

## **creating : communities conference 20/21 October 2005.**

### **Workshop M – Sustainable Economic Development**

The focus of the workshop was to be a review of the shift in emphasis of sustainability appraisals, in the light of the European Union Directive on strategic environmental assessment (SEA) and the new framework for sustainability published by DEFRA. Whilst some attention was paid to this, there was much more general discussion about what is meant by “sustainable” and how we respect and consider the concept in our work.

In terms of gaining a typical view on issues, this group (11 with 2 facilitators) would not be considered large enough, but with a demographic breakdown of 6 men and 5 women, representing 2 private sector organisations, 2 local community partnerships, 2 regional organisations and 5 local authorities (1 Unitary, 2 County and 2 District level) there was a fair mix present.

We sought comment on what came to people’s minds when the words “sustainable economic development” are mentioned. It was felt that, for many, these words make people “switch off”, because as an expression it is bandied about so much without a great deal of thought being given to what it actually means. Sustainability is becoming the latest buzz word, being used as an adjective all over the place. It will, of course, mean different things to different people, with many believing that it is what everyone used to know and do – using common sense and not being too greedy; buying things that last, for example. For some, it implies that there are things wrong with an area that can be improved with a different approach and that it can deny growth, although this brought debate about a need to uncouple the concept of growth from extra resource use. Generally the view was that sustainable economic development took a forward looking approach, looking at the whole picture and taking care to see what impact development will have in the future. We agreed that it doesn’t just mean ‘financial sustainability’; for many economic development practitioners in the past (and now?) they actually meant viability when they talked about sustainability. It is a lot wider. We liked the phrase “We borrow the world from our children, not inherit it from our parents”.

Before reviewing the 5 principles outlined in the New Framework for Sustainable Development, we looked at how familiar we were with the new framework and the SEA. Whilst 6 were aware of/had some familiarity with its implications, only 2 had used it, with 2 having only heard of it and 1 being brave enough to ask, “what is it?” This gave a context to the discussion about some of the 5 principles.

There was consensus that these are an improvement on what was there before. It was felt that the previous aim of “maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment” was actually contradictory, and that the approach of “building a strong, stable and sustainable economy” was an improvement. Quite frequently during discussion an issue raised within the context of one principle was covered by the content of another.

It was agreed that the content of the principle “Achieving a sustainable community” was critical, because behaviour will only change with rewards or costs. Many people do not actually want to live, or care about living, within

environmental limits. The fear and emotion raised as a result of the recent storms in the Gulf of Mexico, however, have brought more focus on sustainability issues than many programmes and projects.

We felt that there is a tension between the belief in the importance of sustainability, of looking after the environment, and what can actually be done. Some issues are felt to be too big, even for governments, to deal with and they thus leave people wondering about how to engage with the process. Most will recycle these days, but with time running out on e.g. the resource of fossil fuels, we felt that there were going to have to be huge changes in the way we act as individuals and in our professional lives within the next 5 to 10 years. To this end, the new framework will be supportive.

However, we had some concerns about our ability to “enact” these principles. The fundamental concerns we had were:

1. Will the new framework, and the SEA, be applied sensibly? Building on flood plains, for instance, was obviously not sustainable but, until recently and the attention of insurance companies, such development was commonplace. Will those involved in spatial planning take heed of this, or bow to commercial pressures?
2. How does “good governance” become promoted? Sustainable (economic) development tends only to become “real” when it impacts directly on you/your organisation etc.. Engaging creativity is not just for people but also for businesses – as part of society they too can have a role to play. Whilst appreciating that every situation will be different, it was felt that considerable thought needs to be given to the depth and breadth of engaging with the community on sustainability.
3. Where will we source the scientific evidence that will be needed? With all 5 principles to be respected, many of us will need to obtain “strong scientific evidence” to support our proposals. Are these skills available and would we know what evidence is sound and what is not?

This leads to 3 questions to put to the IED (who wrote the review article on the new framework) and to creating : excellence, reflecting the 3 concerns above:

1. how will we create greater awareness of the new emphasis in the guidance on sustainable economic development, or indeed going further and instigate training events?
2. how will we create better ways of engaging public (including business) involvement in policy and plan making and sustainability issues?
3. how will we establish registers of relevant sources of “scientific evidence” and, if needed, encourage further such skills development? Also, should not those involved in “creating communities” be made more aware of the types of skills needed?

Neil Robertson and Stephen Hewitt, workshop facilitators