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CLÉS 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 Communities Plan

The long awaited statement from John Prescott, setting out how the extra money set aside in the Spending Review will be used to deliver thriving, sustainable communities in all regions, was published on 5 February 2003. The Communities Plan, *Sustainable Communities: building for the future*,¹ provoked much discussion in the media. In this edition of CLÉS Bulletin we explore these debates.

*Inside Housing*² featured a discussion among a panel of experts, debating the wide-ranging issues raised by the Communities Plan. The panel included Michael Irvine, Director of Housing Policy at the Association of London Government and Robert Ashmead, Chief Executive of the House Builders' Federation.

The debate raised concerns over the emphasis on housing in the Plan, at the expense of other areas, such as education, as well as concerns about the over-emphasis on the South East.

The panel went on to discuss whether house builders will be able to deliver the 200,000 new homes planned in the growth areas by 2016, and they looked at how the Housing Corporation is affected, raising concerns for Housing

Associations, should the corporation's influence decline.

The panel concluded by talking about the changing face of the housing sector, highlighting concerns from within the sector about reaching the decent homes standard by the set target and emphasising the need to monitor progress to ensure the money is spent wisely.

Municipal Journal (MJ)³ continued the debate on housing in the Communities Plan, but suggested that the Plan dealt a blow to local authorities by planning to deliver 200,000 new homes through development corporations and regional housing boards.

The MJ also reveals concerns from the LGA that the proposals to create regional housing boards, make no mention of council involvement. It finally draws attention to the reaction from county councils in the south, who are concerned that their planning powers will be stripped under the new planning bill and the countryside in the South East will be affected by the house building regardless of the concerns of local people.

Local Government News (LGN)⁴ magazine also reported concerns about the countryside, reporting that the Communities Plan had come under fire from green campaigners who believe it will lead to concentrated development over enormous unspoilt parts of the country. It shows that the planning studies commissioned by the Government have revealed that as much as over 550,000 new homes could be built on Greenfield sites.

LGN notes that according to campaigners, such as the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) this is totally unacceptable and reports that some environmentalists called the Plan 'frightening' particularly as it comes at a time when the Government is trying to take planning powers from county councils and deliver them to unelected regional bodies.

LGN finally highlights criticisms that the Plan will see billions invested in the South East at the expense of the rest of the country, which could exacerbate the north-south divide.

*Planning*⁵ magazine also looks at the housing problems in the north and south, which have led to

¹ Sustainable Communities: building for the future

<http://www.odpm.gov.uk/communities/plan/index.htm>

² The big issues Inside Housing 14 Feb 2003 pp.18-20

³ Carroll, Nicola *Prescott homes plan by-passes councils* MJ 13 Feb 2003 p.5

⁴ Dunsmuir, Alistair *Prescott's plan is "frightening"* LGN Feb 2003 pp.1, 3

⁵ Donati, Marino *New life for derelict homes* Planning 14 Feb 2003 p.8

the proposals in the Communities Plan. It tells us that the Plan outlines a drive to replace unwanted properties in the north with “sustainable communities”, however, it points out that the main impact of the measures in the Plan are likely to be felt in the south of England, where a massive programme of additional house building is being planned.

Planning concludes by highlighting that, however the money is shared out, this looks like the best opportunity yet for deprived areas to replace pockets of dereliction and social exclusion with thriving communities.

New Start⁶ magazine echoed this positive outlook, claiming that the Communities Plan is “*the most ambitious housing and regeneration strategy to emerge from the Central Government for many a decade.*” It examined the key issues raised in the Communities Plan of housing, liveability, infrastructure and regional policy.

New Start highlighted the current problems in housing and the plans to deliver more homes where people need them. However, it queried whether the growth can be delivered in time to make a difference to public services that are already struggling to recruit and retain key workers. Furthermore, will quality be sacrificed for the sake of speed?

It went on to highlight the issues pertaining to liveability and the setting up of a Land Restoration Trust to improve quality of life. It suggested that the test of whether or not the money allocated to the Trust makes a difference, will be how conflicts between local communities and developers over the future of public spaces are resolved.

New Start draws out the problems of infrastructure, arguing that without investment in schools, hospitals, transport and community facilities, the expansion of house building in the south east will exacerbate rather than solve the region’s problems.

Finally, *New Start* discusses the Plan in relation to regional policy, arguing that the regional divides are widening and that promises to rectify this were conspicuously absent from the Plan and asks what the long term consequences of this imbalance in investment are likely to be.

Regeneration and Renewal⁷ magazine presented a general overview of the issues raised in the

Communities Plan, reporting that the regeneration sector has greeted the Plan with a unanimous call for increased Government investment in transport, arguing that without it the Deputy Prime Minister would fail to achieve his vision of reviving communities in the north and building 200,000 new homes in the South.

It also reports on the £500 million boost to housing renewal in depressed areas, which has been welcomed by regeneration professionals, and sets out the pathfinder timetable.

Regeneration and Renewal informs us that the Plan announced an additional £1 billion for councils to set up arms length management organisations (ALMOs) to manage their housing stock. It reports that the Chartered Institute of Housing believes that the additional money will not be enough, given the number of councils reluctant to undertake more controversial stock transfers.

The Communities Plan, although welcomed by many, has its fair share of criticisms. Concerns over the focus on housing and the South East, in particular, do not fit with the ODPM’s statement that the Plan ‘*goes wider than housing and planning*’, or his promises to create ‘*thriving, sustainable communities in all regions*’. Thus, although this has been called, ‘*the most ambitious housing and regeneration strategy to emerge from Central Government for many a decade*’, there are still many questions left unanswered.

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⁶ Dobson, Julian *All things to all people* New Start 14 Feb 2003 pp.12-13

⁷ *Communities plan* Regeneration and Renewal pp.9-11