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Sustainable Urban Competitiveness and Low Income Residential Development: Experience from Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Chair, Colleagues it is a great honour to be invited to speak at this conference. As we work towards a more sustainable future the topics that are being discussed are of real importance.

The topic I wish to speak to you is based upon my experience in Newcastle upon Tyne. First I will present the context for my speech. Second I will give a short history of the city. Third I will discuss a regeneration project in part of the city that has been successful in putting together Sustainable Urban Competitiveness and Low Income Residential Development.

Newcastle has won an award from Forum for the Future as the most sustainable city in the UK for the past two years. The award is made against criteria such as transport system, waste reduction, air-quality and so on. As a city we have tried to work within the context of sustainable development. However we have made many mistakes in the past. But we have learned from our mistakes and are now learning to do things differently. Urban regeneration is challenging and ensuring we do that within a sustainable development context is even more challenging. To do so we need to ensure that housing has high environmental standards and that regeneration promotes employment and social cohesion.

Sustainable development is a contested term and broadly can be interpreted in 2 ways; weak and strong. Most commentators suggest that the main approach to sustainability is weak; it is too focused on people and technology coupled with a general reluctance to change. I do not wholly support this notion. Whilst it can be argued that in some instances progress may not be as rapid as some may wish, there is clear evidence that many countries are doing things differently. The evidence includes a shift towards renewable technologies, higher environmental standards and global efforts to make agreements that favour Sustainable Development. It is increasingly common to see renewable energy technologies on housing as well as gray water recycling and composting. I do not underestimate the scale of the problems we face, but I do acknowledge the progress is being made.

Newcastle upon Tyne

Newcastle was founded in 1080. The City played a key role in the UK through its exploitation of coal resources and the development of an engineering sector based on the steam locomotive, shipbuilding and armaments. During the Industrial Revolution the city expanded rapidly along with its industrial base. However development was very haphazard and slum housing was a common feature of the era.

Following World War Two the city gradually de-industrialised and the scars of its past blighted many parts of the city. This was a period of increasing affluence that drove demand for better housing. The growing increase of personal transport, the motor-car, meant that housing developments could be located on the periphery of the city. Many poor people who could not afford to move remained in the inner-city and were often housed in sub-standard accommodation.

By the 1970s most of the industrial base of the city, particularly in the inner-west of the city and along the banks of the river Tyne, had closed. This left a legacy of unemployment; often many families were unemployed for 2 to 3 generations. Parts of the city became high crime areas. Many young people had low educational attainment. Though some attempts were made to improve housing conditions, these were often unsuccessful. Attempts at improving employment

opportunities for the inner-west of city were also unsuccessful. I will focus on this part of the city because though many parts of the city have prospered, some parts have been left behind.

Public funding for social housing is in limited supply in the UK; the financial crisis in Europe means that currently the situation is even more difficult and will be for some time. In the development boom of the 50s to 70s many housing initiatives were inappropriate. Standards were low but better than earlier terraced housing, though many terraces still remained. We cannot build our way out of the problem so a mixed strategy of new build and refurbishment is needed. However the amount of refurbishment work is being limited by the credit crisis both in the UK and EU.

New Deal for Communities (NDFC)

The NDFC operated in a specific part of the city that had some of the highest levels of deprivation in the UK. Some 4000 households in the inner west of the city were selected for the NDFC programme based on national indicators of deprivation. NDFC was established as a 10 year programme (2000-2010), much longer than previous regeneration programmes. It was also community focused – a very different approach from previous programmes.

The themes of the NDFC programme were Housing and Environment, Health, Education, Crime and Community Safety and Employment. For employment the NDFC worked closely with the Department of Work and Pensions to target support to the long term unemployed and to young people. Projects included giving grants for clothing, help with CVs and job searching, interview coaching and skills training. This was a multi-stakeholder approach. Some 1300 new jobs were created. A number of these were created as part of the housing refurbishment programme.

To tackle crime NDFC worked with the Police and established a New Deal Policing Team. The Police worked hard to establish trust with the NDFC community. The City Council worked to remove disruptive tenants and against a background of falling crime rates the area, which had a high population turn-over, began to stabilise. The combination of improved housing and targeted help for the unemployed started to turn this part of the city from being regarded as unsafe and unsavoury to an area that is regarded as increasingly vibrant.

The NDFC refurbishment programme improved some 2000 homes. Much of this work was targeted at fuel poor households (households are defined as being fuel poor if more than 10% of household income is spent on fuel). This is a problem for those on fixed incomes such as the elderly and those on state benefits. The types of initiatives include insulated schemes houses (many older terraced houses were not insulated) as space heating is largest component of energy bills. Our view was to do the easy things first, such as better doors and windows for draught proofing, cavity wall and loft insulation and low energy lights and appliances.

In terms of sustainability we decided to develop a legacy for the NDFC. We established a charity (Centre West) that purchased office space to provide an income and develop the Beacon. This is purpose built to the highest UK environmental standards. It comprises incubator units for entrepreneurs, office space, a community based radio station, artist workshops and a flexible large meeting space for large weddings, conferences, entertainment events and training facilities for young chefs. One project that is about to start is working with young people who are defined as NEETS (Not in Employment, Education or Training). This will use a multi-stakeholder approach such as the provision of social housing and furniture and appliances and a variety of support packages to help them into either training or work.

Concluding Remarks

We have made progress in the NDFC Newcastle but there is still a long way to go. We have found that a multi-stakeholder approach that works with communities is the most effective way of working. We have also found that by giving people responsibilities is a very effective way of building community cohesion. By ensuring that housing is of a good standard and the public realm is improved we have found that communities tend to stabilise. This has the knock-on effect of reducing crime and generally improving the vitality of an area. It is often hard work and at times considerable tension can be generated. But if political leaders are determined enough and stick with their beliefs then much can be achieved.

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