**Can we plan for wellbeing?**

**Karen Scott attends the All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics 12 May 2014 House of Commons**

I have just returned from attending a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics in the House of Commons. This was the last of a series of four special meetings which explored how to improve wellbeing without putting more pressure on the public purse. The meetings have focussed in turn on culture, the labour market, mindfulness and this last meeting looked at planning policy. Evidence was presented by representatives from new economics foundation, Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), The Design Council (formerly CABE), Campaign for Better Transport and Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) on three aspects of planning policy and wellbeing: green space, transport and designing for social connections. This included the (unsurprising) findings that access to green space and nature, high quality environments, low commuting and less car use were linked to higher rates of wellbeing and social capital. Some of the discussion focussed on getting different departments to work together and the new Health and Wellbeing Boards were seen as an opportunity for bringing public health to work more closely with planning. A large part of the conversation focussed on design of the built environment to encourage people to take more exercise. Perhaps due to the focus on saving public money and the current political agendas, there seemed to be a pre-occupation with individual behaviour change. I would have liked to have seen more on the agenda about how planning could tackle social inequalities, encourage participatory processes and promote affordable housing provision, also very important for wellbeing. Nevertheless, the evidence presented generated lively debate which did generate some tricky political and structural issues. For example, after hearing all the evidence Lord Richard Layard (formerly dubbed the ‘wellbeing guru’ because of his continued lobbying on these matters in parliament) raised a question about the concept of the green belt. His opinion was that this was partly responsible for the lack of affordable homes and that it would be better to have large areas of green space throughout all development where people could access it easily, rather than at the edges. He suggested the solution was ‘conceptually simple’ and that we should ‘repeal’ the green belt policy. This provoked a surge of laughter and a comment of ‘you try that one in The House of Lords!’. The planning officer from DCLG explained that green belt policy was there to stop settlements coalescing. Lord Layard looked bemused and asked, ‘Sorry, but in terms of wellbeing, what’s the problem with settlements coalescing?’. The planning officer replied that we should not deregulate planning policy as that would cause all sorts of social problems. Lord Layard stressed that he was not arguing for deregulation of planning policy but a specific change to one aspect of it. This exchange laid bare for me the specific political culture in UK and (relatedly) the deeply entrenched protectionism towards our countryside which means that a suggestion to change green belt policy is interpreted as ‘unpolitical’ and a threat to the whole idea of planning regulation. It was an interesting meeting and more interesting than the evidence presented were the clear indications of what is and is not politically possible.