

Summary of responses to the Egan review of skills public consultation

**Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
April 2004**

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Published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

April 2004

Introduction

This paper provides a summary of the responses to the public consultation that closed on 28 November 2003. The consultation, which was launched on the 27 October 2003, asked 14 questions in total. These questions were grouped under the three themes of 'General approach, leadership and process', 'Professional skills', and 'Other'.

During the Review, Sir John Egan established five working groups to cover the topics of:

- Sustainable communities
- Local authorities
- Finance
- Planning
- Skills

This Summary of the 103 responses received by the Secretariat provides a brief analysis of the comments set against these five topics.

Key points

103 responses were received from the following groupings:

- Local authorities,
- Developers,
- Government departments,
- Voluntary and charitable sectors,
- Regional Development Agencies and Regional Centres of Excellence,
- Non-departmental government bodies,
- Professional bodies,
- Universities,
- 'Other' organisations,
- Consultants and
- Individuals.

Ninety-one of these responses have been made available on the ODPM website for your information. You will be able to view the individual responses within these 10 groupings.

The overwhelming majority of respondents to the consultation believe substantial change to current culture, and systems and processes are necessary if the step change envisaged in the Sustainable Communities Plan is to be achieved.

The majority of respondents considered that local authorities should have the lead role in co-ordinating delivery of the sustainable communities' agenda but that they could not and should not work in isolation. Effective delivery mechanisms will require cultural change and the creation of broad-based partnerships operating in a transparent manner.

A large number of respondents reported that few elected members or officers of local authorities have a good understanding of finance and economics particularly in respect of development.

Many respondents believe that Local Planning Authorities should adopt a more positive approach to development and to use their power creatively.

Particular concerns were the need to tackle blanket resistance to development and ways to deal swiftly with objections.

Greater developer understanding of the objectives and intended outcomes of planning policy is also needed.

Simplification of the planning system was advocated alongside greater separation from the political process.

Many anticipated that the forthcoming legislative changes would bring about many of the improvements that are sought.

Early and continuing involvement of key stakeholders including the local community was seen to be crucial to the successful implementation of planning policy and the progress of new applications

A large range of skills, knowledge and behaviours needed by people working in professions and occupations with a core role in delivering sustainable communities were identified

Many respondents considered that current distinctions between professions and occupations are no longer appropriate for the delivery of sustainable communities suggesting the distinctions need to be redrawn and updated to incorporate the 'softer' side of delivery

Two 'new' professions were suggested; a new qualification in urban regeneration to train people with skills which cross the historic professional boundaries and a proposal for a profession of 'developer'

The current approach to education and training for the core professions is not perceived to be delivering the right skills, knowledge and behaviours. Some suggested academic theory needed to be aligned with industrial reality through the development and use of more current - and relevant - learning material and methods.

Shortages in many core occupations are identified.

Support for a re-branding exercise is mixed with many respondents concerned it may distract from core issues

There is overwhelming support for elected members - particularly those who serve on planning committees - to be offered training in delivering the sustainable communities'

agenda. Many consider this training should be compulsory although some respondents question whether this would interfere with the democratic process

Sustainable communities

In the opinion of the overwhelming majority of respondents to the consultation there is a need for substantial change to current culture, and systems and processes if the step change envisaged in the Sustainable Communities Plan is to be achieved. The proposed changes will need to build on a foundation of public awareness and consultation and be driven by:

- A genuine commitment to partnership working
- A willingness to learn from others
- A new approach to development which should be based less on control and more on building consensus
- Replacing short term emphasis on costs with a long term vision of value
- Cultural sensitivity

The need for vision and leadership is identified as crucial to the delivery of the Government's objectives. Respondents emphasised the need to break down professional silos and to develop better cross-departmental and collaborative working within local authorities.

Some respondents indicated that there is a lack of clarity about the size and nature of sustainable communities. Clarification of these factors should precede any proposals for change.

The majority of respondents, including developers themselves, considered that most developers were informed about the concept of sustainable communities but lacked commitment to implementation of the Sustainable Communities Plan's objectives. Terms used to describe the development industry's approach included 'jumping through hoops', 'questionable box ticking' and 'arrogant and uninterested'. Many developers have appeared to equate sustainable solutions with reduced profit.

There was wide agreement that the development industry would acquire the skills and will to commit to sustainable development when the commercial need became imperative. Suggestions made included:

- Strengthening the building regulations
- A campaign to raise public awareness and demand for sustainable development

- Joint public/private sector training
- Incorporating sustainable development principles within the procurement process or adapting contractual presumptions and reward mechanisms.

Local authorities

The majority of respondents considered that local authorities should have the lead role in co-ordinating delivery of the sustainable communities' agenda but that they could not and should not work in isolation. Effective delivery mechanisms will require cultural change and the creation of broad-based partnerships operating in a transparent manner. Key objectives should include:

- Developing an innovative approach to joint working
- Developing a culture of interdepartmental co-ordination
- Community involvement
- Sharing knowledge and good practice

Frequent reference was made to actual and potential role played by Local Strategic Partnerships and the local Community Plan.

Some proposed other bodies for the lead role. Some considered that the Sustainable Communities' Agenda is broader than any one local authority's remit and a broader vision will be needed with the relevant Regional Development Agency assuming the lead. Others considered that local authorities were compromised by the constraints of local politics and NIMBYism and proposed alternative structures including Urban Development Corporations, Urban Regeneration Companies and revival of the New Towns Act.

Many respondents emphasised that local authorities would need to be adequately resourced if they are to shoulder responsibility for delivering the Sustainable Communities' Agenda.

Finance

A large number of respondents reported that few elected members or officers of local authorities have a good understanding of finance and economics particularly in respect of development.

Planning

Many respondents indicated that Local Planning Authorities needed to adopt a more positive approach to development and to use their power creatively. Particular concerns were the need to tackle blanket resistance to development and ways to deal swiftly with objections. Greater developer understanding of the objectives and intended outcomes of planning policy is also needed. Simplification of the planning system was advocated alongside greater separation from the political process. Suggestions for more learning opportunities across the planner/ developer gap were proposed. Many anticipated that the forthcoming legislative changes would bring about many of the improvements that are sought.

Some respondents suggested that the Regional Development Agencies should take a greater role in developing standard planning policies particularly to address regional issues. This approach was seen to be particularly relevant to the provision of cross authority - and often unpopular - infrastructure including, for example, provision of facilities for waste management. Regional Architecture Centres also have an important role to play.

The early and continuing involvement of key stakeholders including the local community was seen to be crucial to the successful implementation of planning policy and the progress of new applications. Skills in community facilitation and engagement are essential to achieve consensus. There should be public engagement in devising local development strategies, which should be regularly reviewed to ensure currency. Early involvement of key stakeholders enables the impact of a development to be more effectively assessed and understood. The use of public inter-departmental meetings to highlight key issues was suggested for key developments. This process would also allow key stakeholders to comment at an early stage. There is a fear that the length and complexity of the planning process can result in social, crime and environmental issues taking lower priorities.

Some respondents pointed out that the involvement of multiple stakeholders could lead to conflicting requirements. For example, increased permeability of developments by foot and cycle paths is encouraged to promote sustainable development but is not favoured by the police because of the greater opportunities provided for crime. Although continuing stakeholder involvement is essential to achieving consensus the more involved in debate the higher the number of conflicts that are likely to emerge creating the potential for delays.

More formal - and possibly mandatory - pre-application negotiations would facilitate agreement at design stage and encourage a more positive and proactive approach to development. Urban design briefs, strategies, frameworks and masterplanning were all seen as positive ways of speeding the process. Some suggested that developments that meet agreed criteria should be fast tracked. The use of Enquiry by Design was encouraged, as was the Extension of Permitted Development Orders (to projects to go ahead with the need for planning permission).

Some respondents suggested Local Planning Authorities should have greater incentives for reaching decisions within prescribed time limits. Another suggestion was that Local Planning Authorities that made decisions in conflict with their published plans should be penalised.

Other issues raised included:

- the conflict between engagement and speed,
- that certainty and speed are not the same
- quality is more important than uniformity
- collaboration should not be at the cost of an architecture of mediocrity

Skills

The Egan Review of Skills has concentrated on identifying the skills needed by a range of professions and occupations with a core role in delivering sustainable communities. Respondents did not always confine their comments either to this group or to 'generic' skills, knowledge and behaviours. Not all were convinced of the value of core skills. Concern was frequently expressed that concentration on generic skills would dilute the weight given to technical skills. Others drew attention to the value of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's work in defining generic skills knowledge and behaviours (The Learning Curve).

A large range of skills, knowledge and behaviours needed by people working in professions and occupations with a core role in delivering sustainable communities were identified. Generic skills noted included:

- Ability to see the potential impact of action on others
- Accountability
- Communication
- Community engagement
- Customer focus
- Empathy
- Enthusiasm
- Environmental issues
- Joined up decision making
- Knowledge of the democratic process
- Lateral thinking
- Leadership
- Listening skills
- Making things happen
- Mediation and conflict resolution
- Mentoring

- Negotiation, persuasion and influence
- Objectiveness
- Partnership working
- Passion
- People management skills
- Political awareness
- Problem solving
- Programme management
- Project management
- Respect for others
- Robust common sense
- Strategic thinking
- Sustainability
- Sympathy
- Time management
- Understanding of the roles and responsibilities of other professionals
- Vision

Other skills and knowledge judged necessary for all included:

- Causes and prevention of crime
- Current thinking and practice on spatial planning (for non-planners)
- Development finance
- Environmental design
- Government funding procedures
- Health and safety
- Knowledge of urban history and policy

- Understanding of the development process including commercial aspects and risk
- Understanding of economics and the market
- Urban design
- Urban regeneration

Many respondents considered the current distinctions between professions and occupations were no longer appropriate for the delivery of sustainable communities suggesting the distinctions need to be redefined and updated to incorporate the 'softer' side of delivery. Although a few described the professional institutions as overly 'precious' and 'aggressive' most concentrated on the potential for a more positive approach incorporating improving linkages with more scope to recognise alternative qualifications and accredit prior learning linked to the increasing need for multiple skills and an holistic approach. This approach would recognise current professional and occupational distinctions are 'building blocks' not 'silos'. An alternative suggestion was for adoption of the civil service generalist model.

Two 'new' professions were suggested; a new qualification in urban regeneration to train people with skills which cross the historic professional boundaries and a proposal for a profession of 'developer'. The point was also made that the creation of any new 'super' profession would only add a small additional resource.

The current approach to education and training for the core professions is not perceived to be delivering the right skills, knowledge and behaviours. Some suggested academic theory needed to be aligned with industrial reality through the development and use of more current - and relevant - learning material. Suggested innovations included:

- Better collaboration between built environment professional
- Delivering all professionally accredited courses in the context of multi-disciplinary professional work
- More practitioner based learning supported by foundation level training in some core delivery skills
- Providing a better overview of the system
- A move from an emphasis on professional qualification towards education that is fluid and fit for purpose
- Compulsory work experience on all built environment courses

- Higher entry standards to increase status of the built environment professions
- Incorporation of modules on regeneration, urban design and public policy
- Use of accredited case study material to introduce more 'live' learning
- Greater commitment to the value and worth of Continuing Professional Development
- Development of a virtual sustainable communities institute
- Increasing the availability of part time and distance learning study opportunities perhaps through the Regional Centres of Excellence or Regional Architecture Centres
- Post qualification job swap and secondment opportunities

There is broad support for the concept of a foundation year across built environment courses although some respondents caution about potential logistical problems. Most assume Higher Education Institutes would deliver the course although there is limited support for it to be community based. Suggested accreditation bodies include Higher Education Institutes, CABE, ODPM + IdEA, local people and boards of public and private sector professionals.

Roles identified for the professional institutions included:

- Working in unison
- Defining core skills
- Shaping training to deliver the right skills for the future
- Accreditation
- Setting standards to ensure expertise is not lost
- Developing more market awareness to match research and development with market needs
- Being a window on the industry world wide
- Being a hunter gatherer of new techniques and technologies
- Collaborating to develop and provide relevant continuing professional development

Shortages in many profession and occupations were identified including:

- Architects
- Building surveyors
- Builders with conservation skills
- Civil engineer
- Conservation officers
- Construction trades
- Ecologists
- Electrical engineers
- Environmental engineers
- Environmental planners
- Flood risk assessors
- Highway engineers
- Housing professionals

- Landscape architects
- Mechanical engineers
- Planners
- Quantity surveyors
- Regeneration officers
- Skilled craft workers
- Transport planners
- Transport engineers

Some respondents were able to provide hard evidence of shortages although others relied on anecdote and personal experience. Many commented on the lack of availability of professionals of calibre

Reasons given for shortages fell into two categories; ones that might hamper the retention of qualified personnel and those that limited initial recruitment. Included in the first category were:

- Business cycles
- Frustration
- Lack of a career path
- Lack of job satisfaction
- Low morale and prestige
- Low salaries

In the second:

- Government policy on higher education fees
- Strength of competition for good graduates
- Poor image
- Low salaries
- Ignorance of the opportunities available in built environment careers.

Suggestions for addressing the shortages included:

- Reviewing government policy on higher education
- Better salaries
- Widespread adoption of the Respect for People toolkit
- Development of existing staff
- Making the built environment attractive to potential recruits
- Raising awareness in schools
- Encouraging entrants to under- and post-graduate courses
- Supporting the employment of trainees
- Providing work experience and mentoring
- Reviewing skill needs in the light of the government's new skills strategy with the lead taken by the appropriate Sector Skills Councils

Support for a re-branding exercise is mixed with many respondents concerned it may distract from core issues. There is a concern that the major problem facing the built environment professions is a lack of awareness suggesting 'branding' rather than 're-branding' is needed. It may be possible to learn lessons from the National Housing Federation's recent re-branding exercise, which re-launched the organisation as in Business for Neighbourhoods.

Many respondents consider that local authority elected members and officers also have been of the generic skills listed above. Other skills deemed in short supply are:

- Financial skills
- Understanding of the economics of development
- Understanding of the development process
- Self confidence
- Skills to work effectively with developers

Suggestions for improvement include:

- The inclusion of business management modules in professional courses

- Private sector placements
- Improved Continuing Professional Development
- Joint public and private sector training sessions
- Job swaps
- Physical co-location of teams for the duration of a project

Elected members are considered unlikely to have the skills necessary to deliver the sustainable communities agenda. Officers lack finance, design and economic skills. Overall the local authority skills gap is seen, as so large that it need co-ordinated action following a pro-active lead by the government. Higher Education Institutes, Regional Centres of Excellence and Regional Architecture Centres could all be involved in delivering training and Continuing Professional Development.

Many respondents were emphatic that the professions listed are indeed core to the delivery of the sustainable communities agenda and their training needs could not be considered in isolation. Suggestions included joint training sessions to promote interdisciplinary learning and understanding, information sharing and the creation of web based teaching tools. Others have found it difficult to engage with these groups.

There is overwhelming support for elected members - particularly those who serve on planning committees - to be offered training in delivering the sustainable communities' agenda. Many consider this training should be compulsory although some respondents question whether this would interfere with the democratic process.