

**ODPM: HOUSING, PLANNING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE
REGIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO EMPTY HOMES AND LOW-
DEMAND PATHFINDERS**

**MEMORANDUM FROM THE COMMISSION FOR ARCHITECTURE
AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT (CABE)**

24 January 2005

1 The role of CABE

- 1.1 CABE was set up by the first Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in 1999 with the mission to promote high quality architecture and design within the built environment. CABE's vision is of a country that by 2010 will lead Europe in understanding and harnessing the ability of great buildings and spaces to transform neighbourhoods, to generate social value and to sustain economic growth.
- 1.2 CABE is now jointly funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). The sponsorship arrangements are with the DCMS. As at 31 March 2004, CABE comprised a team of 16 commissioners, appointed by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and 82 staff appointed by CABE itself.

2 CABE involvement with Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders

- 2.1 Today we are attempting to deal with the future of our towns and cities in perhaps a more comprehensive way than ever before, recognising that the social, physical and economic well-being of places are vitally important. A good example is the establishment of the nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder areas in the North of England and the Midlands, and the commitment of resources by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to assist in the preparation and delivery of sub-regional strategies that tackle the problems of low housing demand.
- 2.2 Central to the Pathfinder programme is the recognition that:
- the problem of low demand has to be tackled at both a sub-regional (beyond the local authority boundary) and neighbourhood scale
 - it is about more than housing, combining homes with access to employment, transport and services in a high quality environment, social, economic and physical factors contribute to the quality of neighbourhoods
 - the involvement of the private sector is crucial to lever the investment required to turn these places around.
- 2.3 In CABE's experience, high quality design is an essential attribute of the physical interventions, be they homes, streets, schools, health centres or

open spaces. This is particularly the case in the Pathfinder areas, many of which face a dramatic restructuring of their physical environment. This presents a real challenge but much of the work emerging and many of the activities being undertaken both by individuals and organisations, are laying a good foundation for creating successful neighbourhoods for existing and new communities.

2.4 CABE, in conjunction with English Heritage, the Sustainable Development Commission, the Environment Agency and the Commission for Integrated Transport, published *Building Sustainable Communities: Key Actions for Housing Market Renewal* in June 2003. This paper highlighted what the five national agencies, with their specific remits, considered to be the key factors for successful housing renewal and creating places in which people and their communities would choose to live, work and stay. The actions outlined how the Pathfinders could put design quality, sustainable development and heritage considerations at the heart of their approach. An update of this paper titled *Creating Successful Neighbourhoods: Lessons and actions for housing market renewal* is being published by CABE on 1 February 2005, at the Sustainable Communities Summit. This report would be useful reference material for the Committee as it:

- revisits the key actions and revises them to reflect the current status of Pathfinder proposals
- highlights remaining challenges for Government, Pathfinders, local authorities and their partners against the seven key actions; and
- through case studies, showcases good practice occurring in the Housing Market Renewal areas and shares the ideas and approaches put forward by the Design Task Group.

2.5 Over the last two years the Pathfinders have developed their strategies and submitted them to Government for funding. They are now in the process of refining and progressing their strategies, delivering 'early win' projects, consolidating partnerships with the public and private sectors, and embedding processes for change designed to deliver sustainable communities.

2.6 CABE has been privileged to be part of this process, in both a strategic capacity, through the Design Task Group which provides a mechanism for the Pathfinders and national agencies to share and develop best practice, and through on-the-ground input, working within individual Pathfinders on a range of projects. Two years on CABE are in a position to give evidence on the progress of the Pathfinder programme and to look forward to the challenges ahead.

3 Key issues

3.1 The key issues that CABE see as being worthy of discussion by the Select committee, and to which we could provide further insight, focus on the need for a continued commitment to the long term objective of transforming neighbourhoods through good design, sustainable development and valuing

heritage. To deliver on this commitment there is evidence that the following issues must be addressed:

- Urban regeneration is a fickle and challenging business - the issues being tackled are often multi-faceted and ingrained, the time to make plans is often short, squeezed by a desire to see quick results, and the wait before tangible progress can be measured can seem long. These issues are apparent in the housing market renewal areas. However, complex issues require **careful strategising and proper planning** if the results are to be long lasting and to avoid the mistakes of past clearance programmes. Time needs to be programmed for design and consultation.
- That the **commitment to design quality** is embedded in policy and practice, and be given the **resources** (time, skills and money) necessary resources to succeed in creating truly sustainable neighbourhoods, where people will choose to live, invest and stay.
- Housing market renewal will depend on the **investment of house builders** (including registered social landlords) their commitment to and ability to deliver houses and neighbourhoods that are well designed, incorporate sustainable design features and are built to last, must be tackled. This is strongly evidenced in CABE recent **Housing Audit** which examined over 100 recently completed housing projects and found many of them wanting in terms of design. To tackle this issues the public sector will need to work in much **closer partnerships** that they have traditionally.
- For many local authorities, who are operating within the HMR areas, they are being asked to address very complex regeneration issues. For some Pathfinder areas this will be an agenda for which they have little track record. Therefore there is a need to **build up the skills and capacity of key professionals** within the local authorities, particularly within planning and housing departments. This also needs to facilitate a much more **joined-up approach to managing local neighbourhoods** - housing, planning, education, health, transport and open spaces issues.
- The HMR agenda, very positively, seeks to establish approaches to housing renewal across a sub-region. It is apparent that the way different local authorities are **tackling certain issues can be inconsistent** – for example, different expectations of quality or rigour in terms of planning have been observed.

4 Issues identified by CABE

- 4.1 This remainder of this submission takes each of the 7 key actions identified above and sets out the key questions that the Committee may want to consider in more detail. CABE has evidence to assess the Pathfinder performance against these issues, which it would be happy to share with the Committee, if called to do so. We can also supply a copy of *Creating*

Successful Neighbourhoods: Lessons and actions for housing market renewal (CABE 2005), if the Committee would find it useful.

- 4.2 **Realise the scale of the opportunity** – Are Pathfinders basing investment and clearance decisions on a thorough understanding of the causes of and potential solutions to market failure from the macro scale (sub-regional) to the micro level (the local community)?
- 4.3 **Positively address heritage as an asset** – Have Pathfinders carried out work to fully evaluate the physical assets of an area to inform decision-making about what to retain, enhance and celebrate? This is particularly critical issue given the scale of clearance that is proposed. Decisions on clearance must be informed by an understanding of the physical, social and economic factors which cause market failure.
- 4.4 **Create places of distinction** – Are the skills and time being made available to develop an understanding of the urban design character of individual neighbourhoods and towns, so that proposals that are put forward create places of lasting quality, where developers will want to invest and residents will want to live and stay?
- 4.5 **Recognise the value of design and its role in renewal** – Are the Pathfinders and Government providing leadership to the public and private sectors by championing good design and delivering high quality projects to demonstrate a neighbourhood is on the up?
- 4.6 **Adopt policies and tools to deliver high quality urban neighbourhoods** – Are the Pathfinder and local authorities using the appropriate tools and strategies that will help design and deliver high quality environments on the ground?
- 4.7 **Place sustainable development at the heart of thinking and action** – Are standards being set so that investment and developments use resources efficiently and encourage sustainable lifestyles?
- 4.8 **Get ready to meet the challenge** - Is the drive for design quality being embedded from the strategy level down into the individual built projects? Have sufficient resources - time, skills and funding – been committed to following through this design agenda and assist with working with the private sector house builders to improve the quality of their standard product?