planning out poverty

Barry Knight of the Webb Memorial Trust and Kate Henderson of the TCPA explore their respective organisations’ shared origins and consider the role of planning in helping to create a good society free from poverty

Progressive planning and public health were both inspired by the mapping of the relationship between poor environmental quality and poor health and social exclusion – most notably by Charles Booth, assisted by Beatrice Webb, in 1888. It was a decade later, in 1899, that Ebenezer Howard founded the Garden Cities movement (through the Garden City Association, the first incarnation of the TCPA) – based upon fair shares in development and land value uplift; shared ownership of public open space; participative and entrepreneurial local governance; town and country planned together; inclusive places; and enhancement of the environment. Howard’s Garden City idea asserted the need for sustainable communities; and the need for an appreciation of the environment, and with it people’s long-term wellbeing, is no less relevant today.

That is why, in 2013, the TCPA and the Webb Memorial Trust have come together in collaboration within the Trusts’ Poverty and Inequality Programme. As readers of this journal will know, the TCPA is Britain’s oldest charity concerned with housing, planning and the environment, while the Webb Memorial Trust aims to achieve social and economic justice and the advancement of education and learning with respect to the history and problems of government and social policy. The two organisations working together should be a powerful partnership.

Beatrice Webb

Beatrice Webb made a remarkable difference to public life at a time when women did not have the vote. Born in the 19th century as one of nine children in an affluent London family, she became concerned about the plight of the working class, and in particular the problem of poverty. She formed an impressive partnership with husband Sidney Webb, who became a leading London councillor and then a Member of Parliament. Together they founded the London School of Economics – as well as the New Statesman magazine.

Beatrice Webb’s achievements did not end there. Indeed, she became very well known for her contribution to the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress 1905-1909, which produced ‘Majority’ and ‘Minority’ Reports. Critically, and very radically at the time, the latter expounded the view that poverty was not the fault of the poor but was a result of economic mismanagement and the lack of strong social structures. Beatrice
stressed the need for full employment and for those in poverty not to be excluded from local authority general service provisions. In particular, she advocated 'a national minimum of civilized life... open to all', by which she meant 'sufficient nourishment and training when young, a living wage when able-bodied, treatment when sick, and modest but secure livelihood when disabled or aged'.

And so the seeds of the welfare state were sown. Interestingly, William Beveridge, the architect of the 1942 Beveridge Report, was one of Beatrice's researchers in the early part of the 20th century – and Harold Wilson was part of Beveridge's team a few decades later. Beveridge said later that 'most of what he had learned, he had imbibed from the Webbs'.

The Webb Memorial Trust has in recent years concentrated on finding practical proposals to reduce poverty and inequality. Over the next few years, it will spend down its resources to develop a vision of what constitutes a good society without poverty, identify how such a good society can be obtained, and disseminate findings to those who wish to develop it.

**Ebenezer Howard, FJO and the TCPA's origins**

The TCPA's origins are similarly humble, and equally impressive. It all started when a shorthand clerk and inventor, Ebenezer Howard, produced a scheme for the formation of 'Garden Cities'. Far from there being a smoothly functioning planning system in place to deal with proposals such as Howard's, there was at the time only a system of bylaws. But Howard was undaunted, and within a decade the Garden City Association, formed in 1899 to promote the Garden City idea, had become the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association. In broadening its scope to promote town planning as well as Garden Cities, the Association was already acknowledging that there would be little progress in one without the other. As such, the Association became the first campaign group for planning.

Although the first planning legislation was introduced in 1909 – the same year as the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws reported – planning remained relatively ineffective until the question of land values and compensation was tackled at the end of the Second World War.

The TCPA (as it was renamed in 1941) was active in campaigning for more effective planning, and within it no-one more so than the unrelenting Frederic J. Osborn. Towards the end of the 1930s and in the ensuing war years, he put effective planning legislation at the top of the Association's agenda in a campaign that led to the 1946 New Towns Act and the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. Reflecting on this period, Osborn said: 'I think that I personally have been a decisive factor in the evolution of the new towns policy and that this evolution is extremely important historically. I mean no less than without my fanatical conviction and persistent work in writing, lecturing and especially lobbying, the New Towns Act of 1946 would not have come about.'

The TCPA has maintained a robust post-war record of keeping improved planning constantly within its sights, from starting an Environment Education Unit and pioneering Planning Aid in the 1970s through to influencing government legislation today. With the Localism Act 2011, the National Planning Policy Framework and Coalition Government support for Garden Cities, the debate on planning is today as lively as ever.

**The challenge today**

While our understanding of the complex inter-relationship between the factors that lead to social exclusion (such as the links between poverty, social mobility, health and education) has become more sophisticated, there is less clarity about what our policy responses should be and about the spatial level at which they should be implemented. In recent years, our society has become more unequal, and concentrations of poverty persist.

We have also failed to learn from successes and failures in the past. There is growing evidence that many of the current Government’s policy responses are exacerbating inequality. Many Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder projects have now been abandoned, leaving thousands of people surrounded...
by obsolete and boarded-up terraced properties that are effectively ghost towns. At the same time, there are also places whose inability to plan for future housing needs creates a whole series of social problems, from overcrowding through to low educational attainment.

Since the end of the 19th century planning has made a significant contribution to improving the quality of life of ordinary people, through the provision of well planned social housing and infrastructure. But the planning system, whose original radicalism was simply breathtaking, is a powerful example of how inspired vision can turn into nightmarish procedural complexity. Its achievements are still impressive, but it no longer transforms peoples’ lives and rarely considers tackling inequality as a core objective. Over the last 30 years it has been less clear that planning has been fully focused on dealing with social exclusion.

The project

During 2013 the TCPA will work with the Webb Memorial Trust on a case study based research project addressing an overarching question: ‘How can we re-focus planning to be more effective in dealing with social exclusion?’ The project will not be a study into poverty in general, but will focus on how to challenge social exclusion through planning in different urban contexts.

It will explore four case study locations across England; each will have diverse socio-economic backgrounds, demonstrating distinct patterns of social exclusion and representing different typologies of urban spatial scales, ranging from a large ex-industrial metropolitan city through to a London Borough and an isolated ex-industrial rural village.

Each case study will examine the extent to which spatial planning policy approaches have tended to exacerbate or alleviate patterns of social exclusion – and, specifically, will establish the nature of social exclusion locally; the extent of recent and current planning policy approaches; and planning policy successes and failures measured against key social exclusion data. The project will also distil the key lessons of previous policy interventions. In each case study there will be a focus on a number of planning policy themes – for example the role of planning in:

- delivering a balanced portfolio of housing to meet varying needs;
- providing accessible public transport and an inclusive civic realm;
- creating sustainable and resilient communities which promote health and wellbeing; and
- enabling economic activity.

The case studies will be collated into a report which will identify key lessons from across the localities and present a clear set of recommendations on how the planning system can be improved to better deal with poverty and social exclusion. The report will be published in the autumn of 2013, with the aim of capturing the imaginations of politicians, planning practitioners and, most importantly, the public.

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At a time when the planning system is undergoing radical reform and making the front pages of the national press, the project aims to set a positive, forward-looking agenda for how planning can more effectively deal with poverty and deprivation – the right mix of housing, employment, and accessible local amenities, from play spaces and allotments to health centres.

We need a new debate about future pathways for our communities. Although the backdrop is one of rising unemployment, public expenditure cuts, benefits reform and the euro crisis, we cannot simply accept that increases in poverty and inequality will be inevitable – and one way of starting to address the issue is through planning.

Good planning can offer greater opportunities for excluded communities, both at a national level, in shaping investment patterns, and at a local level, by getting the right outcomes from planning decisions.

In exploring the role that planning that can play in creating a good society free from deprivation, we hope to build a coalition of support around opportunities to plan out poverty, and to raise awareness of the enduring legacy of Beatrice Webb and the TCPAs founding principles. It is time to frame a new debate.

- Barry Knight is Principal Advisor to the Webb Memorial Trust and Kate Henderson is Chief Executive of the TCPA.

Note

1 Tomorrow and Tomorrow. The TCPA’s First Hundred Years, and the Next...TCPA, 1999.
www.tcpa.org.uk/data/files/18991999.pdf