > a network of competitively appointed regional centres developed in partnership with the Regional Development Agencies and/or a national academy to transform the development of a raft of current professionals so that they can become trusted project leaders and deliverers
- > a single coherent source of best practice evidence and learning opportunities for clients and professionals
- > a shift in young people’s education to capture the importance of the built environment and to provide new marketing channels to bring more of those young people into further and higher education opportunities
- > a dedicated focus of effort on improving client performance, concentrating in particular on the equipping of special delivery vehicles such as Urban Regeneration Companies with the right mix of skills and support to deliver changes on the ground
- > new and clear demands on the professions, and the institutions which represent them, to change the way they promote education and learning, so that we raise capacity for delivering skills through undergraduate, postgraduate and professional training

The need for change



When the Deputy Prime Minister published his *Sustainable Communities Plan* in February, he signalled a new intent on the part of Government to create sustainable neighbourhoods that offered a high quality of life, tackling problems of housing shortage and low housing demand as they affect different parts of the country. The vision was to create mixed use developments, using efficient construction techniques that would create places of distinction with access to high quality public services, places of work, and reliable public transport.

CABE supports this vision. We have been making the case for well designed developments since we were created on the back of the Urban Task Force report in 1999. We have consistently expressed our frustration at a development culture and planning system that consistently turns out places of no distinction, 'could be anywhere' housing estates, business parks and retail outlets.

We have also learnt over the last four years that, by themselves, the relevant professions, and the institutions that represent them, cannot produce change on the scale needed. We have got stuck in a rut. The post-war vision, encapsulated in the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act and the new towns movement, of properly planned settlements, with good public realm and excellent transport infrastructure, has been reduced to:

- > a volume house-building industry that for years has got away with producing a boring, repetitive product, using out-dated production techniques, simply because, in many areas, demand for housing outstrips the rate of supply; the house-building industry has become a land speculation industry first, with the needs of consumers trailing a distant second
- > a wider development industry which has often been channelled by the planning system and lack of incentives to take the easy way out by building business and retail sheds on the edge of our towns rather than grapple with the complex opportunities presented by brownfield sites

- > a planning system dominated by a process of reactive development control that creates a 'can't do' culture, and fails to attract sufficient creative and talented people to its ranks
- > design professions that are brimming with talent but have failed to present themselves to the most important clients as being part of the solution rather than part of the problem
- > other professions that have become stuck in a silo; for example, the transport industry, has created a culture that understands safety and logistics, but makes little or no contribution to making places.

This critique is not new. The Urban Task Force made the same analysis in more detail, with the assembled evidence, back in 1999. Nor are we suggesting that all these problems can be solved at once. There is, however, one factor that influences all these problems, which we can start to address very quickly, and that is the prevailing level of skills within client organisations and the built environment professions.

It is a simple but essential truth that great buildings and spaces are built by great people – inspired and committed clients, talented architects and landscape architects, engineers and planners who can see and respond to the bigger picture.

Our urban environment can only ever be as good as the teams that build it. If their skills are not up to the job, then neither will be the product. A fundamental shift in gear is needed within these professions. The lack of relevant skills is the single biggest barrier to the development of sustainable communities.

The skills deficit



The Communities Plan has put its money where its mouth is - £30 billion over three years to make things happen. But even if it was £60 billion or £100 billion, does the professional capacity to achieve this vision actually exist?

We know that it does not. We therefore applaud the inclusion of resources for skills development within the Communities Plan. This is the axle upon which the whole plan turns. Professional skills are the foundation of a high quality environment and the foundation upon which the Plan will stand or fall.

The point is simple; the levels of skills within the built environment professions have a direct effect on the quality of what they create. We only have some of the skills necessary to undertake this task and these skills are in short supply. This is not anecdotal or personal opinion, but is backed up by rigorous research:

- > the PricewaterhouseCoopers report for the Urban Task Force which estimated a potential untapped market size for urban development training of about 360,000 hours per annum
- > reports from the then DETR, carried out by Reading University on the provision of training for urban design, and by Arup Economics on the availability of design skills in local planning authorities, both of which again found a substantial deficit
- > the 2000 Urban White Paper which recognised that good planning and design depends critically on the ability and skills of the professionals involved, and that additional activity was required to improve skills
- > the CABE 2001 Survey of Local Government which found that less than half of local authorities have even a single qualified designer in their planning department and even fewer have access to architectural skills

> the *Urban Design Skills Working Group* report, commissioned by the then Minister for Housing, Planning and Regeneration, and backed by all the key professional institutions, the LGA and Planning Inspectorate; the report set out 26 recommendations for action, most of them still not implemented.

As a result, we know the following skills are lacking:

- > strategic planning skills, particularly within local planning authorities, to inform the production of development plans, supplementary planning guidance, development briefs, masterplans etc
- > urban design, to lead, manage and advise on the process of re-thinking existing urban areas or planning new developments, including the production of design briefs
- > project management, to provide clients with the confidence to take on complex mixed schemes that combine commercial and residential development, and related infrastructure provision
- > managing and maintaining local development partnerships and other special purpose vehicles, and in particular, in the discipline of managing community involvement in the design and development processes
- > experience and expertise in project appraisal and financing, including dealing with the requirements of funding bodies and financial institutions.

Overarching these specific deficits is a lack of leadership from decision-makers in both the private and public sectors to commit to excellence.

The journey to date



In 1994, the Latham Report, *Constructing the Team*, sounded an alarm that skills levels in the construction industry were not up to scratch, highlighting the poor image of the construction industry and the need for a more coordinated approach to learning. *Rethinking Construction*, the 1998 Egan Report, put its finger on key issues within that industry.

- > Too slow, too expensive, too dangerous and too badly built
- > Designers designing for themselves; not being customer-focused
- > Little research into users' needs or the outcome of the projects and no feed-back
- > Little interest in life-cycle costing
- > No performance measurement

At the heart of Egan's solution was a more integrated approach, joining up the supply chain, integrating design and construction and encouraging professions to work together.

The Urban Task Force Report *Towards an Urban Renaissance* (1999) took the findings of Egan and others, weaving them into a coherent vision for the future of urban living. It described the importance of a solid 'urban design' based approach and an integrated supply and construction chain within the urban regeneration process, underpinned by the right skills.

At the heart of Egan's and Rogers reports are two principles – 'integration' and 'innovation' – and we believe that these two principles should also underpin any National Skills Strategy to deliver sustainable communities. This would mean:

- > all players seeing themselves as part of the team to deliver great neighbourhoods, including those who currently see themselves as regulators, rather than providers or facilitators

- > a focus on using integrated, liberated and properly resourced teams to combine their professional skills to deliver the product on the ground

- > a design-led approach that would accentuate the use of creative talent at the start of the delivery process in the form of urban design, public realm strategies and design for manufacture solutions

- > a supportive educational framework that produces rounded professionals - true urbanists - and which is not afraid to fast-track the development of an expert group of leading professionals to manage the required programmes and projects.

Current learning and practice is not creating the environment we have just described and we see little or no sign that the existing institutions are capable of making this leap by themselves within a reasonable timescale. A new framework is required, one that creates pressure for change and involves the institutions, for they must be involved, but also leads by example.

Our programme for action



1 Creating a trained network of project leaders and deliverers

In the next five years, we need available on the ground, at least 1,000 skilled professionals who are capable of leading Sustainable Communities projects.

These are individuals who will already be trained in one discipline and with at least some years of professional experience behind them. But for the most part, these individuals will currently not have the range and depth of skills to secure the types of development that are required. Many of them will have become stuck in their career development, unable to access the training, mentoring and experience that they require to move beyond a specialism to become a true urbanist, able to brigade different resources and skills to a single end.

To achieve this raft of newly equipped professionals, we know we cannot rely solely on the existing institutions or their Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provision. What we require is a small number of professional education providers, supported by CABE and the Regional Development Agencies, which are recognised and equipped to raise the game to the best of international provision. They would provide easy-to-use and highly relevant learning packages and innovative CPD that sets a new benchmark.

> Recommendation

There is an urgent need for a sustained programme of training and personal development through a small number of tested and then recognised regional centres, a new national academy or a combination of the two. The National Skills Strategy must set a new standard for learning, leaving in its wake an understanding of integration and urban design amongst targeted professional groups, local authority officers, house builders, investors and others. These centres must serve as exemplars for other learning providers.

2 Improving our knowledge and evidence base

We need to create, as a priority, a single source of information, knowledge, research and toolkits for building better places. There is a wealth of information available, but there is no one recognised route to access it. It is essential that a single, online knowledge and evidence portal, backed up by a respected institution, is quickly created to carry out this function.

Research and evaluation that tests and monitors the impact of skills training (and skills deficits) in the built environment is also needed. The use of benchmarking, post-occupancy evaluation and the capture of outcomes as well as outputs are important ingredients.

> Recommendation

Create a 'one-stop' online learning portal for built environment professionals, bringing together all the available resources, learning packages, development tools, best practice examples and research. Place this under the 'Learning Curve' initiative umbrella, already set up by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.



3 Young people

There are two issues here. The first is that young people are users of the built environment and their behaviour, opportunities and choices are influenced by that environment. The second is that young people are the professionals, decision makers and consumers of tomorrow. We must therefore:

- > engage them with their environment and address their needs
- > inform and educate them
- > attract more young people into professional training

The CABE Education charity has made a promising start in addressing the first issue. The second requires a coordinated effort that learning providers have so far been unable to achieve.

In the construction industry, the Construction Industry Training Board has led the way with a successful advertising and recruitment campaign for the 'crafts' professions including plumbing, brick laying and carpentry. This scheme appealed directly to young people in their own language. It made a connection for them between good jobs, lifestyle and changing the environment. We need the same for other professions including planning, engineering and architectural technology.

It will require:

- > research into what exactly is putting young people off choosing courses and careers in the built environment
- > targeted campaigns to remedy this
- > coordinating the marketing of HE and FE sectors, and ensuring their product is worth accessing
- > running specific initiatives to increase take up, for example targeting BME, women and disabled groups.

> Recommendation

Develop a lasting partnership between ODPM and DfES to drive an understanding of the built environment into the heart of the National Curriculum and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's Schemes of Work. This needs to be seen as a long-term, high profile national programme, creating a new consumer of the built environment.

In addition, undertake a major national campaign to re-brand and market the built environment professions as exciting, rewarding and dynamic career options, working with career advisors in keeping with the CITB initiative.



4 Responsive organisational frameworks

Too many projects fail because they get wrapped up and choked in organisational complexity so that:

- > we fail to make a clear distinction between policy and delivery
- > we don't give those who can deliver the autonomy and freedom to deliver
- > we get caught up in political correctness so that a desire to involve every stakeholder means that little or nothing useful or worthwhile gets done.

History tells us that those projects which work best are those where there is:

- > a clear, single, empowered delivery body with maximum delegated decision-making authority
- > early partnership between public and private sector promoters
- > a clear adopted plan based upon the community's expressed values interpreted by those who can combine their professional skills to turn values into a vision for the future.

The Urban Regeneration Company structure is an example of how this can work. These and similar special purpose bodies should be our focus for directing skilled personnel to achieve delivery on the ground. They should each be a hot-bed for learning and mentoring, in the same way as the New Towns and UDCs spawned a raft of skilled professionals who we are still calling upon to this day.

We will therefore need to build a strong relationship between the training providers described under recommendation one and these special purpose vehicles, a process that should be two-way.

The current skills deficit is also one reason why we must be careful not to attempt too much too quickly. Despite the need to get money out of the door quickly, we cannot afford to spread our existing skills-base too thinly. Better that we achieve a smaller number of truly successful projects than a large number of failures.

> Recommendation

Ensure that every URC and other new Special Purpose Vehicles have the right organisational structure and skills training programme to allow for the delivery of excellence at ground level.



5

Overcoming Institutional inertia

Institutional inertia has had a massive impact on our environment and the time for change is long overdue. Disposing of historic professional silos and developing a common understanding through training are basic to the success of the Communities Plan.

Employers often complain that graduate architects have a limited understanding of practical issues and that planners do not understand design; again highlighting a lack of integration from undergraduate training onwards.

At the same time the Research Assessment Exercise administered by DfES actually penalises schools that employ working practitioners because their 'research' effort does not score as highly as an academic treatise on an obscure theoretical process. This has to change.

A change in the institutions and the training they sponsor, both in continuing professional development and at graduate level, is desperately needed. But the scale of this task cannot be underestimated and should not divert the Communities Plan skills agenda from delivering work that meets immediate need.

> Recommendation

Commission a 'select committee' style review of the role of the professional institutions, led by an independent senior figure, including the educational provision and the content of graduate training, examining models of practice in other countries.

At the same time, bring all the relevant professional institutions into a strategic partnership, chaired by a Minister, to drive through change.

Conclusion

The Communities Plan represents a one off opportunity for change in this country's built environment. It is also the catalyst for equal change within our professions, because their level of skills defines what we are able to achieve from the outset.

We want, deserve and need quality, innovation and creativity. We must therefore inject these qualities into the professions and other groups responsible for delivering the Communities Plan if its ambitions are to be achieved.

We have provided five recommendations that could fundamentally change the landscape of urban skills development in England. We ask the Government to strongly consider their early adoption as a foundation of the National Skills Strategy.

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