

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Towards a thematic strategy on the urban environment**

(2005/C 43/09)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

**Having regard to** the Communication from the Commission: Towards a thematic strategy on the urban environment (COM(2004) 60 final);

**Having regard to** the decision of the European Commission of 11 February 2004 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

**Having regard to** the decision of its Bureau of 10 February 2004 to instruct its Commission for Sustainable Development to draw up an opinion on this subject;

**Having regard to** its opinion on the Commission Communication: Sustainable Urban Development in the European Union: A Framework for Action: (COM(1998) 605 final - CdR 115/99 fin <sup>(1)</sup>);

**Having regard to** its opinion on the Commission Communication: Towards an urban agenda in the European Union (COM(1997) 197 –final CdR 319/97 fin <sup>(2)</sup>);

**Having regard to** the Commission Communication on European Governance (COM(2001) 428 final);

**Having regard to** the Protocol on the Application of the Principles of Subsidiarity and Proportionality, appended to the Treaty establishing the European Community;

**Having regard to** the definition of 'sustainable development' in the Amsterdam Treaty;

**Having regard to** the Commission Communication on A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development (Commission's proposal to the Gothenburg European Council) (COM(2001) 264 final);

**Having regard to** the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Towards a global partnership for sustainable development (COM(2002) 82 final);

**Having regard to** its opinion on the Commission Communication on the sixth environment action programme of the European Community 'Environment 2010: our future, our choice - the Sixth Environment Action Programme', and the proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Community Environment Action Programme 2001–2010 (COM(2001) 31 final - CdR 36/2001 fin <sup>(3)</sup>);

**Having regard to** the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee on 'A European environment and health strategy' (COM(2003) 338 final);

**Having regard to** the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Biodiversity Strategy (COM(1998) 42 final) and the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Biodiversity Action Plan (COM(2001) 162 final);

**Having regard to** its draft opinion (CdR 93/2004 rev. 1) adopted on 8 July 2004 by its Commission for sustainable development (rapporteur: Ms Tarras-Wahlberg, member of Stockholm City Council, SE/PES);

<sup>(1)</sup> OJ C 293, 13.10.1999, p.58

<sup>(2)</sup> OJ C 251, 10.8.1998, p.11

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ C 357, 14.12.2001, p. 44.

## WHEREAS

- 1) Some 80 % of European Union citizens live in urban areas and it is clear that many of these have serious environmental problems. Urban environmental problems impact primarily on town dwellers, but they also have negative regional effects in terms of the environment and quality of life.
- 2) In order to improve the environmental situation in European Union cities, more resources are needed as well as a flexible strategy that takes account of the different characteristics of European towns and cities. This should be a long-term strategy, and compatible with EU sustainable development policy.
- 3) For the strategy to be effective, it is essential that it should establish the link between an improved urban environment and opportunities to benefit from European Union support in various policy areas.
- 4) The strategy should also lead to social integration and fair environmental conditions within the EU, whilst taking account of poor countries' needs for resources and creating fairness between generations.
- 5) In light of changing urban conditions and the subsidiarity principle, the local authorities should bear the main responsibility for framing the measures that need to be adopted in a specific urban area.

**Unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 56<sup>th</sup> plenary session held on 29 and 30 September 2004 in Brussels (meeting of 30 September):**

**1. The Committee of the Regions' views**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General

1.1 **welcomes** the Commission Communication as a first step towards a thematic strategy on the urban environment, called for in the EU's 6<sup>th</sup> environmental action programme. The future thematic strategy will play an important role in improving the quality of the urban environment. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the role and responsibility of the local and regional authorities in achieving the objectives of the EU's sustainable development strategy;

1.2 **underlines** the fact that the urban environment is a complex area. Environmental aspects need to be meshed in with economic aspects, e.g. competitiveness and employment regions, and social aspects, e.g. segregation and integration, in order to achieve sustainable development in urban areas and agglomerations. Cultural aspects should also be included;

1.3 **appreciates** the commission's decision to address the question of working 'towards a more integrated approach'. Both the horizontal/cross-sectoral approach (between policy areas and between different players) and the vertical approach (between different levels of administration) need to be developed in order to get a global view of sustainable urban development;

1.4 **appreciates** the fact that the Commission is helping to frame common objectives and indicators for urban environmental follow-up. However, it is important that these should serve as a guide rather than be prescriptive;

1.5 **considers** that it is important that towns and their immediate, as well as their more distant hinterland should be seen as mutually dependent, i.e. following the thinking of the ESDP (European Spatial Development Perspective);

1.6 **appreciates** the fact that the Commission intends to promote ecologically orientated education and exchanges of experience and research in the field of the urban environment;

1.7 would **remind** the Commission of the European Urban Charter, adopted by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRAE), a consultative body of the European Council. The Urban Charter describes the complexity of urban areas.

Sustainable urban management

1.8 **appreciates** the fact that the Commission aims high in highlighting the need for a structured approach to urban management, with a view to increasing cross-sectoral work, and facilitating follow-up and comparative studies in order to improve the urban environment;

1.9 would also **stress** the need for new urban management systems to be strategic and operational across administrative borders in an urban area and in the areas adjacent to it.

Sustainable urban transport systems

1.10 **questions** the Commission proposal to develop a separate plan for urban transport systems. One of the most important aspects of a sustainable urban environment is precisely the fact that it links transport systems with land development, and this is best achieved at regional and local level;

1.11 would **encourage** the Commission to disseminate best practice in transport in terms of cooperation and coordination both between the various authorities and between the different modes of transport in order to make transport more efficient and reduce environmental impact.

#### Sustainable construction

1.12 **welcomes** the fact that the Commission is to develop a common methodology for assessing the overall sustainability of buildings and the built environment, as a tool for use in new building and significant renovation;

1.13 **considers** that the Commission must not supplement Directive 2002/91/EC with requirements that are not linked to energy-related environmental performance. The directive must be fully implemented in national legislation and assessed before any further proposals are drafted;

1.14 **appreciates** the Commission proposal to draft national sustainable construction programmes and **agrees** that public purchasers must include a sustainability requirement in their tendering procedures for construction projects.

#### Sustainable urban design

1.15 **appreciates** the fact that the Commission encourages sustainable urban settling patterns and the use of brownfield land over the use of greenfield land, in order to achieve sustainable urban development based on the high-density city;

1.16 **does not recommend** that the Commission should frame guidelines for high density, mixed-use spatial planning. **Neither does it endorse** the proposal for the Commission to define brownfield and greenfield land or develop other guidelines on specific urban design issues. The Committee of the Regions **considers** that spatial planning is a national, regional and local competence, and every country has its own cultural and topographical features, construction traditions, etc.

## 2. Committee of the Regions' recommendations

2.1 **accepts** that the Commission is right to propose ambitious goals for more sustainable urban environment. Believes, however that the role of the Commission is to propose policy frameworks and agree targets but should not include proposing the legislative framework of how this should be achieved;

2.2 **considers** that it is important that EU measures regarding the urban environment recognise and build on already existing urban environmental management plans and environmental management systems that have produced good results, and support local authorities with respect to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality;

2.3 **considers** that environmental management plans and environmental management systems must be assessed further in terms of their environmental benefits, and then developed

for the public sector, with the focus on sustainable urban development;

2.4 **considers** that it is important that EU measures regarding transport systems and mobility recognise and build on already existing transport and mobility plans that have produced good results, and support local authorities with respect to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality;

2.5 **considers** that a sustainable urban transport plan must be based on an integrated approach which is consistent with social, environmental and economic policies at local and regional level. The regional and local level is the most appropriate level for developing sustainable cities and urban areas and for coordinating issues and players in a holistic approach;

2.6 **encourages** development of methods to facilitate the switch to more sustainable modes of transport; examples of areas that need developing are economic management tools, mobility management and intelligent transport systems (ITS);

2.7 **recommends**, as an alternative to legislation, developing tools and methods building on agreements that can win the Member States over to sustainable urban development. The Committee of the Regions **calls on** the Commission to frame urban development agreements, working along the lines of, for example, the open coordination method and the Ålborg Charter, or tripartite agreements. It is essential, here, that the regional and local level be provided with the influence and resources it needs to enable it to take part;

2.8 **calls on** the Commission to develop resources for exchanges of experience and expertise-sharing through networks. Network efforts under Interreg IIIC could provide a model to build on in the Life and Urban programmes, for example;

2.9 **takes a positive view** of the Commission's proposal that the Member States should be encouraged to develop national or regional strategies for the sustainable urban environment. These should be developed into strategies for the sustainable development of cities and agglomerations;

2.10 **takes a positive view** of the Commission's proposal that the Member States should be encouraged to establish national or regional Focal Points to provide cities with back-up in the form of information, expertise and advice. These Focal Points should champion the sustainable development of cities and agglomerations;

2.11 **considers** that the comprehensive national efforts many Member States are making to promote sustainable urban development in areas such as the environmental labelling of construction materials or the renovation of older buildings containing materials incompatible with the environment must be taken on board before framing new systems. Furthermore, the Committee believes that harmonisation measures required to adapt to any new systems must not involve duplication of effort, more red tape or expense;

2.12 would **highlight** the fact that many of the Commission's proposals are concerned with creating standards, systems, indicators and methods to make comparisons between countries possible. The Committee **believes** that it is very important to develop systems that do not put pressure on resources, or increase costs and red tape for regional and local authorities;

2.13 **considers** that it is very important that all the proposals should be flexible and simple, in view of the various countries' situations and needs;

2.14 **considers** that it is important that the Commission proposals should promote a step-by-step approach, and do not

create any tension between cities that manage to implement the proposals at once and those that are unable to comply with them immediately;

2.15 **considers** that the Commission must clarify what is meant by 'towns and cities' and 'urban areas'. Definitions could, if necessary, be worked out in each Member State;

2.16 **stresses** the need for the thematic strategy consistently to take into account the links between the urban environment and its hinterland, making provision, where necessary, for agreements and cooperation with the relevant authorities of the surrounding areas concerned.

Brussels, 30 September 2004

The President  
of the Committee of the Regions  
Peter STRAUB

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on reinforcing the civil protection capacity of the European Union**

(2005/C 43/10)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

**Having regard** to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on *Reinforcing the civil protection capacity of the European Union* (COM(2004) 200 final);

**Having regard** to the decision of the European Commission of 25 March 2004 to consult the Committee of the Regions on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

**Having regard** to the decision of its Bureau of 19 June 2003 to instruct its Commission for Sustainable Development to draw up an opinion on this subject;

**Having regard** to its Opinion on *the management and consequences of natural disasters: the role of European structural policy* of 3 July 2003 (CdR 104/2003 fin) <sup>(1)</sup>;

**Having regard** to Council Decision 1999/847/EC of 9 December 1999 *establishing an action programme in the field of civil protection (2000-2004)* <sup>(2)</sup>;

**Having regard** to Council Decision 2001/792/EC, Euratom of 23 October 2001 *establishing a community mechanism to facilitate reinforced cooperation in civil protection assistance* <sup>(3)</sup>;

**Having regard** to the initiatives of the Commission in late 2003 to adopt the implementing instruments for Council Decision 2001/792;

<sup>(1)</sup> OJ C 256 of 24.10.2003, p. 74

<sup>(2)</sup> OJ L 327 of 21.12.1999, p. 53

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ L 297 of 15.11.2001, p. 7