

## PERSPECTIVES

### Achieving Balanced Communities: Challenges and Responses

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#### Introduction

Faced with a collapse of housing investment and unachievable development objectives, public organisations like England's new Homes and Communities Agency will have to rethink priorities, and reconsider what building sustainable communities is really all about. Some will question whether the idea of mixed communities was ever feasible, while others will be arguing that other goals, such as tackling climate change or economic decline are far more pressing. It is therefore going to be more important than ever to show that we not only know how to build good houses but also neighbourhoods that will stand the test of time, and where people from different backgrounds can live in harmony. If we fail, we may lose all confidence in our capacity to manage change, and the trends towards polarisation and break-down will win out. It is therefore timely to review recent British experience in developing places where people from different social backgrounds can live together

in harmony, as well as contrasting the situation with European experience, which seems much more successful.

To meet the need for some practical guidance, English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation commissioned URBED (Urban and Economic Development) to draw up a good practice guide that could be used for staff training. Working with experts from the University of Westminster (Nick Bailey and Tony Manzi), who had already produced reports on mixed communities for the Chartered Institute of Housing, we started by summarising the extensive literature, which raised a number of serious challenges for making mixed communities work. URBED then interviewed experts, and six path-setting schemes were written up as case studies.<sup>1</sup> We also asked PRP, a leading social housing architectural practice, to pull together advice on service charges, drawing in particular on the experience of Notting Hill Housing Association.

We found planners and private developers as well as social housing providers need help in tackling the management issues involved with mixed communities. Too often the issues are left to the last moment, as soft issues carry less weight than hard issues, such as access roads

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<sup>1</sup> Caterham Village Surrey; Craigmillar Edinburgh; Hulme Manchester; Greenwich Millennium Village London; New Gorbals Glasgow; and Park Central Birmingham.

and drains. Occupants then move in without any idea of how much the service charge will be, how communal areas are to be maintained, or what kinds of people are going to be their neighbours. This leads to social tensions and at its worst, regeneration schemes follow their predecessors, and end up as 'ghettoes', despite the original intentions of enabling different types of people to live together.

This summary of the research findings and guidance starts by reviewing the challenges for mixed communities. It then draws lessons from the case studies of good practice. Finally it suggests what needs to be done in a situation where house-building is collapsing, and where difficult investment choices have to be made.<sup>2</sup>

## Why management matters

Though there is evidence, for example from research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to show mixed communities can work once they have settled down, there are also plenty of problems that need to be solved, particularly in the early days.<sup>3</sup> Even relative success stories like the new town of Milton Keynes went through a pe-

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<sup>2</sup> The full draft good practice guide, literature review and case studies can be accessed on URBED's web site [www.urbed.co.uk](http://www.urbed.co.uk). Comments would be welcomed, as well as requests to reuse any of the material.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Nick Bailey et al Creating and maintaining mixed income communities: a good practice guide, JRF 2006

riod that the press called 'New Town blues' and similar feelings of 'grief' have been documented recently in the new community of Cambourne, just outside Cambridge.<sup>4</sup> Even where the new housing replaces unpopular Council estates, the social challenges are every bit as complex as the physical ones. Lynne Hanley, in her personal account of living on *Estates*, talks about the need to break down the 'walls' that make Council tenants feel worse about themselves.<sup>5</sup> Yet she grew up at a time when most men living in social housing went out to work.

Planners now have to address 'residualisation' where those at the top of the list for social housing are often single parent families that are workless and vulnerable, and therefore find it hard to cope with living in a new settlement without proper support. At the same time the number of one person households doubled from 3 to 7 million between 1971 and 2005, and many of these end up renting flats bought from 'buy to let' investors in new settlements, or are likely to go for shared ownership because they cannot afford to compete in the wider housing market.

Because neighbours in new communities often have little in common, what is called 'bridging

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Platt's research into the experience of Cambourne can be accessed on the Inspire East web site.

<sup>5</sup> Lynne Hanley, *Estates: an intimate history*, Granta Books 2007

social capital' is needed to create links across social groups and neighbourhoods, and this has to be paid for somehow. The 'well-integrated mix' called for in former Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's Sustainable Communities Plan requires careful planning to rebalance neighbourhoods if extremes are to be avoided, as well as management plans to ensure that some kind of balance is maintained over time.

Building mixed communities that work requires all the stakeholders to behave differently and often nothing less than a 'step change' is called for. Of course there are some good examples in the UK, for example in Newcastle and Gateshead, of setting up partnerships in which different agencies collaborate in managing a regeneration programme. But comparative case studies show that Britain lags behind other European countries in devolving powers to local authorities, and in working together for the common good.<sup>6</sup> The UK now needs to learn from countries such as the Netherlands and in Scandinavia that have built much more social and rented housing and achieved more sustainable outcomes without excessive house price inflation. The outcomes have created safe and attractive places with social infrastructure within walking and cycling distance, which helps to produce

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6 Regeneration in European Cities: making connections, URBED for JRF 2008 [www.urbed.co.uk](http://www.urbed.co.uk)

much happier children as well as keeping travel and energy consumption down.<sup>7</sup>

As the qualities of leadership and project management required are still rare within local authorities, according to the Egan Review<sup>8</sup>, support is needed from national public agencies to achieve the changes in behaviour required. These can include allocating time for training, and joining networks, and study tours to look and learn from places that work, rather than just relying on published guidance. Achieving the benefits of a balanced community requires more than just providing a few community facilities or a community development worker. Coordinated action needs to be written into management plans that carry weight long after long after the initial developers and designers have passed on at three different spatial levels:

- **domestic**, for example ensuring that people get on with their neighbours and do not produce excessive noise or waste
- **communal**, for example providing spaces where people can meet for informal interaction and where children can play unsupervised

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7 Beyond Ecotowns, PRP Design for Homes and URBED. 2008, [www.urbed.co.uk](http://www.urbed.co.uk)

8 The Egan Review of the skills needed to implement the Sustainable Communities Plan led to the formation of the Academy for Sustainable Communities (reborn as the Homes and Communities Academy) and a number of Regional Centres of Excellence.

- and at the **neighbourhood** levels, which includes support systems for those with social needs and transport to access jobs and other opportunities.

Issues of management or governance are often treated in ideological terms, such as securing accountability, whereas the form of management ought to match the situation and what members of the community actually want. Our case studies were carefully selected to cover different types of places and different types of manage-

ment. Thus an asset endowed development trust can work well in a relatively well-off place like Caterham Village in Surrey, but would be harder to establish where development values are low and middle class families are in a minority. By contrast in areas with high levels of deprivation, such as Hulme Manchester, on the spot neighbourhood management is required to bring together social, education and environmental services, which makes local authority involvement essential. The differences in management tasks are brought out in the boxes below.

#### Box 1: **Neighbourhood and estate renewal e.g. Attwood Green, Central Birmingham (now called Park Central)**

- decanting and re-housing existing tenants while redevelopment is under way
- working with community organisations to build self-confidence and employability
- allocating new housing to those who will benefit most
- attracting higher income families to live in the neighbourhood
- generating a positive new image for a once failed area
- dealing with the needs of households on low incomes, and vulnerable groups, including older people
- managing communal spaces to higher standards
- setting up effective neighbourhood management
- establishing local area agreements

### Box 2: **Area regeneration e.g. Hulme, Manchester**

- dealing with social problems that can blight an area, such as drug and alcohol abuse
- ensuring personal and property security providing the quality of services to encourage mobile groups to stay
- rebuilding the local economy and engaging the 'workless'
- promoting social and racial cohesion
- facilitating resident involvement and delegating decision-making
- involving 'hard-to-reach' groups, such as immigrants and those with poor language skills

### Box 3: **Brown-field development e.g. Greenwich Millennium Village, London**

- dealing with contaminated land
- relocating non-conforming uses
- stimulating demand, for example through natural features such as water or historic buildings
- upgrading transport links
- creating a forum for involving people who want to live in the new community
- developing social infrastructure to support a growing community
- managing a public realm which may include strategic open space e.g. waterfronts
- creating mutual benefits and positive connections between the new and existing communities
- dealing with the needs of households on low incomes, including young families
- considering flexible uses of property including concepts such as 'Lifetime Homes'

#### Box 4: Green-field development/urban extensions e.g. Northstowe new town, near Cambridge

- responding to local objections to new housing
- providing social infrastructure at the right time
- building local authority capacity to handle major schemes
- creating positive interaction between the new and existing communities
- implementing new environmental technologies e.g. Combined Heat and Power (CHP)
- encouraging environmentally conscious behaviour e.g. reducing car use
- establishing development trusts and other vehicles for community ownership

It can be daunting to realise how many different tasks are involved in developing a balanced community (which is why the good practice guide sets out a series of choices or decisions which could be made sequentially). It is also hard to set enough money aside for developing social capital in the face of demands to fund the hard infrastructure. However developing social capital needs to be seen as an investment that adds value, not as an optional extra. Its value can be monitored through the take-up of housing and customer attitude surveys, as well as through indicators such as turnover, property values, and even demands on local health services.

#### What leads to success?

We identified four principles that are in line with the Egan Review of skills, and which lead to long-term success, along with a number of proven tools that can be applied, which are set out with examples in the draft good practice guide, the glossary alone contains over a hundred different terms! However, good management should not just be seen as a 'tick box' exercise. Management in place-making depends on leadership in setting priorities, then breaking complex objectives down into manageable tasks, picking the right tool for the job, and monitoring outcomes. Below are some examples from the case studies to illustrate the principles and some of the available tools.

### ✓ *Fair for everyone and well-served*

Problems soon arise when residents in different tenures feel they are being unfairly treated. Higher density schemes that require lifts and entrance halls inevitably call for maintenance and disputes over who should pay for what. The problems can be minimised by engaging with communities from the start, funding social infrastructure through an agreed strategic plan, using choice based lettings as in the Netherlands (not simply allocating social housing according to some form of points), and giving everyone a stake. Our case studies involved tools such as the community trust at Caterham Barracks turning an old chapel into a children's play centre as an interim use that helped build bridges between the new and the existing communities. In Park Central in Birmingham, an estate renewal project, there is a time limited equity scheme for first time buyers. Hulme's housing association gives priority to people with local or economic connections.

### ✓ *A mixed and integrated community*

One of the best ways of making mixed communities work is to ensure that the schools act as 'community hubs' so that children grow up with a wider range of role models. Masterplans and development briefs showed that each phase of a development has an appropriate tenure

mix. Local Lettings Plans then showed that the principles and original vision to ensure long-term stability are maintained. They should feedback into the design so that there is a sufficient range of size and types of unit to allow people to move within a neighbourhood when their needs and circumstances change. We discovered that in Greenwich Millennium Village problems arose when people moved in who did not understand that for example, cars were supposed to be parked on the edge, and when too few larger homes were built, those with growing families are forced to move out. Good linkages to local jobs and services are always vital, and residents in Caterham are given a bus pass funded through the service charge to get them used to using public transport, which is an excellent way of creating a sense of community. Covenants on the land or their equivalent can be used to ensure standards of behaviour are maintained, with the same standards applying to everyone (and Community Land Trusts can help ensure that covenants are passed on as residents change).

### ✓ *Clean green and safe*

Places often fail because the public realm – the spaces between buildings – is neglected, and 'broken windows' or graffiti quickly multiply. Supercaretakers are being employed in some places to fix problems quickly, and the Optima Housing

Association at Park Central in Birmingham has set up its own maintenance organisation which covers the whole estate. Having lots of children facilities for different ages is crucial. UNICEF found that children are happier in countries such as the Netherlands; and in part this could be because the communal facilities are surrounded by buildings rather than being isolated on the edge. As a result children learn to socialise from an early age. A number of British schemes are starting to use environmental trusts to look after larger areas of public space and these tend to be better than local authorities in involving different parts of the community in voluntary work. Smarter forms of parking in communal areas or on the street can be combined with measures to encourage walking and cycling so that cars do not predominate. Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems are a great way of not only minimising water run-off but also creating places that are a pleasure to walk around. Vauban and Rieselfeld in Freiburg provide some of the best models, and examples like Upton in Northants show that the principles can be replicated but also that it is difficult to agree who is responsible for maintenance.

### ✓ *Responsive ongoing management*

The best communities are built together, and this requires some way of funding the ongoing costs. The extra costs involved in high density development can create a further poverty trap, due to the costs of maintaining lifts and entrance halls. These are most easily resolved by allocating houses to needy families, and using the flats for those with higher incomes (as in the Park Central scheme in Birmingham where all share the use of a fine communal park). Allocation Agreements, as for example in Craigmillar in Edinburgh, and a policy of 'sensitive lettings' avoid people with conflicting lifestyles having to live as neighbours. Extra support needs to be provided for those that need it, such as those with a problem of drug dependency, and this should be built into the management plan, not argued over after problems have arisen. New models such as Commonhold Associations, Community Land Trusts and Cohousing are starting to be used to build a sense of community and ensure places do not deteriorate for lack of care and maintenance. Some inspiration can be drawn from the lasting success of communities like Letchworth Garden City or the post-war Span estates. Again we have a long way to go to match common practice on the Continent, where it is much more common to live in rented property with professional landlords.



## What can be done?

The Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse is quoted as saying *'Accomplish the great task by a series of small acts'* Risks can be minimised through advance planning, and there are four areas where action upfront should make subsequent developments much easier:

### 1. Meaningful partnership agreements

Experts we consulted consider that success in achieving balanced communities is largely down to a strong framework established from the outset. Conflicts can be minimised by setting up the right arrangements early on, such as clustering social housing and agreeing a management plan, or using trusts to avoid house-owners opting out of the leasehold enfranchisement. Partnership agreements should also ensure that social infrastructure such as schools are phased to match and support the development of housing. Local authorities will need to play a much more proactive role in future, including making investments and not assuming that everything they want can be secured through Section 106 obligations.

### 2. Creative community involvement

Community activists we consulted feel strongly that community involvement is about far more than holding occasional meetings between the developers and a few of the residents. Market surveys and housing capacity studies at the start help identify the kinds of people who are going to be moving in, and create an initial forum. Charters and development frameworks can draw in people with an interest in the results (rather than just those living locally who are often against change). These are likely to become the pioneers to set up the initial community facilities long before there is sufficient demand to support commercial endeavours such as pubs or shops. Local project offices with large models of what the scheme will eventually look like (as in Dutch schemes we have studied) also provide the space for residents' forums to meet and establish the human contacts that are so important. So too can development trusts and in some cases community councils. An important area for innovation is through cohousing and the involvement of different forms of housing cooperatives. These are used much more extensively in other European countries, and the success of Vauban and Rieselfeld in Freiburg is in part due to the fact that as

much as a third of the housing was commissioned by the eventual occupants, who also took on responsibility for the communal areas.<sup>9</sup> Catering for a wider range of tenures helps speed up the development and occupation processes.

### 3. Quality housing management

The social profile and some of the demands on estate management can be influenced by nomination agreements and charters but there is still a need to fund and control maintenance costs. There is a strong case for common maintenance of the communal areas, as in Park Central, and housing associations often do the job better and cheaper than private companies. The responsibilities need to be sorted out before the first occupant moves in, and in the case of regeneration areas, the local authority needs to take on the ongoing responsibility of maintaining standards to avoid the place declining when development is completed. In Europe, systems for waste storage and collection and local energy supply, as in Hammarby Sjostad, make new settlements much more attractive

places to live.<sup>10</sup> The early housing associations relied on intensive housing management to raise standards of behaviour, (and in the case of Hampstead Garden Suburb failure to keep the hedges cut could lead to eviction!). With the breakdown of traditional communities, something similar may be called for today if only to stop the behaviour of a few individuals causing a whole neighbourhood to suffer.

### 4. Active neighbourhood management

Where new housing is in locations where jobs are in short supply and deprivation is commonplace, much more effort must be put into community development and training with personal development programmes that address the roots of worklessness, which include low self-esteem and a sense of powerlessness. A common complaint is that housing schemes feel dead most of the time because there is no-one in the streets, and here the design and management of facilities such as schools and shops becomes vital so that those with time on their hands do not sink into depression. The experience of innovative projects such as Greenwich

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9 The Showcase web site provided by the Housing and Communities Agency features case studies of Freiburg and Amersfoort.

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10 Dutch settlements offer good models, see Beyond Ecotowns, but probably the most inspiring example is Hammarby Sjostad on the edge of Stockholm, which is the subject of a film produced by Design for Homes [www.designforhomes.co.uk](http://www.designforhomes.co.uk)

Millennium Village show this involves much more than simply designing and building social infrastructure early on, as running an extended school places extra demands on the school's staff. In the UK, management (and local finance) have tended to be poor relations of planning and design. They should be seen as equal partner, which would add more value than it costs.

## Conclusions

The field of housing and development is always changing. The current financial crisis will force compromises to be made, which could lead to making the same kinds of mistakes the UK made with system built housing and tower blocks that had to be pulled down before they ever paid their way, as in Hulme in Manchester. Yet the crisis could also lead to breakthroughs, particularly if we built new settlements that not only work as well as neighbourhoods, but carries a premium because they offer families a better quality of life (which is where the original New Towns scored).

There are a number of messages for policy makers

- While the economic down-turn will intensify social tensions, the building of new communities in the right places offers one of the best ways of restarting the economy and making progress towards creating better and more sustainable neighbourhoods. A fundamental aim of the Housing and Communities Agency should be to intervene where the public sector can add most value, as it has both the powers and remit to combine social with physical actions.
- Progress depends on paying more attention to management than we have in the past. As

well as budgeting adequate amounts for investment in community development, ways must be found of funding the ongoing costs. Local authorities who are taking on the role of 'place-making' need to link this with efforts to establish neighbourhood management, and not rely on government initiatives, or Section 106 negotiations to fund short-term posts. This calls for innovation in how the uplift in land values from development and growth are tapped to provide incentives for local authorities (and Energy Supply Companies) to provide better services in the form of energy, waste and water so that overall new settlements offer better value for money than those they replace.

- Time and money needs to go into building capacity among all concerned so that we learn from previous experience, and avoid making the same old mistakes. We no longer have the resources to waste in inter-departmental disputes or planning disputes, and cannot depend on the private sector to do much more than build homes efficiently. Social housing providers are on the 'front line', and should be playing a leading role in managing service provision. They would be helped by a more determined effort to join up social and physical investment (for example through the use of Local and Multi Area Agreements and the

kinds of contractual arrangements that the French and the Dutch have pioneered.) Rather than over-dependence on centralised edits and guidance, we need to encourage the use of charters, protocols and concordats that enable people to 'look and learn together'<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> The Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth, which was shortlisted for a 2009 RTPI Award, provides a possible model for learning across sectoral boundaries. [www.cambridgeshirehoirzons.org.uk](http://www.cambridgeshirehoirzons.org.uk)

