



Introduction

Most people want to live in a place where they know their neighbours and feel safe. A place with good homes, local shops, lots of jobs and opportunities for young people to get a good education. A place with a strong and varied offer of quality leisure and cultural activities.¹

Creating these places requires more than a change in the way our housing and communities are planned, designed, built and maintained. Sustainable communities are about much more than physical regeneration. They need good governance, strong partnerships, excellent public services, effective community engagement and high quality design - and delivering all this requires a range of professional and leadership skills.

A key finding by the Egan Skills Reviewⁱⁱ in 2004 was that while professionals have very good 'hard skills' within our particular competence, it is our 'soft skills' which need to be developed further - communicating better with communities, working better as a team, managing successful projects, coping with unexpected barriers and poor behaviours and more besides.

Established at the request of Government, regionally RENEW Northwest and its sister regional centres of regeneration excellence and the national Academy for Sustainable Communities exist to develop these skills amongst regeneration professionals - from highways engineers to youth workers, from community leaders to property developers.

The regional centres of excellence were established as a result of the Urban Task Force

chaired by (Lord) Richard Rogers in 1998, which recognised the need to address urban design skills. The publication of the Sustainable Communities Plan in 2003 widened their role to cover the skills involved in creating sustainable communities. The Egan Report in 2004 further confirmed the need to develop a set of new, broader skills among sustainable communities professionals.

The Egan Skills Review identified over 100 occupations which impact either directly or indirectly on the creation of sustainable communities. The role of regeneration professionals is quite specific within this wider field, and as the Chair of the Academy for Sustainable Communities, Peter Roberts has said - regeneration practitioners are often trying to "retrofit communities to make them sustainable" because the very same professions (if not the same individuals) worked on those communities so badly in the past.

The Egan Model for Sustainable Communities

This policy and these organisations are in response to the need to develop much better 'soft' regeneration skills, and is based on a model in the Egan Report which summarises the complexity of regeneration programmes and the nature of sustainable communities. The model is commonly called the Egan Wheel, with its eight 'spokes' or components of a sustainable community which are:

Governance - Well run communities with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership.

The Regeneration Skills Agenda

By Tony Baldwinson, Head of Knowledge, Design & Innovation, RENEW Northwest.

Local Work: Voice is a guest author's perspective on regeneration and local economic development. If you would like to share your thoughts in a *Voice* or to comment on someone else's, please email victoriabradford@cles.org.uk

No 73 December 2006



Transport and Connectivity - Well connected communities with good transport services and communications linking people to jobs, health and other services.

Services - Public, private and community and voluntary services that are accessible to all.

Environmental - Providing places for people to live in an environmentally friendly way.

Equity - Fair for everyone in our diverse world and for communities both today and tomorrow.

Economy - A thriving and vibrant local economy.

Housing and the Built Environment - High quality buildings.

Social and Culture - Active, inclusive and safe with a strong local culture and other shared community activities.

How the sector is responding to Egan

To be fair, the various professional institutes and their general memberships have accepted the analysis and have given a new impetus to their skills programmes and in particular their Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Most professionals are far from indifferent to the impacts they make within communities - for good and bad - and share the ambitions of local leaders, of stakeholders and most importantly of the communities themselves.

For example in the North West initially eight professional institutes have come together and signed a Memorandum of Understandingⁱⁱⁱ to develop Pan-Professional CPD underpinned by the work of RENEW Northwest. Similar initiatives are now underway nationally and in other regions.

Regeneration practitioners also find it useful that there is a policy recognition of the sheer complexity of running a highly effective, holistic regeneration programme. The eight components identified in the Egan Report are only the starting point - it is a descriptive model but it doesn't explain what to do next, nor how to do it, nor why some things will work while other projects will fail.

Interestingly, a key response from practitioners is that they value the face-to-face contact with their peers and with exemplary leaders to be far more useful to them than being sent documents, accessing toolkits, or even going on the worse type of 'one size fits all' training courses. Some of this

contact can be gained through workshops and masterclasses, and for a more intensive approach through new forms of action learning sets and similar events such as case study presentations.

Another key response from practitioners is perhaps surprising, but they report how isolated they sometimes feel within their local initiatives, and how surprising it still is that others in a similar predicament elsewhere have much the same challenges and 'lessons learnt'. Much of the learning and skills development for sustainable communities is not new, state-of-the-art cutting edge innovation. Rather, it is grappling with the hard task of how a successful project or idea can be replicated from Place A to Place B, given all the local variations that are bound to impact on the attempt.

Behaviour matters

In the two years following the Egan Skills Review there have been further developments. Firstly there is a sense that many of the skills mapping exercises undertaken previously were just too crude for the task in hand. Secondly there is an understanding that, even if practitioners have the most wonderful skills sets, they will come to nought if the leadership cultures they are working within are not fit for purpose. There is now a growing acceptance that excellent leadership is judged on a much higher level than charisma or projection, even though it is still too problematic to identify the poor examples. However, perhaps the third development will prove to be the most important: that we need to look at behaviour as much as skills if we are to make a difference.

As a pen-portrait, an example of the behaviour that is desperately needed would be where a team of different organisations faces an unexpected and fierce problem, where one organisation asks for help from others, and the first response they get is "yes, we want to" and not "this isn't in my budget" or "I don't have the capacity". This is not to pretend that it is easy to behave in this way - there will always be resource constraints - but a willingness to work together through adversity is key to success within regeneration. It is a systemic failure if an adversity is thought to belong to just one organisation.

Leadership and integrity

A wanted behaviour is the ability and willingness to admit to and tell a difficult truth. There is a strong need for positive images, for communications strategies and for ambitious masterplans. However, these need to be delivered with integrity, which

includes telling people those difficult truths when necessary. I well recall in the early 1990s a local authority leader on a stage in front of over a thousand very unhappy staff, saying 'we made a mistake, and closing every library every Thursday had been a cut too far'. That was a difficult truth. In terms of future developments, work is being planned in the Northwest of England for 2007 which will be alongside the many and varied local authorities in the region to look at local practitioner and leadership skills and behaviours in order to make more communities sustainable.

Regeneration skills and universities

An interesting recent publication, also from the Northwest of England, looks at the work that the fifteen higher education bodies in the region (universities and HE colleges) have each done in conjunction with local regeneration teams, to showcase these as examples to other academics and to regeneration practitioners looking for help and expertise. One example is an arts college which has excellent methods for engaging young people.

We have also seen the rapid change in many two-year postgraduate 'conversion' courses to now being one year long, for example in town and country planning. This is understandably in response to market pressures, but there is a concern that the 'soft skills' element of such courses might be squeezed out. There is far less project work now required, yet these types of assignments would be those where a more rounded skills set was developed.

Delivery, delivery, delivery

Around the same time as the Egan Skills Review there was a related priority development within central Government on the need to focus on delivery. From the head of the civil service and from the Prime Minister the message was that officials needed to be as good at delivering change as they were in analysing the need and options for change. This impetus has common ground with the Egan Skills Review, especially in the areas of team working and project management skills. The reputation of Government bodies, both central and local, remains seared with the popular perception of an inability to deliver large projects on time and on budget, from the Dome to Pickets Lock, even if the facts sometimes belie the reputation. This pressure for stronger delivery will only continue with the regeneration aspects of the 2012 Olympics and the masterplanning of 40,000 additional homes probably being the showcase programme for the medium term.

However there are some organisational improvements now beginning to bear fruit. The national Academy for Sustainable Communities is gaining ever-increasing amounts of traction since its recent launch, and from local schools to national organisations is giving a strong lead in skills, careers and practitioner learning.

The recent Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* maps a route to a new settlement between central government, local government and communities. It suggests more freedoms and powers for local government and local people to shape their own communities, it aims to radically reduce national targets whilst strengthening local accountability and puts in place new measures to ensure local services can be more responsive to communities.

There is also an increasing understanding on the importance of place, not least in terms of improving the local economy. Put crudely, the previous orthodoxy was that localities should first improve their local economy with more and higher value jobs and with inward investment, and then with the proceeds it might be possible to splash out a bit and give the town square a makeover. However, the work of the core cities in particular have shown that, done carefully, the quality of the place can itself drive up the local economy, and not just the retail economy. Investors and high earning managers will look at the quality of place when making personal and business investment decisions, and high quality public realm will also add to property values nearby creating the potential for partnership working to maximise public and private investment gains.

But more than this perhaps, there is an understanding now that *happiness* is a public good and is strongly influenced by hard landscaping and frontages as much as by softer factors such as sense of ease; and that this is a proper discussion for the public and no longer in the realm of the experts alone.

Communities that fight for what is best

As the Prime Minister said at the launch of the Local Government White Paper: "From the moment we step outside our front door it is about how our neighbourhoods look and feel, to the quality of our schools and the facilities in our local park. Good local authorities benefit from strong and accountable leaders who are in touch with confident communities who will fight for what is best."

Complexity

The Communities Secretary added: "For the next phase of reform we need to respond to new challenges. The increasing complexity and diversity of these - from climate change to tackling deep-rooted social exclusion - demand more flexibility at the local level."

Priorities and focus for the future

There is sometimes a danger of complacency with the formulaic response of "much done, much still to do". Locally, regeneration practitioners and leaders face some major challenges with very few levers to pull, such as little control on transport, on "brownfield" development, on health or higher education programmes, on cultural attractions. The most effective regeneration professionals have used their strong networking and influencing skills to align investments and strategies as far as possible across the sectors and across the administrative boundaries, and have provided the envisioning to others to enable these alignments.

The Stern Review on the economics of climate change may also help in providing a further economic analysis on why sustainable communities matter so much. This report may yet move the general understanding of sustainable communities on from being a nice place to live to something more far-sighted about denser urban settlements where more journeys can be walked or cycled, about stable and diverse communities where life or career changes don't require moving to another region, where urban settlements are reconnected to their own distinctive rural neighbours, and where housing estates with only roads for infrastructure, both the old public or new private housing estates, are no longer acceptable. As an example of this development, the Northern Way's submission to Government for the Comprehensive Spending Review highlighted the adverse impact of newly built private housing estates all of low-value "executive homes" in suburban and semi-rural areas and the need to better control this type of adverse development.

Lessons learnt

There is now a better understanding that 'regeneration' cannot just be about the local

economy, but equally it will fail if the local economy itself is unsustainable. Hopefully, now gone are the days of just housing-led regeneration or road-led regeneration or similar. We have a better understanding that creating and nurturing sustainable communities takes more than a housing improvement programme or a retail strategy - it now must cover the economic, the social, the environmental and the cultural needs of each community. The importance of the quality of place is now better understood. Leadership skills are no longer just seen as charisma. The value of partnership working and of engaging with communities at the centre of this working is now appreciated. The understanding that deep-rooted changes can sometimes take over ten years to achieve has allowed for more concerted efforts to deal with some of the most difficult challenges, and efforts which last beyond the electoral cycle.

Summary

If anything, the imperative for sustainable communities is now stronger than ever, and the expectations of regeneration professionals, of leaders and of communities are still increasing. The prize of sustainable living is the best that can be won in our generation, the challenge remains to ensure that the professionals have all the skills, knowledge and tools they need to win.

References

- i Extracts from the websites of RENEW Northwest (www.renew.co.uk) and the Academy for Sustainable Communities (www.ascskills.org.uk).
- ii Available from the website of the Department for Communities and Local Government (www.communities.gov.uk).
- iii For further details on this Pan-Professional CPD Memorandum of Understanding please contact Sue Carmichael c/o RENEW Northwest.



For details of previous issues of Local Work or to
subscribe to CLES products and services visit
www.cles.org.uk