

Chasing the American dream

For the latest in his Public Service Futures series, Robin Hambleton asks if lessons learned from new urbanism in the US, championed by John Prescott at the recent Sustainable Communities summit, can be applied in the UK



**Public
Service
Futures**

'New urbanism' was given a close examination at the Delivering Sustainable Communities in Manchester earlier this month.

Deputy prime minister John Prescott indicated that lessons could be learned from 'new urbanists' in the United States, who shared the Government's ambition for walkable, mixed-use communities'.

And he was right. Not least because the more socially-aware new urbanist schemes are very much in line with UK urban policy.

For example, last year, the excellent Egan Report on *Skills For Sustainable Communities* produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) drew attention to the importance of improving urban design.

Sir John Egan identified a number of components of 'sustainable communities' and argued that chief executives, urban planners, developers and other stakeholders needed to do much more to create a sense of place when developing or regenerating neighbourhoods.

Within the built environment strand of the 'sustainable communities' agenda, the aim, Sir John argued, should be to create: 'A high-quality, well-designed built environment of appropriate size, scale, density, design and layout which complements the distinctive local character of the community.'

Prince Charles must have been pleased. He has been making this

kind of argument for years. More than that, he has actually tried to do it. Poundbury Village in Dorset – an attempt led by Prince Charles to build an attractive, sustainable community – was heavily influenced by US new urbanist principles (see www.poundbury.info).

Critics argue that Poundbury is a Utopian project which is flawed because it aspires to create a sense of community by harking back to the past. Enthusiastic residents disagree. They say it works.

The debate about the strengths and weaknesses of Poundbury Village resonate with a wider debate about city planning and urban design – a debate which straddles the Atlantic.

The US architects Leon Krier and Rob Krier had a significant role in the planning and design of Poundbury. And they are key players in the US new urbanist movement.

This transatlantic discussion is important. Mr Prescott arranged for several US experts to contribute to the summit and, as I explained more fully in the *The MJ Town and City Management Supplement*, (27 January 2005), the new urbanism debate raises significant issues for all local leaders – whether politicians or officials.

Some of the design ideas are already being tried out in the UK.

For example, the Design Coding Pilot Programme, which forms part of the ODPM's Sustainable Communities portfolio of urban initiatives, aims to assess the potential of 'design coding' for enhancing the performance of the planning system in delivering high-quality urban environments.

The seven established pilots are



Prince Charles' pet project, Poundbury in Dorset, was heavily influenced by new urbanists in the US

Ashford Barracks – 1,500 dwellings; Hastings (Ore Valley) – 700; Swindon – 4,500; Aldershot (Military Estate) – 4,500; Rotherham – 500; Newcastle (Walker Riverside) – 2,500; and Cirencester – 400.

In each case, new urbanist design codes are being used to guide residential led development.

Research is examining what kinds of design codes are being used, whether they speed up development, whether they achieve design aspirations, and what the strengths and weaknesses of alternative approaches are.

When Mr Prescott spoke at our

City Futures International Conference in Chicago last July, he made positive references to the new urbanist approach.

'New urbanism is pragmatic and flexible in its implementation, allowing different solutions to urban development,' he said.

New urbanism does, of course, have its roots in European urbanism.

Cynics will say the Americans are just starting to catch up with concepts and approaches which have been commonplace in Europe for more than a century.

But this is complacent. As the Commission for Architecture and

the Built Environment (CABE) has argued for the past five years, the UK planning system has produced a plethora of 'could be anywhere' housing developments, a shoddy public realm, and poor linkages between development and transport.

That is why the transatlantic debate about new urbanism is important. US experience can contribute insights on good practice – as well as what to avoid.

Robin Hambleton is dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago