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Commons ground

Chris Carter explains the role of the parliamentary urban development group

14.07.2006
By *Chris Carter*

Development issues that were for so long either ignored or misunderstood are set to get a good airing in parliament with the establishment of the all-party parliamentary urban development group this month.

All-party groups are formally registered committees of MPs and peers who come together based on a mutual interest in a particular subject. They already exist for a range of issues such as pharmaceuticals, nuclear power, financial services and homelessness.

Under the chairmanship of Clive Betts MP, the all-party urban development group will take a fresh look at the barriers that are holding back successful regeneration.

It will also devise a package of policy proposals to streamline processes, develop innovative funding methods and provide novel approaches to the successful development of 'sustainable communities'. Starting with a series of inquiries beginning in the autumn, the group plans to tackle many issues that encroach on this area (see fact file).

Although all-party groups do not have formal powers, they carry considerable weight as they can request ministers to appear before them, and make policy recommendations.

A prime example was the impact of High Street Britain: 2015, a report published on 15 February by the all-party small shops group. The report accused large supermarket chains of pushing small shops out of business. It sent shockwaves through the retail sector and may have been the final straw that pushed the Office of Fair Trading to refer the whole grocery trade to the Competition Commission on 9 May. The investigation could force supermarkets to change the way they run their businesses or even to sell off stores.

Despite the effectiveness of its campaign, the all-party small shops group came under fire in the Times for being funded by the Independent Retailers Confederation, a lobby group whose members have a commercial interest in the outcome of the Competition Commission investigation. This and similar campaigns have aroused criticisms that industry uses the cloak of parliamentary respectability and independence to advance commercial interests.

The urban development group is seeking to raise the standard. It will be transparent about its affiliations and any research will be carried out independently. Its officers have registered the [British Property Federation](#) with the parliamentary commissioner for standards as the provider of the group's secretariat services.

The [BPF](#) has pledged to abide by a code of conduct to be fully transparent and accountable. All of the group's reports will carry the BPF logo and all intellectual and financial assistance will be reported to the commissioner.

Independent thinking

To add further independence to the group's reports, the non-partisan Centre for Cities, a [Westminster](#) think tank, which is based within the Institute for Public Policy Research, will undertake research for the group and will help with drafting. The reports will enter a formal approval process by, and will be the property of, the urban development group.

The inquiry sessions will provide a forum for parliamentarians to engage with organisations involved in urban renewal. It is hoped this will help raise awareness about the ability of government, regeneration agencies and the commercial property industry to deliver successful regeneration in the UK.

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Given the limited level of understanding of development in parliament, the urban development group has its work cut out, but there are many interested parties determined to make it worthwhile.

What the group will cover

- Financing infrastructure how devolved financial powers and private sector consortia can fund urban infrastructure.
- Regeneration funding and governance how to streamline the planning barriers and bureaucracy that hold back successful regeneration.
- Housing supply how to encourage institutional investment in affordable housing.
- Business in deprived areas what incentive structures can be used to attract private investment into deprived areas to kick-start regeneration.
- Sustainable growth how to ensure that the government's designated growth areas are economically viable over the long term.

Who's who

Honorary chair

Nick Raynsford MP, former minister of state for local and regional government

Chairman

Clive Betts MP, former government whip and member of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister select committee

Vice chairs

Lord (Richard) Best, director, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; James Brokenshire, Conservative MP for Hornchurch since 2005; Baroness Scott of Needham Market, Liberal Democrat shadow minister for communities and local government

Between 20 and 30 MPs are also expected to sign up to the group before its inquiries start this autumn.

Postscript:

Chris Carter is director of public affairs at the British Property Federation

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