



Unlocking Social Capital

The key to building
sustainable communities

jtp



Unlocking Social Capital

The key to building sustainable communities

No presentation on sustainability appears complete without the ubiquitous diagram that unites economic, environmental and social concerns. The social aspect of sustainability however, has long been the poor relation in this family, being less emotive than protecting our fragile environment and not as accountable as economic performance. Anyway - social sustainability - that's just people getting along together isn't it?

Well yes it is, but today people are increasingly less engaged with each other and the social fragmentation that is occurring as a result has severe implications for society as a whole. A number of American and British observers (almost without exception baby-boomers growing up immediately after the war) have lamented the loss of community spirit and civic engagement that shaped their experience of childhood in the late 1950's. The most engaging and focused of these studies is Robert Putnam's excellent 'Bowling Alone', which employs a mass of graphical evidence to clearly demonstrate that there has been a gradual but pronounced breakdown in social interaction since this period. Putnam offers several reasons for this disconcerting shift, including changing work patterns (longer hours), urban sprawl (greater

commuting time), the rise of technology and mass media ('television - the privatisation of leisure time') and generational change (different social aspirations).

But of equal concern is the fact that where communities do still exist the social benefits of their internal bonds are often counteracted by weak external links. These groups are frequently defined along socio-economic, religious, ethnic or generational lines, and can end up holding strong views and pursuing narrow interests, making them parochial and highly intolerant of others. Identifying these problems is one thing, understanding them another – but to actually change things, and create integrated communities that are actively engaged and yet transcend social boundaries - that is the major task that now faces us.

At the centre of the current debate is the idea of social capital, which can be defined as the resources that become available within a community as a consequence of networks of mutual support, trust and obligation. Social capital is accumulated when people interact with each other in families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, local associations, and in a range of informal and formal meeting places. As the glue that binds us all together, its importance

Besides fulfilling planning aims, community involvement increases social capital by engendering respect and tolerance and helping to create new friendships and alliances.



to the well-being of society cannot be underestimated, and the mutual benefits that derive from interpersonal co-operation and co-ordination provide the bedrock for effective business transactions. Also, without social capital no amount of investment in physical or economic initiatives will be sustainable - people must act collectively to make these a success.

This is particularly the case with development, and over the last decade at JTP we have developed a number of participatory techniques that allow us to tap into local knowledge and expertise, harness enthusiasm and provide a forum for ordinary people to voice their concerns and aspirations. These processes help us to create consensus-led visions that bring communities together, create a shared sense of ownership, and act as a catalyst for enhancing social capital.

Creating visions and making friends

Our project at Caterham Barracks in Surrey began with one such large scale Community Planning event involving over 1000 participants including local residents, businesses, schools, the planning authority and various interest groups, who were asked to work together to help create a vision for the area. Our role was to listen and learn, facilitate discussion, challenge norms, persuade, arbitrate and finally to use our placemaking skills to give the consensus view a physical form. This vision – presented to the local community just a week later, was extremely well received and subsequently taken forward in association with The Caterham Barracks Local Group, and a number of specialist focus groups-involving over 100 local people - who met up on more than fifty occasions. Today the project is virtually complete and over £5 million of benefits have been transferred into the management of a Community Development Trust set up with a financial contribution from the developer. These include a nursery, bar/restaurant, dance studio, health and fitness centre, meeting rooms and Skaterham, a highly successful indoor skateboard and BMX centre for young people, with over 6000 members.

Working together, making plans
and making friends

Denaby, community planning
JTP



Participation – the act of people being involved, working together, discovering shared values, interests, and common goals – is a process that not only assists in creating a collective vision for the future, but also helps to forge new friendships and unlikely alliances that can overcome social status, ethnicity and age differences. In our experience community planning engenders respect, tolerance and a better understanding of each other's aspirations, in short, the process itself enhances social capital and in so doing creates the ideal conditions for a project to succeed. At Caterham things worked out because everyone willed them to.

In 2004 The Deputy Prime Minister deemed the project worthy of a commendation in his inaugural Sustainable Communities Awards. Judging by recent legislation (Planning Policy Statement 1), it is possible that our approach could soon become the rule rather than the exception, as the government are seeking to place community involvement at the centre of a reformed planning system.

Putting people at the heart of the process - that sounds like progress to us.

Sustain Magazine October/November 2004

London Studio

23-25 Great Sutton Street

London EC1V 0DN

+44 (0)20 7017 1780

www.jtp.co.uk

Edinburgh Studio

Venue Studios

21 Calton Road

Edinburgh EH8 8DL

+44 (0)131 550 6600

www.jtp.co.uk