

Innovation for Urban Sustainability and Eco-efficiency Workshop Report

Background

This workshop — organised and facilitated by the Ministry for the Environment and held in Wellington on 23 April 2002 — was the first occasion for a long time that a central government agency had created an opportunity to meet and exchange ideas on urban sustainability and eco efficiency.

The workshop's 140 participants come from central and local government, research institutions, business, iwi, non-governmental organisations, and the transport, water, waste, infrastructure and development sectors.

The aim of the workshop was to:

1. Guide the Ministry for the Environment (MfE) in its long-term work on urban issues
2. Guide supporting agencies — Auckland Regional Council; Foundation for Research Science and Technology; Local Government New Zealand; Ministry of Transport — in their own work and planning
3. Enable those working in related and overlapping fields to share ideas and goals
4. Enable individuals to network, giving them an opportunity to discuss shared concerns and to provide an opportunity for future contact
5. Suggest priorities for further work.

The workshop tapped a rich vein of concern about how effectively our towns and cities are working, and what the government should be doing to help. Since the Ministry was seeking guidance in its own work, it did not set an agenda or define the issues. Instead, participants themselves generated topics, then met in more than 30 small groups to discuss them.

Before the workshop ended, participants ranked the issues encapsulated in discussion group topics according to perceived importance. The five most highly rated issues were:

1. Integration
2. The need for an urban research centre
3. Transport
4. The need for a national policy statement on the built environment
5. Mindsets and frameworks.

Other topics to rate highly include: motivating change; linking the environment with the economy; clean and green; cities as systems; and macro regions defined by urban systems.

Three general areas of agreement emerged:

1. The need to integrate approaches to urban sustainability and the institutions that plan and manage these approaches
2. The importance of urban design in contributing to short-term liveability and long-term sustainability, particularly in regard to transport
3. The need to motivate individuals, communities, businesses, and governments to change their mindsets *and* behaviour.

Summary of discussion

The following summary is abstracted from notes taken during the small-group discussions, and is grouped under five topic headings:

1. Defining principles and terms
2. Integrating approaches
3. Motivating change
4. Designing and living in towns and cities

Please note: These headings are for organisational convenience only and by no means conceptually watertight. One group's discussion may be referred to under one heading only; others may be split between many. Discussion was often exploratory rather than definitive, with questions more often raised than answered. It ranged freely over subject matter and at various levels of abstraction (from over-arching principles and definition of terms, to detailed practical solutions to everyday problems). Consequently, this summary only indicates recurring themes and outlines selected points. For a more detailed account, please see the notes for individual discussion groups. Finally, views expressed are those of workshop participants and not necessarily of MfE.

1. Defining principles and terms

Urban sustainability and eco efficiency are both a means to an end, and ends in themselves — a destination and a way of getting there. If they become merely ends, they fail to challenge traditional concepts. Sustainability goes beyond the environmental to include social and economic elements, and solutions are best tailored to time and place.

Current definitions of *environment* are too restricted. The built environment underpins the economy, and business interests drive cities. Yet there are poor links between commerce and planning that are symptomatic of 'short term-ism', leaving others to pick up the real, long-term costs. Cities are eco-systems, but planning does not take this into account. Annual plans, for instance, do not represent the entire system or see the city as part of a larger system.

Thinking on urban issues is constrained by administrative boundaries rather than shaped by macro settlement patterns. Urban ecology considers large-scale relationships, flows and feedbacks.

We need better agreement on the meaning of *sustainability*. People require basic information that they can relate to day-to-day activities like shopping and gardening, as well as a common language and conceptual framework, and an understanding of where we are now and where we are headed.

Clean and green is a catch cry and an image rather than a reality. It will only be realised through education, information and incentives, and normalisation and celebration of good eco practice. We need to understand how we damage our environment, how to reverse it, and learn from what has happened overseas.

A healthy urban system is one that can meet many needs simultaneously.

2. Integrating approaches

Institutional frameworks mitigate against national integration. There is a lack of central government leadership and accountability for integrated urban outcomes.

Health is one example of how fragmentation of agencies and funding hampers real progress. Some consider the RMA discourages a systems approach to urban planning, while there were concerns expressed that some local bodies seem to operate on the squeaky wheel principle, making decisions on the basis of pressure group needs rather than sound information and planning.

Social connectedness and inclusivity — building a sense of community and belonging — is also vital in integrating approaches to urban issues. We need to reconnect environment and community at every level, and eliminate the dichotomy between nature and culture.

Many groups stress the importance of community participation — the 'bottom up' approach. Others suggest this can lead to lack of respect for expert knowledge, making it difficult to

achieve consensus. Shortage of time can also work against integration, however desirable the latter might be.

Engaging business is important, especially since the commercial sector is beginning to understand it will not lose money by espousing social and environmental values.

It would be helpful to apply an ecological perspective to all levels of urban policy, planning and construction, using interdisciplinary teams with a good understanding of the eco-system in which a city is embedded. Better strategies would venture beyond strict urban and administrative boundaries to recognise cities as part of a larger community, and integrate regional lifestyles and economic opportunities.

The current 'silo' approach to urban issues is generally decried. At the very least, an umbrella organisation is needed to bring these 'silos' into contact with each other. A central organisation would drive vision and commitment at both national and local levels, and integrate sustainable policies.

A national policy statement on the built environment could enhance integration by embodying an overview of operational strategy. It could also integrate research with policy and planning. An urban research centre could be an independent umbrella organisation to lend intellectual force to, and champion, better urban systems.

3. Motivating change

Sustainability and eco-efficiency are widely accepted as concepts but not as practice; how to turn ideas into action is a vital issue. What stands in the way of institutional and personal change is apathy; ignorance; short-term views; selfish motives; lack of policy and planning integration; lack of central responsibility and strategy; lack of leadership; and continuing use of old institutional models.

Rules can obstruct change by alienating people and not giving them incentives to improve. Telling people what to do can be counter-productive since they dislike being told, and continue to make short-term, individualistic decisions.

A long-term view is vital to sustainability; the challenge is to get this across. Simple solutions work best: overwhelming people with global problems they feel they can do little about does not help them change their behaviour. Raising awareness of the waste problem and changing behaviour on this one issue alone might eventually lead to community responsibility over a wider area such as sustainability. Waste is a good place to start since it encourages small, individual activities.

We need to strike a balance between 'top down' and 'bottom up' solutions. Central government could lead by example, incorporating urban design principles into all government-owned buildings and government-funded infrastructure, such as transport. Urban design could feature in undergraduate education, with all disciplines being aware of the big picture. Education on sustainability could start in schools.

We need to know how to determine when we have achieved change. Many indicators, such as transport and energy, are already in place. There might be an advantage in re-branding sustainable development as Smart Growth (as in the USA).

Leadership is vital — how to identify and support community and other leaders, create a leadership culture, and upskill new national and local politicians. Local and national leaders/politicians are unaware of their own limitations, and need information and education.

4. Designing and living in towns and cities

Design including transport issues

Urban design contributes to quality of life at macro and micro levels, and is crucial to sustainability. Contemporary urban design is too often shaped by existing infrastructure and the need for modernisation. All those involved in creating urban environments should look beyond these factors to the big picture. The challenge is to create cities that encourage good environmental practice, such as in the transportation area.

Transport is an essential feature of urban design, and urban planning ought to consider the full range of modes available. Currently, many people don't have a choice but to use their cars, because of difficulties faced with using other modes. Others don't have access to cars. It is important to provide choices — such as public transport, walking and cycling, more efficient private vehicle use, and tele-communications as an alternative to physical movement. We need to recognise that people have different accessibility needs — because of age, disability, income or employment, cultural reasons, or simply inclination.

We need to make other transport modes available and encourage their use. Appropriate pricing structures could discourage car use — and there are some innovative examples overseas that we could learn from. Alternatives to private car use must be in place if pricing is to be publicly acceptable.

Walking in particular deserves to be taken seriously as a mode of transport — it ought to be central to urban planning. Town and city environments often deter walkers. Better accessibility, safety and attractiveness would encourage pedestrians, as would giving them a voice in planning. Walking can be encouraged by better lighting, safety measures, improving the attractiveness of surroundings and traffic control.

Improved urban form with greater density along transport corridors and in growth nodes would provide greater support for public transport. We need to find ways to make more intensive housing more acceptable to New Zealanders; housing density must be appropriate to location, with city boundaries containing high density housing and not allowing it to spread into locations better suited to medium and low density

Housing designed for the needs of different cultural groups needs to be provided. Feng shui is increasing being recognised as a design principle, but housing designed specifically for Pacific Islanders is rarely available; any market available for this type of housing is not seen as attractive for developers.

We must strike a balance between catching the bad and encouraging the good. Legislation brings only limited benefits. The Resource Management Act (RMA), for instance, only catches poor design; it provides no information on long-term environmental outcomes. A national policy statement on the built environment could sit alongside the coastal policy statement, and should not be prescriptive but set quantifiable targets.

Heritage and cultural sustainability are a vital fourth leg of the sustainable development model (the other three being environment, economy, and society). Green infrastructure is also crucial to cities, and should be recognised and valued in the same way as art and heritage.

Local and central government, professional institutes, and the development community could take responsibility for urban design at the local level. It is important to look at what works overseas, how and why. We could encourage best practice solutions for designing sustainable neighbourhoods, towns and cities, setting environmental building standards, and encourage people to consider the total, real cost of design, construction and use. We need to encourage

developers, impose strict city boundaries, and find ways to encourage people back into open spaces, which are too often sterile, unsafe, and inaccessible.

Urban social well-being issues

Sustainability links environmental values with the economy, but urban social well-being is also vital. Urban social issues discussed include:

- The aging population — with fewer people working and a bigger health bill, there will be less money from taxes and rates to pay for sustainability; population concerns vary from one urban area to another: some, e.g. Invercargill, are declining; others, e.g. Auckland, are growing, partly as a result of immigration.
- Poverty — the link between affluence and waste is well-known; the poor waste less. Transport is another challenge for low-income families — the range of transport modes is often limited, and access to employment opportunities can be restricted.
- Health — shifting funding from costly tertiary care into environmental health would bring wide health benefits. Obesity is a growing concern, which can be linked to the way our urban areas are designed — we are walking and cycling less, and discouraging our children from playing outdoors.
- Cultural groups, migrants and refugees — these may be excluded from the community, and we must look for appropriate channels of communication e.g. radio talkback, newsletters.
- Children and young people — their needs are often ignored, or give rise to space, safety and access issues; the urban environment does not encourage them to be outdoors.

Suggestions for work priorities

1. National urban research centre

In the absence of any central agency responsible for urban issues, the workshop recommends the establishment of a leading national urban research organisation. This could help integrate approaches to urban issues on behalf of many diverse organisations, and champion urban issues.

2. National policy on the built environment

Such a policy could be a National Policy Statement under the RMA, or a broader statement on the impacts of the built environment on urban areas.

3. Transport

It is important to promote walking by improving the attractiveness of the environment and integrating with it other modes of transport, as well as changing the mindsets of transport professionals, local government, and the public.

We need to look overseas for examples of what works and what doesn't work. Introducing appropriate pricing structures and improving the availability of transport choices could make transport more sustainable.

4. Improve integration

We need to investigate ways of linking up the thinking and implementation of urban systems and issues to achieve better integration and outcomes on the ground. We also need to ensure that institutional barriers or blockages are removed.

5. Mindsets and frameworks

It is important to engage relevant professions and the broader community, and encourage behaviour changes. The workshop identified leadership as a key component of motivating change, and this could be an area to concentrate on. Education is seen as essential in building an environmental ethic: from kindergarten to tertiary, and for the wider community.