



CLES Bulletin is a topical summary of an issue which has recently emerged. Its aim is to provide a pithy précis of the issue, thus creating a quick and easy to read document which directs to more detailed material, if required.

**CLES Bulletin No. 30**  
**The future direction of the sustainable  
communities agenda**

**CLES BULLETIN**





## Introduction

The Delivering Sustainable Communities Summit 2005 was the largest event of its kind to be ever held in the UK. Over 2,000 delegates from the UK, Europe and the wider world attended the three-day conference at Manchester's GMEX. This CLES Bulletin looks at some of the key messages that have come out of the Summit, summarising the themes that are likely to provide the future direction of the sustainable communities agenda.

The three main messages covered in this Bulletin are:

- Neighbourhood Charters, designed to help local people shape public services;
- A National Sustainable Community Skills Centre or Academy to coordinate the development of skills in the sector; and
- A new European, outward looking approach to the Sustainable Communities agenda.

## The Neighbourhood Charter

The government wants to give local people more of a say in the way their communities are run and the right to tackle poorly performing public services. On 31<sup>st</sup> January 2005, the discussion document '*Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*' was published. The discussion document sets out a range of ideas for developing sustainable communities at the neighbourhood level, some of the ideas in this document include:

- Devolving much more power to neighbourhoods;
- Placing democratically elected ward councillors at the heart of neighbourhood arrangements;
- Empowering communities to improve local services and create safer communities.<sup>1</sup>

The government would like to see people help shape the local public services they receive by

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<sup>1</sup> Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter, [http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm\\_localgov/documents/page/odpm\\_locgov\\_034880.pdf](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_localgov/documents/page/odpm_locgov_034880.pdf)

becoming more involved in the democratic life of their community. As part of the agenda for increasing levels of active citizenship in society, the "*neighbourhood can be (seen as) the 'nursery' for democracy*"<sup>2</sup>.

The Neighbourhood Charter offers the potential for 'participatory budgeting', involving communities in not only the planning and delivery of services but also setting the priorities for budgets/funding. Where it has been tried internationally it has enhanced participation in local democracy, improved the delivery of local services, and enhanced the roles of local councillors.

Under new proposals, people could

- petition their local ward councillors for changes and improvements;
- communities could assume ownership or involvement in community assets;
- extend anti-social behaviour powers;
- Neighbourhood Improvement Districts could be established, similar to Business Improvement Districts<sup>3</sup>;
- there could be a delegation of budgets to ward councillors;
- introduction of byelaws; and
- neighbourhood contracts with service providers.

If the Neighbourhood Charter were put in place, the government, local government, other service providers and the voluntary and community sectors would enter into it. The charter would then recognise the ability of people to take neighbourhood action, and those entering into the charter would commit themselves to act in accordance with an agreed framework for neighbourhoods.<sup>4</sup>

Under the 'catch all' banner of new localism, a whole raft of initiatives and bodies now decide things at the local level. New Labour has extended

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<sup>2</sup> See CLES Bulletin No.29 – Active Citizenship, <http://www.cles.org.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> See CLES Bulletin No.28 – Business Improvement Districts, <http://www.cles.org.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter, p29.



democratic principles further than any previous government and the Neighbourhood Charter signals the intent to devolve more responsibility down to neighbourhood levels. Many more people are now involved in decision making within policy, for example in the New Deal for Communities areas, Sure Start, tenant participation, Local Strategic Partnerships, Youth Referral Panels.

These ideas are however contentious, Tony Travers at the London School of Economics<sup>5</sup> believes that going too far down the road of new localism will make the “already challenging task of joining up local services a lot more difficult”.

Local governments warn that there is a limit to how much you can devolve, it is argued that the more functions devolved the more conflicts that will arise, where local individuals or groups compete for the good of the wider locality. Going down this road will require a strong local government to step in and make the difficult decisions, therefore a much stronger debate needs to be opened up.

The government will be taking this debate forward through a series of national and regional seminars, workshops and meetings with local government and representatives of the public, private, voluntary and community sector over the coming months. This discussion may provide an opportunity to further this debate between central and local government on the concept of ‘localism’ in the context of sustainable communities.

### ***Academy for Sustainable Community Skills<sup>6</sup>***

Sir John Egan’s report *Skills for Sustainable Communities<sup>7</sup>*, published last April, revealed that the field of regeneration suffers from a number of skills gaps. Technical expertise in areas such as design and project appraisal, and skills in leadership,

partnership working and communication have all been identified as areas that need help in developing. The Egan review calls for a cultural change in the approach to skills development in more than 100 occupations involved in delivering the sustainable communities plan. Egan recommended that a national centre for sustainable communities skills be established to promote learning and share best practice.

It was announced at the summit that Leeds is to become home for this centre. The successful Leeds bid was the result of a joint project between the three northern Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Yorkshire Forward, One North East and the North West Regional Development Agency under the ‘Northern Way’ umbrella. The Academy should be ready to open its doors in April or May 2005.

Martin Havenhand, Chief Executive of Yorkshire Forward, said:

*“On behalf of the North, we are delighted that the national centre will be based in Leeds...The centre will provide us with a focal point for the development of best practice based on experience and expertise whilst ensuring that people have the skills they need to safeguard the environment for future generations and providing sustainable communities in which people can live, work and invest.<sup>8</sup>”*

A Task Group with members drawn from practitioner and policy backgrounds, regional and local government is taking forward ideas for the new national centre. The main objective of the Academy is to ensure that in the long term the country has sufficient people and skills to deliver and maintain sustainable communities across the country.

Rebecca George, Steering Group member for the Academy for Sustainable Communities says the academy will do three things. “It’s going to inspire people to go into the professions that support sustainable communities. It’s going to enable skills development. And it will provide a resource centre

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<sup>5</sup>Samuel Mithran, Labour’s Localism is here to stay, LGC, p9, 20.02.04.

<sup>6</sup> The Academy is also being referred to as the National Centre for Sustainable Community Skills.

<sup>7</sup> To download the report visit the ODPM website at the following address,

[http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm\\_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm\\_urbpol\\_028549.hcsp](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_028549.hcsp)

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<sup>8</sup> Yorkshire Forward Press Release, see <http://www.yorkshire-forward.com/view.asp?id=3146&pw=>



for people working in the industry and members of the wider community.”<sup>9</sup>

The National Academy's work, funded directly by the ODPM will take forward key messages from the Egan Review, its proposed objectives are currently to:

1. Focus on improving generic skills, such as leadership, project management and others identified by Egan, in a sustainable communities context;
2. Promote skills development across a very wide range of occupations involved in planning, maintaining and delivering sustainable communities;
3. Provide and encourage training and skills development that is cross-occupational;
4. Promote a culture of life-long-learning; and
5. Develop a strong international dimension to its work, learning from and building on the best approaches from around the world.

George hopes the Academy will become a point of contact where people go for information, a portal that can direct to more specific sources of information, whether this be for people working in the field or for interested members of the wider community.

The Academy will work through or with existing bodies, not replicating their work. Eileen Scott, director of organisational development at regeneration agency English Partnerships, says key organisations, including CABE, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the universities will have an active role to play. “By creating a more cohesive approach to skills, the centre will help other organisations to ensure the training and services they offer link into the wider regeneration agenda,”<sup>10</sup>

The National Academy will be supported by the network of recently established Regional Centres of Excellence (RCEs) throughout the country (the national centre will replace the regional centre in the Yorkshire-Humber region).

How the relationship between the National Academy and the RCEs will play out is not yet clear, however the RCEs should be able to influence policy at the regional and national level through what is learnt locally and across the regions and therefore influence the practice of the National Academy.

### *European approach to Sustainable Communities*

The Deputy Prime Minister launched a European approach to creating sustainable communities at the Summit. In his keynote speech, Mr Prescott said he wanted to use the UK Presidency of the European Union (EU) to set up a new, Europe-wide framework for creating places where people want to live. Mr Prescott said the Presidency of the EU would provide a forum for exchanging views and experiences across member states,

*“There are huge challenges in the new Europe. The expansion of the EU to form 25 nations with over 450 million people has brought together...different political and economic traditions. The UK's Presidency will be an opportunity to discuss a European approach to creating sustainable communities. Such thinking could create a new framework to consider the emerging regional policy.”*

In his speech, John Prescott looked to American approaches to sustainable development and stressed a desire to link US new urbanist ideas with Europe's urban traditions<sup>11</sup>. Prescott told delegates huge progress had been made in improving cities in the UK since Richard Rogers' Urban Task Force was set up in 1998

<sup>9</sup> Guiding Light of the new school, Matt Ross, Regeneration & Renewal, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Summit News Day Three, [http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm\\_communities/documents/page/odpm\\_comm\\_035009.pdf](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_communities/documents/page/odpm_comm_035009.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> The origins of the New Urbanism movement in the US can be traced to dissatisfaction with the quality of urban development taking place on the edges of US cities. The New Urbanism movement opposes urban sprawl and placeless development, and challenges the quality of urban design, see [http://www.uic.edu/cuppa/hambleton\\_publicservicefutures\\_10.html](http://www.uic.edu/cuppa/hambleton_publicservicefutures_10.html)



Linking back to the National Sustainable Community Skills Academy, Prescott said:

*“The Academy will be an international centre of excellence. I want it to join forces with the Congress for New Urbanism in the United States and other leading centres in Europe and around the world. It will have a really strong European outlook and has huge potential for developing new ideas and thinking on sustainable communities.”*

## **Conclusion**

The future of the Sustainable Communities agenda has been set out to some degree by the announcements and publications surrounding the Summit, this bulletin has examined a number of the issues that have come to light in the past month.

By involving citizens in public services and giving them the power to make a difference locally it is hoped that a difference can be made to peoples lives, it is hoped local ownership of key policies will provide the sustainability required to prevent regenerated neighbourhoods slipping back into a cycle of decline in the future.

The central support for ‘new localism’ is however much stronger than that from local government. Austin Williams<sup>12</sup> argues that under the guise of new localism, we are seeing a “celebration of fragmentation”. The proliferation of new bodies may fragment local governance and reduce the effectiveness of attempts to join-up policies and services.

Fulfilling the Sustainable Communities Plan will require a much broader coordination of the sectors skill set, and the development of a national academy will no doubt help the sector. Regeneration covers many disciplines and policy areas and requires a raft of skills and experience. The people involved in regeneration need to have the abilities and skills to think cross sectorally, think differently, and think in the context of the problem.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, Austin, Going Loco over new localism, Municipal Journal 20 Nov 2003 p.11

In this, more effort must be made to increase and retain diversity and wealth of skills within the regeneration sector. Many Regional Centres of Excellence (RCEs) are looking at this sort of thing, though it must be ensured that they don't just focus on traditional skills, but also set in train methods for developing innovative and creative skills as well.

The government is committed to creating thriving, vibrant, sustainable communities. The proposals outlined in this Bulletin, it is hoped will help achieve this aim, although they will take some time to come to fruition. Just how the Academy of Sustainable Community Skills will help the sector is yet to be seen and how the ‘localism’ debate between local and central government plays out may well decide the future of the Neighbourhood Charter.

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