

Sustainable communities: an attainable goal?



The need for action on multiple fronts

Sustainable communities should be safe and inclusive, be well planned, built and run, and offer equality and opportunity for all. However, there is no “one size fits all” solution.

Inside we outline the challenges faced by local authorities and the solutions offered by SQW Consulting.

The challenge

Local government and its partnerships are pivotal to the sustainable communities agenda. As set out by government, the aspiration is that sustainable communities should be safe and inclusive; be well planned, built and run; and offer equality and opportunity for all. But there is no “one size fits all” solution and – with the acute economic down-turn – the challenges in striving towards the aspiration of sustainable communities have multiplied.

Housing presents a particular set of issues.

Six months ago, there were real concerns that the housing growth agenda and the increasing demand for growth-related infrastructure presented conflicting demands in and for local communities. Now – as building has slowed right down – the growing concern is how, in practice, housing supply shortages will be addressed and infrastructure requirements funded: in the immediate term, developers are largely not in a position to pay. All of this is affecting the delivery of affordable as well as market housing.

A further overarching concern is **climate change**, with its many implications at a local level. There are clear links here into the housing agenda and specifically, how both new and existing stock can be made to perform better in environmental terms. All local authorities face this challenge, but it has assumed a particular profile in relation to thinking about eco-towns – a concept that could, potentially, offer the scope for genuinely carbon neutral settlements. Another critical facet of the climate change challenge relates to the management of flood risk; again this is a growing issue everywhere, but it bites particularly hard in coastal communities where very difficult decisions will need to be made about coastal defences and where local governance will face particular challenges.

With the economic downturn, **unemployment has – in large parts of the UK – re-emerged as a major concern for the first time in a generation.** As the number of redundancies

spiral, the challenge will be to generate jobs and then match jobs to workers. However, sight must not be lost of those affected by long-term worklessness. Encouraging active economic participation among this group is very difficult, taking time and resource, and there are far quicker wins to be had elsewhere. In working towards genuinely sustainable communities, the deep-seated challenge of inter-generational worklessness needs to remain a priority.

Where do local authorities fit in?

Local authorities have a lead role in advancing many aspects of the sustainable communities agenda and more generally – as the Lyons Report named it – “place shaping”. At the highest level, this includes leadership roles in relation to Local Strategic Partnerships and through the preparation of Sustainable Communities Strategies, Local Development Frameworks and Local Area Agreements. But it also includes delivery responsibilities including:

- the provision of decent homes
- creating access to employment
- protecting the environment
- regenerating community spirit.

Local authorities play a pivotal role – providing democratic legitimacy and accountability in their efforts to pull together all stakeholders who have a vested and legitimate interest in making communities work, to create the conditions that will underpin sustainable communities. The local leadership of councils is key to thriving economies, decent homes, good transport links and environments free of crime and anti-social behaviour.

It is a complex and challenging agenda with real tensions for which many of the answers have to be local and to which a myriad of stakeholders need to contribute.



Examples of experience

Local Government Association – Using fiscal incentives to reduce household and business carbon emissions: we explored the potential for fiscal incentives at local authority scale to reduce household and business carbon emissions.

Nottingham City Council and One Nottingham - Tackling Deprivation: A City Study and Strategy Development: we mapped the nature and extent of multiple deprivation to make recommendations for improvements to the city's approach. SQW has since supported One Nottingham and the City Council in preparing a full "State of the City" report and a new vision for the city. We co-ordinated the preparation of a ten-year Sustainable Community Strategy.

West Midlands Regional Assembly / Advantage West Midlands: the causes and character of sustainable rural communities: we researched eight dimensions of sustainability for rural communities, and our findings informed revisions to the regional spatial strategy and supported the implementation of the regional economic strategy.

East of England Development Agency – Modelling the implications of the new regional Economic Strategy in terms of emissions of carbon dioxide: we worked with Cambridge Econometrics to develop and model policy options that could impact on the resource use and carbon emissions associated with various growth scenarios.

North West Development Agency – Environmental considerations in achieving sustainable economic growth: we assessed the environmental resource (natural and manmade) in the North West region and identified how it could help to deliver regional economic development objectives.

South East England Development Agency and Arun District Council - Eco-Town at Ford: we were commissioned to examine the potential economic impacts arising from the proposed new eco-town at Ford in West Sussex.

Our services and expertise

Our services and expertise include the following:

- community regeneration, particularly at a neighbourhood level
- policy and practice linked to worklessness
- the analysis and delivery of housing and affordable housing
- environmental dimensions of economic development, e.g. advice on low carbon growth and mitigating and adapting to climate change
- valuing the environment and economic impact studies, e.g. impacts of new roads, buildings, air routes, cycle infrastructure, landscapes and national parks
- improving public services, e.g. sustainable procurement, developing regional or local sustainable development frameworks, mainstreaming sustainable development

Our clients

Our clients include the following:

- county, district and unitary councils and their partnerships, and their regional representative bodies
- Improvement and Development Agency
- Local Government Association
- Whitehall Departments, including CLG, BERR, DCSF, DIUS, DWP and DEFRA
- devolved administrations
- Regional Development Agencies
- Homes and Communities Agency and predecessor bodies
- funding bodies
- Sector Skills Councils

About SQW Consulting

SQW Consulting is a leading independent consultancy in the area of sustainable economic and social development. Founded in Cambridge in 1983 by Nick Segal, Roger Quince and Bill Wicksteed, the firm now employs over 80 staff at its offices in Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leeds, London and Manchester.

Our consultants bring extensive experience to their assignments, with backgrounds in academia, national and local government, industry, and development agencies. In all of our work we employ the principles of rigorous analysis, collaborative working, commitment to quality and independence of thought.

We have a strong track record of analytical research across the various tiers of government and governance. The firm's geographic spread of experience across the UK and beyond, and our ability to join up between tiers / sectors, give us a unique market position. We have strong collaborative relationships and can complement our own specialist skills by drawing on a network of collaborators and associates.

We offer flexible and multi-disciplinary support, drawing on experience and expertise from across the firm. Whilst always providing a perspective that is rigorous and independent, we also work closely with our clients, recognising that they and their partners will be responsible for taking forward the analyses, strategies, and action plans that we have catalysed. Engagement is key to the way we work, as is our commitment to sharing and transferring knowledge and learning.

SQW Group

SQW Consulting is part of SQW Group. Other divisions include: SQW Asia, which provides consultancy services to government organisations in Hong Kong and China and foreign firms investing in China; SQW Energy, which provides consultancy services in energy and carbon management; and Oxford Innovation, which manages innovation centres and investment networks. For more information: www.sqwgroup.com.

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