

Local authorities lead the sustainable design march

Innovations like design centres and business improvement districts are helping local authorities move out of the shadows and into the forefront of sustainable communities policy, argue **Paul O'Brien** and **Mo Baines**

Not so long ago the planners and accountants in local government were 'inspired' to create low cost social housing with walkways in the sky as the answer to modern redevelopment after the slum clearance programmes of the 1950s and 60s.

The error of their ways has not gone unrecognised with a new era of urban regeneration now a key political priority for all the major parties. Sustainability and cleaner, greener spaces is no longer the preserve of a vociferous minority of middle class 'green' voters.

Local authorities are now being recognised for their role in developing sustainable communities. Many have been supported in their endeavours by architectural design centres.

The centres are a relatively new concept in the UK compared with European cities, where they were established in the late eighties and early nineties. However, in the last decade the UK has seen a growth of design centres. All share two key aims: to improve the quality of the designed and built environment and to increase public knowledge, understanding of, and involvement in the designed and built environment. So where do they sit with local authorities?

The design centres can prove an invaluable source of support in delivering key government policies at a local level. Engaging with the local authority through planners, developers, decision makers and architects, the centres provide a sharing of best practice as well as practical support in designing the built environment and enhancing public open spaces on a sustainable basis.

Designing into developments things like anti-crime initiatives and leading on design competitions with design champions' clubs make a huge contribution to engaging the public in the debate about what their local environment ought to be. Functionality is important but so too is the finished product.

Lessons can be learned from successful Bids such as Times Square in New York (right) – probably the most well-known example of the concept across the world

In Europe we see increasing recognition of the creative industries through public recognition and reward. For example, the European Union prize for contemporary architecture through the Mies van der Rohe award recognises the role of architecture for individuals and, more importantly perhaps for the Association for Public Service Excellence (Apse), the role within public institutions. However, recognition of the advances the public sector



has made in embracing design and creativity in regeneration is itself not enough to develop sustainability in our towns and cities. This is perhaps where the greatest challenges may lie.

The removal of business rates from local authorities was viewed by some as the best way of controlling business rate increases. An unwelcome side effect was to increase the alienation of businesses and the community, effectively disengaging local authorities and local businesses.

Legislation to create business improvement districts has allowed local authorities and local firms to agree, subject to a vote by businesses, to raise an additional levy which is then ring-fenced to the area to support additional services. Typically these include improved lighting and 'cleaning and greening' projects. The Bid idea is one imported from America, with perhaps the most famous example being New York's Times Square.

Lambeth's Waterloo Quarter Business Alliance is one of 22 so far established in England and Wales. It includes not only the expected environmental improvements but also a retail strategy study and a street market management study, all designed to make sustainability not just an environmental issue but an economic issue for the local community and businesses.

In Scotland public service reform minister Tom McCabe announced in March that £500,000 had been set aside to fund pilot Bids in Scotland including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Inverness and Falkirk. Mr McCabe's vision is that the Scottish Bids will 'be just as successful as the one in Times Square'.

Apse is confident that all local authorities across the four nations are more than capable of having their own Times Square if the successes already generated by them in partnership with the UK's burgeoning creative industries can be replicated across the board.

Paul O'Brien is chief executive and **Mo Baines** is principal adviser with the Association for Public Service Excellence

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Change of culture key for extended school hours

I write in response to Mick Brookes' assertion (at the National Association of Head Teachers' annual conference) that government plans for all schools to provide extended 8am-6pm provision will damage the capacity of schools to fulfil their core purpose.

What has become clear to ContinYou's extended schools support service (Tesss) is that when the learning outcomes are planned and monitored, the provision of extended services and activities can and does enhance existing school improvement plans and targets. In fact, we would go further than this and say that unless extended services are developed, schools can continue working harder

and harder on their core purpose, but they will not be able to continue improving indefinitely. In order to reach the pupils of those parents who Mick Brookes describes as creating huge barriers to learning, schools need to take a different approach.

An extended school is not one in which all the staff work harder, and for longer hours, than a traditional school. An extended school is one that recognises that it cannot work alone in delivering outcomes for children and families and it therefore chooses to work in partnerships.

It takes time to build effective partnerships. But by closer working with other agencies that are delivering outcomes for families, and by involving the voluntary and community sectors, schools can bring

in a range of people who have the kind of expertise and support that schools really need. And ContinYou has now worked with a number of headteachers who have actually found that their workload, particularly in relation to health, pastoral matters and social care, is reduced as a result.

It's true that working in partnership does require a big shift in behaviour and attitude. But extending services is not about having to do extra things for the sake of it. It's about how a range of fresh approaches, supported by other people working in the local community, in social services, health, etc, enable headteachers and school staff to achieve their priorities for the school.

And of course, the priorities are not just about exam results. Like it or

not, they are also about behaviour, attendance, punctuality, exclusions, and a whole raft of issues for which so-called '8am-6pm' provision can make a real difference.

So providing additional support for children and young people based around the school day is not a distraction from school improvement, it's an important part of the strategy to enable every child to reach their potential. As Julian Piper, national programme director for the extended schools support service described it, 'it is an additional arrow in the quiver for headteachers and schools as they aim for continued sustainable improvement.'

Laurence Blackhall chief executive, ContinYou