New Deal for Communities – improving the urban environment

Introduction

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP) study into the effect of urban areas on the environment provides the potential to express trends and highlight some of the actions already in place. The study has attracted a lot of attention from within Government.

The NDC Network (the umbrella organisation for the 39 New Deal for Communities programmes) and John Twitchen Communications have teamed up to undertake a headline survey of the 39 New Deal for Communities (NDC) regeneration projects located across the country. NDCs are a key programme in the Government's strategy to tackle multiple deprivation in the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, giving some of our poorest communities the resources to tackle their problems in an intensive and co-ordinated way. The aim is to bridge the gap between these neighbourhoods and the rest of England.

One of the five core work themes of NDCs is the physical environment, together with employment, health, crime and education. NDCs are community-led bodies with a brief to explore creative solutions to regeneration, and much of their work is cross-cutting in its nature. £2 billion will be invested over 10 years in each of these programmes. This programme of investment started in 1999/2000 so most NDC partnerships are now half way through their programme.

Whilst the Government take on the RCEP's study will look at how policies are cascading, the NDC view is very clearly looking up at the cascading policies under the “cleaner, safer, greener” agenda. NDCs often consider how cross-cutting can deliver several targets or policies in one project and do so more effectively.

A number of Government policies benefit from cross-cutting and lateral application. Two examples include: Decent Homes targets, fuel poverty initiatives and improving domestic energy efficiency; and reducing litter and fly-tipping, increasing recycling and reuse and providing opportunities for local economic development.

NDCs are undoubtedly undertaking many projects of a cross-cutting nature to improve the urban environment and show the way to other areas not benefiting from NDC investment. Collating and communicating these projects enables other NDCs and non-NDCs to consider how their actions could further benefit both the environment and wider socio-economic considerations over the short and the longer term, notably the way in which the actions delivered provide a positive long-term legacy for the local environment and local people.

With current UK housing policy likely to drive even greater levels of urbanisation and a wider spread of higher population densities, important lessons must be learnt both from the past and current actions, to ensure the environment of urban, fringe and rural areas is protected and serves to benefit everyone. The current work programmes being developed and delivered by NDCs across the country should serve to highlight some of the opportunities that are available, when the approach of problem solving is adopted rather than a silo mentality to policy implementation.

Background to the survey

The headline survey has highlighted a number of projects that offer a different perspective to the RCEP in terms of meeting challenges, implementing policies and targets and delivering sustainable development at grass roots level.

Of all the NDCs, 26% responded with details of projects and programmes addressing the urban environment and broader cross-cutting themes such as health and wellbeing and community safety. The survey was conducted by means of a mailshot to every NDC. Results could be returned either in hard copy format by fax or post, or by means of an automated internet-based survey system. We are also aware of other initiatives carried out by other
NDCs that did not respond to the survey, and have incorporated some of these in the examples below.

The survey posed a series of options to spark NDC officers to provide information on local projects that might be of interest to the RCEP.

Survey results

All of the NDCs that responded reported work of a cross-cutting nature that addressed two or more of the three cleaner, safer and greener elements.

- 50% of respondents were tackling fuel poverty through various energy efficiency support schemes.
- Two thirds were incorporating energy schemes into new buildings, variously consisting of housing schemes and other public infrastructure such as schools or libraries.
- Not surprisingly, all respondents reported undertaking projects that green the local environment, however delivery mechanisms varied and allowed for other aspects to be delivered concurrently.

Examples

Supporting information gathered as part of the headline survey reveals more detail on the nature and extent of how NDCs are making use of their ability to cut across different policy areas in order to improve the local environment.

- Heywood in Rochdale expects to meet its Decent Homes targets for energy efficiency measures three years ahead of target by tackling fuel poverty through the local arms-length housing management organisation and through a private sector renewal project.
- Braunstone in Leicester’s “Solar Streets” programme is the largest domestic photovoltaics project of its kind in the UK to date, benefiting householders and the wider community, and incorporating a “green roof” into the design of a local library.
- Tower Hamlets Ocean NDC’s “Social Entrepreneurs” programme upskills local people with entrepreneurial skills; one of the four local business start-ups which has resulted produces furniture from reclaimed timber.
- Preston Road NDC has reduced fuel poverty through installing energy efficiency measures, including how to reduce fuel bills and maximise household income. Furthermore, the NDC practices what it preaches by ensuring energy efficiency measures are incorporated into all of its buildings.
- East Manchester NDC is incorporating various renewables and energy efficiency schemes into improvement plans, and has engaged local schools in a competition to invent a recycling scheme for plastic cups generated from events held at the Manchester City FC stadium.
- Devonport NDC near Plymouth delivered the Self Build Project based in the Science Garden of a local education centre. This project took a group of local young people who were in danger of being excluded from school and, working with staff and a local architect, the young people designed and built an environmentally friendly classroom. The classroom is powered by a wind turbine, with a turf roof and other green aspects.
- Devonport also ensures that all of its refurbishment and new build projects exceed minimum standards for energy efficiency and Decent Homes. And they recently completed a small housing scheme located on an old Barracks site, salvaging the demolished limestone/granite and incorporating it into the 24 new homes built.
- The Heathershaw and Fitton Hill NDC provides a dedicated officer to work with residents, schools and businesses to develop sustainable solutions to environmental problems such as littering, fly tipping, dog fouling, vandalism and graffiti.
- The same NDC also has a number of initiatives that aim to increase walking and cycling as part of a health initiative and links these projects to improvements to local parks and installation of new footpaths and cycleways.
• EC1 New Deal in Islington is funding the implementation of a “green roof” project on one of its estates that will turn the concrete and barren roof of underground garages into a garden and amenity area. As part of the project, residents are considering how an in-vessel composter might be incorporated into the scheme, to take residents’ kitchen waste and green grounds waste and turn it into compost for use locally; the potential for setting up a local business to run the scheme is also being considered.

• EC1 is also in the process of collating an “Estates Waste Inventory” that has evaluated the current state of waste and recycling services across the area; the Inventory has identified a number of opportunities to implement pilots that aim to significantly increase the amount of recycling collected from residents, and includes the in-vessel composting site noted above.

• The Clapham Park NDC in Lambeth has recently introduced a new recycling service to residents on its estates, to address issues of service inequality and reduce the problems associated with overflowing bins such as smell, mess and vermin.

There are several other excellent initiatives that the RCEP might find of interest, notably Leicester’s “Green Doctor” initiative.

Conclusions

This initial survey, inspired by both the RCEP study on the urban environment and by some very interesting examples of cross-cutting projects that we were aware of, shows there are a large number of practical programmes which strive to deliver a series of outcomes that benefit local people and contribute towards improving the local environment.

These projects contribute in no small way to reducing the impact of the urban environment on climate change and other headline indicators of sustainability through reducing resource consumption, whilst at the same time assisting in cutting crime, improving health, reducing inequalities in access to services and improving liveability.

This headline survey has enabled us to set out the wide range of initiatives that might be considered by the RCEP as useful in its study on the urban environment. There are two important steps that we would be pleased to discuss further with the RCEP:

• firstly, that the results will be taken back to the NDC Network to consider how best to cascade the information that has been gathered, and how some of the excellent projects delivered by NDCs could be made even better by considering further cross-cutting, and perhaps identifying further examples; and

• secondly, whether there is scope for further research and the compilation of a report that might provide more detailed input to the RCEP study and the NDC Network, that quantifies the contribution being made by NDCs and other similar organisations.

On behalf of the NDC Network, The Campaign Company (who provide the Secretariat to the NDC Network) and John Twitchen Communications would be pleased to meet with the RCEP to discuss how this short report and the initiatives being undertaken by NDCs across the country might be assessed further and quantified in respect of their overall contribution towards improving the urban environment and meeting sustainable development objectives, and how these lessons might be applied to other aspects of Government policy.

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