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CLES Bulletin is a topical summary of articles which have appeared in the professional press. Its aim is to provide a pithy précis of a subject area, drawing out the specific and common issues raised in the individual articles.

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The Liveability Agenda & Public Space

Introduction

During 2001, Tony Blair prioritised 'liveability' as an objective for urban policy. The liveability agenda focuses on anti-social behaviour and environmental management, and the quality of open and green spaces.

Since 2001 a number of policies have been developed that contribute to the development of the urban environment. This CLES bulletin aims to outline the newest developments in the government's liveability agenda with a focus on urban public space. The bulletin will firstly look at the problems associated with poor public spaces, then examine why public space is important for developing sustainable communities. The current liveability agenda will then be outlined.

Poor public spaces

Public space is said to be declining in quantity due to development pressures; for example the loss of school playing fields and the redevelopment of urban parkland for commercial uses. The current policy to build more and more on brownfield sites, increases the development pressures on urban public space,

especially those spaces that are run down and no longer used.

Sustainable communities: Dimensions and Challenges¹ is a working paper that outlines the key issues in relation to the development of public space. In the paper, a study by Hillier Parker (1994) is cited, he reported from a survey of 150 local authorities that the state of public space in town centres was generally in decline with only 29% of authorities reporting conditions as improving. More recently, the Urban Parks Forum (2001) found similar findings for urban parks, with only 18% of local authorities regarding their parks as 'good', and many reporting the loss of park features and amenities such as shelters, bandstands, lakes and cafes.

Regeneration & Renewal² carries an article that highlights the fact that a lack of quality play spaces combined with parental fears over traffic and anti social behaviour, result in urban children spending the majority of their time indoors. Heavy traffic causes parents to prevent children walking and cycling to public spaces to play, but it also has an impact in reducing social interaction amongst children as parents keep them in the house where they can keep an eye on them.

Anti-social behaviour, including abuse, unruly behaviour, harassment, noise, litter and graffiti, and the behaviour of alcoholics, vagrants and drug-users undermines the use of public space and causes a vicious circle in which declining use leads to higher levels of anti-social behaviour, thus reinforcing the exclusion of the general public from these spaces.

The main reason for this is that budgets to maintain public spaces are inadequate. Around 40% of local authorities do not have a maintenance programme or budget for the public realm. Local authority budgets for park maintenance are reported to have declined by 20% over the past 20 years. More tellingly, 56% of local authorities do not have any form of parks strategy³.

The think tank **Demos**⁴ have recently published a report on the impact of poor public spaces on children

¹Ade Kearns & Ivan Turok, Sustainable communities: Dimensions and Challenges, Oct 2004, www.odpm.gov.uk

² Loney, Nick, Fear and no play areas keep urban kids inside, *Regeneration & Renewal*, 28th May, p4

³ Kearns & Turok, p40.

⁴ Gillian Thomas & Guy Thompson, A child's place: why environment matters to children, Demos, <http://www.demos.co.uk>

and their health. The report says a marked 'inequality of space' exists between children of affluent and poorer families, with the latter much less likely to have access to gardens and playing fields. As a result the report states "children born in wealthy, rural areas can expect to live almost ten years longer than children born in poorer urban areas" (p20).

Why public space is important

There are a number of ways in which high quality, well-managed public space, in particular open space, can bring benefits for communities, ranging across the health, therapeutic, social, community, and economic spheres. Figure 1 outlines the benefits of good public space across this wide range of issues.

Figure 1. The Benefits of Public, Open and Green Space

Health:	Improved air quality: reduces pollutants and increases oxygen.
Therapeutic:	promotes healing; reduces stress and aggression. Meets people's need to connect with nature. Provides opportunities and motivation for exercise. Psychological benefits of outdoor play for children
Social:	Promotes interaction among users. Reduces isolation.
Community:	Enhances sense of place. Boosts the image of an area. Helps tackle anti-social behaviour and achieve the reclamation of space by the community. Provides reasons for civic engagement, either in looking after space or in the use of space.
Economic:	Bolsters investor confidence in an area. Provides opportunities for employment in landscaping and management.

Source: Sustainable Communities: Dimensions and Challenges⁵

Public space is also important for a functioning democratic society, public space is where people come together to express themselves as part of the public.

*"The public domain is the theatre of an urban culture. It is where citizenship is enacted, it is the glue that can bind an urban society"*⁶ (p16).

In the redevelopment of public spaces, the needs of all should be considered, there is a critique of recent urban policies along the lines of exclusion. There is a concern that cities are being renewed for those people

who possess economic value as either consumers or residents.

There are concerns over the privatisation of public space, for example shopping centres and leisure centres, which exclude the non-paying, non-buying public. This reinforces a general problem that the use of public space is uneven and some groups are under-represented as users, notably older people and ethnic minorities, so that spaces are not inclusive in practice. (See the work of Smith, 1996, Mitchell, 2003 and MacLeod, 2001).

Public space is what binds together urban society, it needs to be open to all to prevent groups from feeling excluded from mainstream society. Good public space is important for our health, children especially should have access to safe, open and green spaces. Good public space promotes a sense of community, and well-developed spaces can improve the economic success of an area. This is why public space is important.

The Liveability Agenda

The Government's commitment to the 'liveability' agenda is taking form through a number of initiatives, and many of these have an emphasis on public space. Included in the term 'public space' are green spaces (such as parks, gardens, play areas, semi-natural green spaces) and civic spaces (such as squares, market places and streets).

Raising the quality of our public spaces is increasingly a priority across Government. "Physical regeneration can only last if people feel a greater sense of ownership and confidence in the places where they live" (John Prescott, 2002). Key developments have been the creation of the Urban Green Spaces Task Force, a Government Response to the task force contained in the document *Living Spaces: Cleaner, Safer, Greener*⁷, the establishment of CAFE Space to champion urban public space and in particular parks and green spaces⁸. There has also been a cross-cutting review on public spaces and local environments.

Local Government News⁹ carried an article, announcing the formation of the Land Restoration Trust, which is charged with turning around 10,000 hectares of Brownfield land into accessible, open green

⁵ Kearns & Turok, p42.

⁶ Urban Task Force (1999) *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. London: DETR

⁷ See ODPM website for more info www.odpm.gov.uk

⁸ CAFE Space 2003, www.cafespace.org.uk

⁹ Urban space supplement, *Local Government News*, May 2004.

space over the next ten years. The trust is made up of English Partnerships, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency and will focus on making neglected areas of land into enjoyable community spaces.

The article argues that at the current rates of land reclamation it will take 200 years to return all derelict land in the UK back into use, it is estimated that there is 66,000 hectares of previously developed land now lying unused.

Sustainable communities: building for the future¹⁰ includes a commitment to introduce a new Liveability Fund to support local authority projects to improve parks and public spaces. This is part of a £201 million package aimed at improving the quality of local environments. The fund will operate as a pilot for the next three years, with aims to test new approaches for tackling public space and local liveability issues. Twenty-seven local authorities have been selected to pilot the scheme. The scheme is due to run until March 2006.

A new programme has been launched across England (Feb 04) called **Living Spaces**¹¹. 'Living Spaces' is about providing community groups in England with money, advice and practical support to improve their local open spaces. The scheme is worth £30 million over the next three years and is being funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Well established organisations such as Groundwork and Green Space are involved and grants from £1,000 to £100,000 are available to improve a wide range of spaces including community gardens, play areas, local parks, village greens, nature areas, ponds, courts and squares, kick-about areas and skate parks.

The initiative is designed to give people the chance to change their environment for the better and to create valuable places for the whole community to enjoy.

Creating or reclaiming neighbourhood space is a central ingredient of many **Groundwork**¹² projects. In Higher Openshaw, East Manchester, Groundwork worked with residents to help them make better use of small patches of communal land between rows of terraced housing. New Century Family Garden is one

¹⁰ Sustainable communities: building for the future, ODPM, www.odpm.gov.uk

¹¹ See www.living-spaces.org.uk for more information on the living spaces programme.

¹² Putting something back, Groundwork Today, Issue No 35.

such example, where alleyways leading to the green have been fitted with lockable gates to increase security and the area landscaped and improved to provide a safe play area and relaxing garden.

A similar Groundwork scheme in Birmingham, worked in partnership with the City Council, the police and local youth agencies to fully redevelop a local park, with the young people of the area playing a key part in deciding the design of the facilities provided such as a playground, skate park and basketball court.

Conclusion

The liveability agenda is more than just keeping streets clean and improving parks, it can also act as a vehicle for building community confidence and encouraging partnerships and civic pride. Using the values and pragmatic approaches that liveability entails will be an effective way of communicating how sustainable development can be achieved.

There is a vital role for public spaces to play in achieving this sustainable development. A successful and sustainable economy needs decent public space. This context and backdrop to the economy is often forgotten. The liveability agenda is a welcome development and issues of health and obesity need to be rolled in. In answering critics of city centre developments of public spaces, it should be remembered that people do not have to be consumers all the time, a thriving, sustainable and inclusive society needs places where all people want to spend time and be part of public life.

For more information on this topic please contact:

Stuart MacDonald

Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES)

Express Networks, 1 George Leigh Street, Manchester

M4 5DL, Tel 0161 236 7036 Fax 0161 236 1891

Email info@cles.org.uk Web www.cles.org.uk

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**For further information please contact Lucy Walker
on 0161 236 7036 or email lucywalker@cles.org.uk**