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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

on Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban areas play an important role in delivering the objectives of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy.[1] In urban areas the environmental, economic and social dimensions meet most strongly.[2] Cities are where many environmental problems are concentrated, but they are also the economic drivers, the places where business is done and investments are made. Four out of five European citizens live in urban areas, and their quality of life is directly influenced by the state of the urban environment. A high quality urban environment also contributes to the priority of the renewed Lisbon Strategy to '*make Europe a more attractive place to work and invest'*. The attractiveness of European cities will enhance their potential for growth and job creation, and cities are therefore of key importance to the implementation of the Lisbon Agenda.[3]

However, there are increasing concerns about the state of Europe's urban environment. The environmental challenges facing cities have significant consequences for human health, the quality of life of urban citizens and the economic performance of the cities themselves. The 6th Environment Action Programme (6th EAP) called for the development of a Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment with the objective of '*contributing to a better quality of life through an integrated approach concentrating on urban areas*' and to contribute '*to a high level of quality of life and social well-being for citizens by providing an environment where the level of pollution does not give rise to harmful effects on human health and the environment and by encouraging sustainable urban development'*.

In line with the 6th EAP, the Commission set out its initial analysis of the challenges facing urban areas in an interim Communication,[4] and suggested actions in four priority themes: urban management, sustainable transport, construction and urban design, such as mainstreaming of good practice and possible EU obligations to adopt plans at the local level. Extensive consultations of stakeholders and thorough analysis of possible ways forward have taken place, the results of which are the basis for the present strategy.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES FACING URBAN AREAS

Most cities are confronted with a common core set of environmental problems such as poor air quality, high levels of traffic and congestion, high levels of ambient noise,

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1 COM(2001) 264.
2 This is reflected in the Bristol Accord: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?docid=1162287.
3 COM(2005) 330.
4 "Towards a Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment" COM(2004) 60.

poor-quality built environment, derelict land, greenhouse gas emissions, urban sprawl, generation of waste and waste-water.

The causes of the problems include changes in lifestyle (growing dependence on the private car, increase in one-person households, increasing resource use per capita) and demographic changes, which have to be taken into account in developing solutions. These solutions need to be forward-looking, incorporating risk prevention aspects, such as anticipating the impacts of climate change (e.g. increased flooding) or progressively reducing dependency on fossil fuels.

The environmental problems in cities are particularly complex as their causes are inter-related. Local initiatives to resolve one problem can lead to new problems elsewhere and can conflict with policies at national or regional level. For example, policies to improve air quality through the purchase of clean buses can be undermined by private transport growth brought about by land-use decisions (e.g. the construction of city-centre car parks). Problems related to a poor quality built environment are often linked to underlying socio-economic problems.

It is widely recognised that the most successful local authorities use integrated approaches to manage the urban environment by adopting long-term and strategic action plans, in which links between different policies and obligations, including at different administrative levels, are analysed in detail (see annex). Obligations imposed at local, regional, national or European level (e.g. land-use, noise, air quality) can be more effectively implemented at the local level when integrated into a local strategic management framework.

3. THE ADDED VALUE OF ACTION AT EU LEVEL

Local authorities have a decisive role in improving the urban environment. The diversity in terms of history, geography, climate, administrative and legal conditions calls for locally developed, tailor-made solutions for the urban environment. Application of the subsidiarity principle, where action should be taken at the most effective level, also implies acting at the local level.

However, the urban environment needs action at all levels: national and regional authorities, as well as the EU, all have a role to play.

Many solutions already exist in certain cities but are not sufficiently disseminated or implemented. The EU can best support Member States and local authorities by promoting Europe's best practices, facilitating their widespread use throughout Europe and encouraging effective networking and exchange of experiences between cities. It can offer financial support for investments to meet environmental priorities and support capacity building by making funds available for research and training, by developing relevant guidance and encouraging the establishment of national advisory points for cities.

It is essential that Member States exploit the opportunities offered at EU level as highlighted in this Strategy for the benefit of the local authorities. They are also invited to support local authorities to meet the objectives of this Strategy by promoting close cooperation and coordination between relevant administrative bodies to identify effective solutions for their cities and regions.

The assessment of urban environment problems, the need for action at all levels and the added value of EU level involvement was shared by all stakeholders, including Member States[5] in the numerous consultations held. The Commission examined different options, including the desirability of legislating to ensure that integrated management would be done at the local level (see impact assessment). However, given the diversity of urban areas and existing national, regional and local obligations, and the difficulties linked to establishing common standards on all urban environment issues, it was decided that legislation would not be the best way to achieve the objectives of this Strategy. Most Member States and local authorities supported this approach, questioning the need for binding EU obligations on environmental management and urban transport plans.

4. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STRATEGY

The measures offered under this Strategy aim to contribute to a better implementation of existing EU environment policies and legislation at the local level by supporting and encouraging local authorities to adopt a more integrated approach to urban management and by inviting Member States to support this process and exploit the opportunities offered at EU level.

If implemented at all levels, the Strategy will ultimately contribute to improve the quality of the urban environment, making cities more attractive and healthier places to live, work and invest in, and reduce the adverse environmental impact of cities on the wider environment, for instance as regards climate change.

5. THE MEASURES

The integrated approach to environmental management at the local level and to transport in particular, based on effective consultation of all stakeholders, is key to successful implementation of environment legislation and to achieve long lasting improvements in environmental quality and performance. There is a need to support local authorities in adopting these management techniques.

5.1. Guidance on integrated environmental management

Adopting an integrated approach to the management of the urban environment helps avoid conflicts between the range of policies and initiatives that apply in urban areas and helps achieve a long-term vision for the development of the city. In addition to the voluntary initiatives Local Agenda 21 and Aalborg Commitments,[6] several Member States have legislated or put mechanisms in place to require integrated management of the urban environment.[7]

Integrated approaches result in better planning and more significant results. Clearly defined objectives, targets, accepted responsibilities, procedures for monitoring progress, public consultation, review, audit and reporting are crucial for effective

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5 Council Conclusions 14.10.2004.

6 www.aalborgplus10.dk

7 Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, France, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia: legislation; Cyprus, Czech Republic: considering mechanisms; UK: some elements.

implementation of measures. Many successful cities have put in place environmental management systems such as EMAS or ISO 14001 to ensure the delivery of policy objectives and provide public scrutiny on progress. Information campaigns about the improvements delivered are important (e.g. European Mobility Week).

The Commission strongly recommends local authorities to take the necessary steps to achieve greater use of integrated management at the local level and encourages national and regional authorities to support this process.

The Commission will provide technical guidance in 2006 on integrated environmental management, drawing on experiences and giving good practice examples. Reference will be made to the most relevant EU environmental legislation e.g. air, noise, water, waste and energy efficiency directives.

5.2. Guidance on sustainable urban transport plans

Urban transport has a direct impact on air pollution, noise, congestion and CO_2 emissions and it is fundamental to citizens and business. The adoption and implementation of urban transport plans is obligatory in certain Member States.[8] Some cities adopt plans on a voluntary basis to improve quality of life or in order to comply with EU standards to protect human health (e.g. air quality).

Effective, transport planning requires long-term vision to plan financial requirements for infrastructure and vehicles, to design incentive schemes to promote high quality public transport, safe cycling and walking and to coordinate with land-use planning at the appropriate administrative levels. Transport planning should take account of safety and security, access to goods and services, air pollution, noise, greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption, land use, cover passenger and freight transportation and all modes of transport. Solutions need to be tailor-made, based on wide consultation of the public and other stakeholders, and targets must reflect the local situation. The Commission strongly recommends local authorities to develop and implement Sustainable Urban Transport Plans.

The Commission will provide technical guidance in 2006 on the main aspects of transport plans based on the recommendations of the 2004 Expert Working Group[9] and give best practice examples.

5.3. Support for EU wide exchange of best practices

Improving local authorities' access to existing solutions is important to allow them to learn from each other and develop solutions adapted to their specific situation. The information has to be well structured, easily available and supported by the right experts.

5.3.1. Networking and Demonstration Projects

The exchange of experience between local authorities financed by the Commission under the 'Cooperation Framework'[10] showed that there are many advantages in

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8 France, UK: legislation; Cyprus, Czech Republic: considering mechanisms; Italy: some elements.

9 europa.eu.int/comm/environment/urban/pdf/final_report050128.pdf

working together to develop solutions for each local situation based on their respective experiences and difficulties. The Commission proposes to continue supporting comparable activities under the new LIFE+ Regulation.[11] The Cohesion Policy[12] and the Research Framework Programme will offer similar opportunities as well as demonstration projects on a range of urban environment issues.

The Commission will offer support for the exchange of good practice and for demonstration projects on urban issues for local and regional authorities through these instruments. Member States, regional and local authorities are encouraged to exploit these opportunities.

5.3.2. Network of National Focal Points on Urban Issues

Local authorities report difficulty in accessing information on initiatives which have delivered promising results. Most good practice is not independently evaluated and is not accessible in one place. The Commission is co-financing under URBACT a pilot network of national focal points ('European Knowledge Platform'[13]) to provide structured and evaluated information on social, economic and environmental issues in urban areas in response to enquiries from local authorities.

The Commission will evaluate the pilot (end 2006) and consider whether it can be used as a building block for a "European framework programme for the exchange of experience on urban development" under the proposed Cohesion Policy 2007-2013.

5.4. Commission Internet Portal for Local Authorities

At present, Communications, research findings, studies and guidance relevant to local authorities are made available through different Commission websites, making it difficult to find this information.

As part of the Action Plan to improve communicating Europe[14] the Commission is exploring the development of thematic portals on the Europa website for certain specialist audiences. A portal would provide links to all information of relevance and would improve the flow of information.

The Commission will assess the feasibility of establishing a thematic portal for local authorities.

5.5. Training

Many local authorities have expressed the need for specific skills to adopt an integrated approach to management involving cross-sector cooperation and training on specific environmental legislation, effective public participation and encouraging changes in citizens' behaviour.

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10 Decision 1411/2001/EC.
11 COM(2004) 621.
12 COM(2004) 495.
13 Led by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior with 15 Member States participating.
14 SEC(2005) 985.

'Face to face' training with the involvement of national, regional and local authorities is regarded by stakeholders as the most valuable learning method. The future LIFE+ Regulation is proposed to provide support for local capacity to assist in the implementation of environmental policy. This could include exchange programmes for officials in local authorities.

The Commission proposal for the European Social Fund[15] also offers opportunities for strengthening the efficiency of public administrations at regional and local level.

The Commission will use the new LIFE+ Regulation and other instruments to support capacity building for local and regional authorities on urban management issues, and it encourages Member States to initiate such activities.

5.6. Drawing on Other Community Support Programmes

The Strategy will also need to draw on the opportunities presented by other policies in order to achieve its objectives.

5.6.1. Cohesion Policy

The Commission's proposals for the Cohesion Fund[16] and Structural Funds[17] for the period 2007-2013 include significant opportunities for assistance to address environmental priorities in urban areas (e.g. waste management, urban waste-water treatment, air quality, clean urban public transport, energy efficiency, rehabilitation of contaminated land and integrated strategies for urban regeneration).

The Commission strongly encourages Member States to exploit these opportunities to address the problems facing their urban areas and give the National Strategic Reference Frameworks an appropriate urban focus.

5.6.2. Research

Much EU research on urban issues is already carried out[18] and actions 5.3-5.4 will improve its dissemination. The Commission's proposal for the 7th Framework Programme for Research[19] sets out that further research is considered useful on innovative urban management, rehabilitation of the man-made environment including the cultural heritage, environmental risk, energy efficiency, clean vehicles and alternative fuels, mobility, safety and security.

The Commission will offer support for further urban research and will actively involve local authorities and endeavour to make material developed for them available in many languages to facilitate use at the local level.

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15 COM(2004) 493.
16 COM(2004) 494 .
17 COM(2004) 495.
18 E.g. 145 'City of Tomorrow & Cultural Heritage' projects.
19 COM(2005) 119.

6. SYNERGIES WITH OTHER POLICIES

This Strategy is cross-cutting, covering many environmental media and issues. It will contribute to the implementation of the priorities of the 6th EAP and other environmental policies, including the other Thematic Strategies.

Different environment policies (air quality, noise etc) ask that abatement plans be drawn up. By placing these plans in the context of a local integrated framework as proposed in this strategy, synergies between many policy areas can be developed, giving improved results, both for the environment and for the overall quality of life in the urban area.

6.1. Climate change

Urban areas have an important role to play in both adapting to climate change and mitigating greenhouse gas emissions.

Urban areas are vulnerable to the consequences of climate change such as flooding, heat waves, more frequent and severe water shortages. Integrated urban management plans should incorporate measures to limit **environmental risk** to enable urban areas to deal better with such changes.

Priority areas for local authorities to decrease greenhouse gas emissions are transport and building.

Wider implementation of **Sustainable Urban Transport Plans** including specific measures to promote low CO_2-emission and energy-efficient vehicles will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions at the local level.

Sustainable construction improves energy efficiency with a corresponding decrease in CO_2 emissions. Local Authorities can promote such methods by raising awareness, setting and enforcing standards where possible and adopting best practices for their own buildings and buildings that they commission through green public procurement. In this context, retrofitting of existing buildings is of significant importance. The Commission strongly encourages Member States, regional and local authorities to develop programmes to promote sustainable construction in their cities.

To promote energy efficiency and use of renewable energy among local and regional actors, the Commission will also continue, in support of its **energy policy,** the use of the Intelligent Energy – Europe programme.[20] The Green Paper on Energy Efficiency[21] asks whether the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive[22] should be extended to smaller buildings when renovated.

To allow **comparison of buildings** across Europe and encourage **exchange of best practices,** the Commission has mandated the European Standardisation Organisation

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20 Energy efficiency in buildings and industry (SAVE), cogeneration of heat and power, new and renewable energy sources for electricity, heat, biofuels (ALTENER), energy aspects of transport (STEER).

21 COM(2005)265

22 Directive 2002/91/EC.

(CEN) to develop methods to assess the integrated environmental performance of buildings (beyond energy efficiency).[23]

6.2. Nature and Biodiversity

Sustainable urban design (appropriate land-use planning) will help reduce urban sprawl and the loss of natural habitats and biodiversity. Integrated management of the urban environment should foster sustainable land-use policies which avoid urban sprawl and reduce soil-sealing, include **promotion of urban biodiversity** and raise awareness for urban citizens.

The Thematic Strategy on **Soil Protection**, under development, is likely to address the rehabilitation and reuse of brownfield sites and space-saving spatial planning with the aim of reducing soil sealing and ensuring rational use of soil.

6.3. Environment and the Quality of Life

Sustainable urban transport plans will help reduce air pollution and noise, and encourage cycling and walking, improving **health** and reducing obesity. Sustainable construction methods will help promote comfort, safety, accessibility and reduce health impacts from indoor and outdoor air pollution, notably particulate matter from heating systems.

Existing **Air Quality** legislation[24] requires plans to be established when limit values are or might be exceeded. Those situations are experienced in many cities, particularly for particulate matter (PM_{10}) pollution mainly emitted by road traffic and combustion plants. In the context of its Thematic Strategy on Air Pollution,[25] the Commission will consider targets and measures[26] aimed at controlling particulate matter and ozone pollution, including Community measures relating to transport, new vehicles and small combustion plants. Achieving Community air quality objectives requires an integrated approach involving city authorities. Sustainable Urban Transport Plans and better integrated management of the urban area, including district heating, could help cities in complying with these obligations.

Transport plays a critical role in the context of climate change, air quality and sustainable development. The Commission will consider a wide set of actions to contribute to the improvement of the urban environment, including new vehicle standards (EURO 5, EURO VI), it will reflect on measures to promote wider use of differentiated charging in environmentally sensitive areas and for the designation of low emission zones with restrictions for polluting transport. The Commission recently adopted a proposal for a directive on the procurement of clean vehicles by public authorities.[27]

As part of the review of the Common Transport Policy[28] the Commission will address the need for further action in the field of urban transport, notably by

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23 CEN Mandate M/350.
24 europa.eu.int/comm/environment/air/ambient.htm
25 COM(2005) 446.
26 These measures will be subject to an impact assessment.
27 COM(2005)634
28 COM(2001) 370.

examining the role of private vehicles in cities and the means to improve the quality of public transport.

The Commission intends to continue its funding of the CIVITAS Initiative[29] that helps cities in achieving a significant change in modal split, promote the use of cleaner vehicles and tackle congestion. CIVITAS also supports training, exchange of information and take up of results.

Noise maps and action plans on **environmental noise** are required by EU law[30] to reduce noise in major urban areas where exposure levels can induce harmful effects on human health, and to protect quiet areas against increases in noise. Sustainable Urban Transport Plans will help compliance with these requirements by identifying measures to manage noise from urban transport.

6.4. Sustainable use of natural resources

The Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources[31] will highlight the importance of using natural resources in an efficient way which reduces environmental impacts. Better urban management can reduce the impacts of day to day use of resources such as energy and water. Avoiding urban sprawl through high density and mixed-use settlement patterns offers environmental advantages regarding land use, transport and heating contributing to less resource use per capita.

The proposed Directive under the Thematic Strategy on the **Prevention and Recycling of Waste**[32] clarifies the obligation for Member States to draw up waste prevention programmes at the most appropriate geographical level. Integrated urban environmental management should cover local waste prevention measures.

7. BUILDING THE KNOWLEDGE BASE – MONITORING PROGRESS

To monitor the effectiveness of this Strategy, up to date, accessible urban data is needed. The Commission, with the help of the EEA and in close cooperation with the Member States, will work to improve European data on urban environment issues without increasing the burden for national, regional or local authorities, in order to evaluate the environmental performance of European urban areas over time. This will be done in the context of INSPIRE (Infrastructure for Spatial Information in Europe) and link with the GEO[33] and GMES initiatives.[34]

The Commission will undertake a further Urban Audit in 2006 and publish a report in 2006 based on indicators describing the living conditions in a number of EU cities, covering economic, social and environmental aspects.

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29 www.civitas-initiative.org
30 Directive 2002/49/EC.
31 COM(2005) 670.
32 COM(2005) 667.
33 Group on Earth Observation.
34 COM(2004) 65.

8. CONCLUSION

Creating high quality urban areas requires close coordination between different policies and initiatives, and better cooperation between different levels of administration. Member States have a responsibility to help regional and local authorities to improve the environmental performance of the cities of their country. The support measures provided by this strategy should contribute to helping local authorities and other actors in identifying the measures suited to their particular situation and taking advantage of exchange of information throughout the EU. They could also help promote good practice on urban environmental management outside the EU (e.g. to the UN Environment Programme's 'Green City' initiative).[35]

Member States, local and regional authorities and other stakeholders will be invited to submit their views on the impact of the measures contained in this Strategy on a regular basis as well as part of a wide consultation exercise in 2009. These views together with the available data on environment performance at the urban level will be assessed as part of the review of the 6th EAP in 2010 where the need for further measures will be considered.

[35] www.wed2005.org

ANNEX

- Examples

Integrated environmental management - Copenhagen

Under Danish law, the city of Copenhagen adopted a Local Agenda 21 strategy. Together with several other more specific strategies for different sectors (e.g. traffic, waste, CO_2, risks) and Copenhagen's own environmental management system for the entire city (called 'Dogme 2000'), these constitute Copenhagen's integrated approach to the management of the city's environment.

The Local Agenda 21 Strategy is not yet fully implemented, but noticeable improvements are reported by the city authority in many environmental challenges including air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, energy use, ecological footprint, recycling and the number of buildings constructed using sustainable construction methods and techniques. The Copenhagen authority also believes that there has been an increase in the city's competitive advantage as a result, since the city can present its environmental policies and projects to companies interested in relocating there. Properties near to the now cleaner bathing water have seen their rental value rise. Work with ethnic minorities on developing solutions to environmental issues has led to greater social inclusion of these communities and better community relations with the city authority. The authority itself is more efficient at planning and managing the urban environment and the level of staff awareness of environmental issues is higher than before.

Sustainable Urban Transport Planning - Nantes

The 'Plan de déplacements urbains' (PDU) of the Nantes conurbation (24 municipalities and 569 000 inhabitants) was adopted in 2000 under French law.

The law set ambitious targets for controlling private car traffic demand (target: a reduction to 50% of all journeys by 2010 from 62% in 2002) and reducing its related emissions (noise, CO2, air pollutants) by developing efficient and clean collective transport systems, managing parking supply and fees, promoting intensive use of cycling and supporting development of travel plans by businesses and public institutions. To date, a 6-7% annual increase in demand for transport has been recorded.

The main actions implemented in the PDU are:

* complete renewal of the bus fleet (150 vehicles) with natural gas buses which will make it one of the cleanest urban bus fleets in Europe.

* funding dedicated extensions of the public transport network (tramway, bus, tram-bus and rail infrastructures) and increasing frequency, accessibility, coordination with other modes and operating hours.

* integrated public transport pricing and ticketing for all collective transport networks.

* voluntary development of travel plans in cooperation with the major employers of the conurbation (13 to date are signed).

* extension and improvement of the cycling network (300km to date) and development of cycle hire services.

* integrated parking policy favouring residents, short duration parking for visitors, supervision of parking areas, development of Park and Ride areas (2,500 parking places) close to major railway stations, parking spaces dedicated to bicycles.