

Towards an Urban Renaissance—a Report by the Urban Task Force

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The Government has placed the concept of an Urban Regeneration at the heart of its policies on planning and development.

Renewed interest in urban development has been prompted partly by forecasts that 4.0 million new households are expected to form by the year 2021, and partly by a growing recognition of the poor quality of life in many urban areas.

The need to accommodate these additional households over the next two decades has stimulated a wide ranging discussion about the future of our towns and cities and how they are planned and developed. Just as importantly it has required policy makers to focus much more clearly on public needs and aspirations in relation to where people do or do not want to live.

The reason for the passion is that the impetus of current policy to encourage more housebuilding in urban areas appears to run counter to the expressed desires of many people, and indeed to a housebuilding industry which reflects and shapes those desires.

However, such are the pressures to reduce the amount of new housing built on greenfield sites that we must consider how our urban areas can be revitalised, with particular reference to increasing the amount and attractiveness of development in urban areas.

I am in no doubt that this is a time for change. It is an opportunity which was not available to previous generations.

It results from significant and recent shifts in demographic, economic, social and environmental patterns. All the most important indicators are now pointing towards the need to prioritise our urban areas.

The socio-demographic imperative is not only to house the additional 4 million households, but also to respond to changing patterns of household formation and migration.

The economic imperative is to secure a competitive urban base having regard to a post-industrial information economy.

The social imperative is to achieve a more mixed and stable society.

The environmental imperative is to manage the sustainable development of town and countryside.

All of these factors point towards the need for an urban renaissance.

We need to create a new vision for our towns and cities. The vision is that of a sustainable city—cities, towns and urban neighbourhoods which develop in a way that generates wealth, prioritises social equity, promotes cultural achievement and safeguards the natural environment.

The industrial age generated wealth and improved social conditions, but the carbon-based economy eroded the urban environment and dispersed people and wealth to the periphery of our urban areas.

It left behind a landscape of declining city centres, large tracts of derelict and contaminated land, empty

and under-used buildings and concentrations of residents with low incomes and little or no choice but to stay.

The transition to a knowledge-based economy is under way. With its accent on clean technologies and data transaction as the basis of economic growth, the information era provides us with the opportunity to reclaim our towns and cities.

For the first time since the Industrial Revolution we can readily mix residential and commercial uses within the same compact urban environment.

Indeed the long standing desire of people for healthy living environments which drove our predecessors out of the city can now be met within the city.

And many now believe that the most sustainable development option at the start of the 21st Century is to concentrate people and jobs at the heart of our urban areas, thus reducing energy consumption and avoiding damage to the countryside.

The impact of new technology when married to the environmental imperative of increased resource efficiency, could change the face of our towns and cities for ever.

Over the next thirty or so years we are likely to see new forms of building and transport that will force us to re-think how our towns and cities function.

The way that we intervene to alter the configuration of our cities will not alone determine the success of those cities but it can help create the right conditions for sustaining shared prosperity within an attractive and well managed urban environment.

We should now be able to achieve a better balance in economic terms between different English Regions and the towns and cities in those regions.

The next century will bring significant opportunities to reverse recent trends which have seen overwhelming pressures on the environment in the South East of the country while at the same time draining the life blood from ex-industrial towns in the North and in the Midlands.

The slowing but continuing population shift from inner urban to suburban and rural areas has undermined the economic and social welfare of some of our towns and cities leaving behind marginalised and impoverished communities.

We must develop the skills, powers and resources to reverse these trends, and create attractive and sustainable urban environments where people will want to be.

It is so easy to disbelieve what could be done, but there is recent evidence of change which is encouraging.

In some urban areas population growth in the centre is overtaking growth in the outer rings. After decades, the four central London boroughs are once again showing increases in population.

Leeds and Manchester are also enjoying influxes of new residents into their centres.

This demonstrates some new appetite for urban living; not a trend significant enough to drive a renaissance but certainly evidence that urban neighbourhoods can become places of choice.

These early signs of changing attitudes towards urban living will grow as we change and improve our towns and cities.

So, assuming that the desire and willingness of more people to live in towns and cities comes about, how much of the new housing required could be accommodated there?

A report from Friends of the Earth prepared by URBED (the Urban and Economic Development Group) has concluded that the total potential capacity of urban areas may be very significant and that it may be possible, with the right policy regime, to accommodate 75 per cent of new housing within urban areas.

This 75 per cent figure is well above the Government's own target of 60 per cent, and in fairness to URBED its main sources of urban capacity that might accommodate these households are given with a health warning—they should not be taken as an indication of what is viable under current policies or market conditions.

They nevertheless give an idea of the maximum capacity that might be realised in the future and considered under these headings:—

- recycled (brownfield) land;
- the redevelopment of existing housing areas;
- the development of car parks;
- the conversion of vacant commercial space;
- the use of unoccupied living space over shops;
- the intensification of existing housing areas;
- the sub-division of existing housing, and
- the better use of existing housing stock.

These are all potential opportunities that must be looked at to help increase the amount of housing that can be achieved in urban areas.

However, there are a number of constraints that will need to be overcome.

Many sites with redevelopment potential will have been used in such a way as to be contaminated.

Decontamination can be costly and sometimes difficult.

There may be land assembly or ownership problems. Vacant possession could involve costly relocation for existing occupiers.

Unattractive adjoining or surrounding activities, the lack of adequate public services and facilities, and ease of access to work.

A major problem to be overcome in many cases will be financial viability.

New housing will, however, have a major role in restructuring our cities. It also means rebuilding the crumbling infrastructure of schools, clinics, public libraries, parks and all the inter-connecting spaces in between.

The Urban Task Force, which was set up in April last year, has addressed all of these issues and more.

Its Report was launched on June 29 this year and is probably the first attempt ever to look at all aspects of the development of the urban place in one volume.

It contains policy conclusions and recommendations for Government and others to respond to.

It is coupled with the issue of four supporting consultancy reports/papers commissioned as part of the Task Force work programme, plus an Executive summary.

Our Mission was to identify causes of urban decline in England and to recommend practical solutions to bring people back into our cities, towns and urban neighbourhoods. To establish a new vision for urban regeneration founded on the principles of design excellence, social wellbeing and environmental responsibility within a viable economic and legislative framework.

For the first three months after we were set up we acted as a Select Committee receiving evidence.

The Task Force received a considerable number of detailed responses to its consultation exercise from local authorities, developers, national, regional and community organisations and numerous individuals, who set out their vision for our urban future.

In the Autumn last year we undertook a programme of study tours which included visits to the Netherlands, Germany, the United States and Spain, as well as places in the UK including East London, Sandwell, Portsmouth, Sheffield, Hull, Manchester, Leicester, Plymouth, Liverpool and Newcastle.

During the Winter we sought to agree on our likely recommendations and we spent most of the Spring drafting the Report. A Report which in its final form had unanimous support—at least no member of the Task force found it necessary to produce a minority report over any point of difference.

As part of our work we called for independent studies on urban development skills, tax incentives, use of planning obligations and urban attitudes.

We learned from our work and visits that regeneration has to be design-led. But to be sustainable, regeneration also has to be placed within its economic and social context.

There are other essential issues—education, health, welfare and security—which were outside our remit.

However, it is important that through the forthcoming Urban White Paper and into the future, Government departments and institutions combine policies, powers and resources to achieve an integrated approach in meeting the needs of sustainable urban communities.

Our Report contains over 100 recommendations for change.

They cover design, transport, management, regeneration, skills, planning and investment.

We recognise that there is a need for a wide variety of solutions to meet the problems ranging from the deprived inner city council estate to the suburban neighbourhood.

The complexity of the Report and its recommendations reflect the complexity of the urban condition in England.

We believe that now is the time for change.

We believe that our towns, cities and urban neighbourhoods must become places where people will *want* to live and to work.

Where people, business and institutions will want to invest.

Places of opportunity and sustainable growth.

Places of choice.

So—how do we achieve this urban renaissance?

Here are some of our key proposals:

To create sustainable towns and cities: based on commitment to excellence in urban design and the creation of integrated urban transport systems that prioritise the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and public transport passengers.

- Create a **national urban design framework**, disseminating key design principles through land use planning and public funding guidance.
- Undertake **area demonstration projects** which illustrate the benefits of a design-led approach to the urban regeneration process, based upon production of a spatial masterplan and public participation.
- Introduce **Home Zones**, in partnership with local communities, which give residential areas special legal status in controlling traffic movement through the neighbourhood.
- Commit a minimum **65 per cent of transport public expenditure** to walking, cycling and public transport over the next ten years.

To make our towns and cities work: by radically improving the management of the urban environment, targeting resources on the regeneration of areas of economic and social decline, and investing in the skills and innovative capacity required to secure lasting change.

- Give local authorities a strategic role in **managing the whole urban environment**, with powers to ensure that other property owners maintain their land and premises to an acceptable standard.
- Create designated **Urban Priority Areas**, where special regeneration measures will apply, including a streamlined planning process, accelerated compulsory purchase powers and fiscal incentives.
- Develop a network of **Regional Resource Centres for Urban Development**, promoting regional innovation and good practice, co-ordinating urban development training and encouraging community involvement in the regeneration process.

We must make the most of our urban land and building assets: by making development on brownfield sites more attractive than building on greenfield land.

The priority is to make the planning system operate more strategically and flexibly in securing urban renaissance objectives:

- Make **statutory development plans** more strategic and flexible in scope, and devolve detailed planning policies for neighbourhood regeneration into **targeted area plans**.
- Adopt a **sequential approach** to the release of land and buildings for housing, so that previously developed land and buildings get used first.
- Establish a **national framework** for dealing with the risks throughout the assessment, treatment and after-care of **contaminated sites**.
- Require every local authority to maintain an **empty property strategy** that sets clear targets for reducing levels of vacant stock.
- Establish a *Renaissance Fund* whereby community groups and voluntary organisations can access the resources needed to tackle derelict buildings and other eyesores spoiling their urban neighbourhood.

Make the investment: by ensuring that sufficient public funds and fiscal measures are used to lever in greater amounts of private investment into urban regeneration projects.

- Establish national **public-private investment funds** and **regional investment companies**, to attract additional funding for area regeneration projects.
- Introduce a **new financial instrument** for attracting institutional investment into **the residential private rented sector**.
- Introduce a package of **tax measures**, providing incentives for developers, investors, small landlords, owner-occupiers and tenants to contribute to the regeneration of urban land and buildings.
- Include the objective of an urban renaissance in the **Government's spending review** which will determine public expenditure priorities for the early years of the new millennium.

We propose to review the **local government spending formula**, which determines the allocation of central government resources, so that it reflects the financial needs of urban authorities in managing and maintaining their areas.

The Task Force proposes that the Government establishes a new Urban Policy Board to co-ordinate policy and produce annually a 'State of the Towns and Cities' report.

Chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and reporting directly to Cabinet, the Board would bring Ministers together with leaders from regional and local government to push forward the agenda for change.

The Task Force's ten key objectives for urban policy up to 2021 are:

1. All urban neighbourhoods will be managed according to principles of **sustainable development**. The main environmental indicators—air pollution, ground contamination, energy use, water recycling and waste disposal—will show significant improvement;
2. a **more balanced national economy** will allow for a more even distribution of economic opportunities and income within cities, between cities and between regions. Key social indicators, such as educational achievement, health, crime and poverty, will have improved;
3. **substantial increase in recycling of previously-developed 'brownfield' land** in line with local needs and projected demand for housing. A parallel decrease in demand for greenfield sites will have taken place;
4. **urban repopulation** with year on year growth in the number of people living in towns and cities. Movement will have taken place from the outskirts to inner areas and distinctions between market and social housing will have become blurred;
5. **Increased quality of life** with at least five major English cities being in the European 'top 50'. None will be in the bottom third;
6. attitude surveys showing that people and investors take a **positive view of urban areas**, enjoy living in towns and cities and regard them as safe and attractive places to raise children;
7. **All urban areas managed** according to standards agreed by local community;
8. England will enjoy a **world-wide reputation** for innovation in sustainable and high quality urban design;
9. public services such as health, education and social services will include a **clear urban dimension** that specifically address the needs and aspirations of urban communities;
10. England will have become the **leading international location** to acquire urban development skills.