

# Putting the Heart and Soul into Planning

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Regeneration has often given local authorities a bad press; examples of “schemes”, “programmes” and “regimes” which have failed to deliver to budget, to time or even failed to get off the ground. But the reality is that whilst the spotlight may focus on a few high-profile regeneration programmes, on a day to day basis local government and local partners, with local communities, are continually developing and improving their areas, creating better conditions for people to live, work and enjoy.

Regeneration is core business for any local authority, differing depending on the nature of the area, local needs and the appetite of local communities. But regeneration has been a victim of a badly organised system; a public service system which is fragmented, over centralised and frequently failing to meet local needs. We know we are in trouble when there’s an announcement about a central approach, a national programme; attempts to apply a single methodology to what ultimately is about improving lives.

Good regeneration, which delivers lasting, positive change for people and place depends upon all of us: local, central; public and private; and, of course, residents. But every player—planners, designers, funders, developers and residents—needs a clear role and the roles need to be understood. Often regeneration fails, or even fails to get off the ground because some of the players haven’t always been present, have been too present, or have occupied the wrong seats.

And central government, often with good intentions, has sought to control too much, whether resources, services or outcomes, at the local level. Local government in turn has often shied away from radical change, operating with a sometimes inflexible planning regime, and often not equipped with sufficient resources to invest and only a medium term horizon till the next election. Naturally, land owners and developers have additional motives to make profit, operating business models which might have longer or shorter timeframes. And we haven’t always been clear about the role that local residents can play in regeneration. Often we’ve relied on assumptions, old thinking and clumsy mechanisms, and not invested enough time, energy and sometimes money at the very start. So regeneration is complicated before a plan is even made.

Understanding the context at the very local level means that anything other than very locally grown regeneration risks being more damaging than beneficial. Centrally driven regeneration programmes, attempting to apply standardised methodologies and a generous amount of bureaucracy frequently fail to achieve their objectives.

They forced communities and councils to over-compromise, imposed tiers of governance and programme management that was little understood, sapped ambition and creativity, and diluted quality. Only local government working with communities and local partners in a flexible and local planning regime can sustainably renew areas and secure better life chances.

If we accept that delivering successful regeneration is a team effort, then local government has a distinctive role. A council is there to provide structure, ambition, capacity as well as opportunity that stretches across individual places, within borough and beyond. Because, of course, boroughs are not homogenous, and the boundaries are not real, just administrative. One of the jobs of the local authority is to operate the telescope; provide all the players with the wide and narrow views. Local government has the mandate and ability to stand back and see the whole place.

Within local government, there are also different perspectives on regeneration. This is sometimes seen as everyone’s business; planners, housing specialists, public health, social care, community development and engagement leads. It can be pretty crowded. But equally it can be seen as no one’s business; projects which become contested, views entrenched, the balance of physical and social, the extent of change, making numbers add up. Some projects just feel too difficult. If we were to design local government from

scratch, “regeneration”—improving places and opportunities—would be at the core, and we would design services around it.

## **Drivers for regeneration**

The different perspectives on regeneration also originate from there being different objectives. Improving places and the delivery systems that make places work, looks different to a planner or public health specialist.

The truth of course is that good regeneration is, and always has been, about places, people and systems. Track back to the 19th century when urban regeneration tackling horrific housing conditions was also the key to social and economic reform and what were the first, organised, attempts at “place making”. Many of the issues facing London in the 1850’s are recognisable today: a growing population and, as a consequence, a strain on public services; a severe housing crisis; many living in poverty; and, an increasing pollution problem.

Because good regeneration must comprise environmental, social and economic objectives, a key issue is the balance. A good local authority will be continually looking at the social and economic needs of the borough: examining the conditions for health and wellbeing in small areas; checking where deprivation is increasing or decreasing; analysing the shifts in business and commercial activity; looking at the condition of the housing stock, the state of the streetscape and the quality of the environment. Only a local council (and one working in partnership with health, emergency services, voluntary organisations, colleges, employers and many more) is in a position to take this widest view. Only a local council can galvanise all the elements needed for sustainable, community inspired and place-based improvement.

But that task is harder now than ever. There are new pressures, specifically housing pressures, and especially in London. It’s generally accepted that Britain’s housing market is broken and needs to be fixed. Most local authorities have been trying to fix the housing crisis through the plan-led system, proactive planning and place-making, and regeneration.

## **Planning in Croydon**

Looking locally, the facts in Croydon are that as a result of population growth and demographic change there is a need for circa 44,000 homes over the next 20 years. Croydon has an up to date Local Plan adopted in February this year, which is ambitious about growth. It uses many tools in the planning toolbox, but it can only plan to deliver around 33,000 of the homes under current national and London planning policy. Looking at the overall need, our evidence tells us that we should deliver 91% of these homes as affordable, but due to the market and taking other factors into consideration a strategic target to deliver 40% of the planned homes as affordable was agreed at the Local Plan examination.

The Local Plan delivers the housing needed in Croydon in three key spatial methods all with an equal capacity of around 10,000 homes. First, in the Croydon Opportunity Area where a huge uplift of town centre living, retail renewal and a strong emphasis on office retention is being followed. Secondly, by pro-actively allocating sites outside the Croydon Opportunity Area in the rest of the borough for development over the next 20 years. Thirdly, through the innovative evolution of the suburbs strategy that seeks to boost housing supply in the suburbs where there is capacity. Furthermore, suburban areas of focussed intensification are identified in the Local Plan, where existing infrastructure will support a step change in housing delivery. In the Local Plan, the opportunity for improving places is set out in policy through our 16 Places. This theme, although set out in the Local Plan, now informs many corporate policies, in particular regeneration plans and projects.

And all these initiatives in the Local Plan are in line with the current London Plan and, largely, the emerging new London Plan. The Mayor’s Good Growth vision echoes Croydon Council’s own vision for

Sustainable Growth of the Suburbs. Dealing with the projected population growth of London and the current housing crisis are some of the biggest challenges of our time. For Croydon, working in partnership with London to tackle the challenges and embrace the opportunities to deliver sustainable growth is positive. But is it possible to deliver new homes, not at the rate of one to every five, but one for every three? This is staggering growth. Whilst the plan-led approach, proactive planning and meaningful regeneration can make a valuable contribution to meeting this growth, inevitably there are limitations. Regeneration has to be deliverable.

The central London vs outer London issue has been prominent in the story of London accommodating its growth. The emerging London Plan has a clear policy direction that outer London should now be taking more of London's growth. But the area we call outer London is not homogenous; it is a collection of individual places with their own, and varying, ambitions. Croydon has already woken up to its responsibilities with its evolution of the suburbs strategy in the newly adopted Local Plan, which will be supported by a Supplementary Planning Document to offer further guidance on how this form of development should occur. However, taking into account the increased housing target would require the suburbs to achieve a 1 in 3 increase in homes, this form of development is and will remain one of the most contentious aspects of planning as the balance is sought between existing residents and the need to accommodate Croydon's growth.

Against this context, attitudes to regeneration are changing. Leading an ambitious programme of place and community change is not for the faint hearted. Making a scheme viable and feasible; securing the right mix of inputs and the right balance of outputs; ensuring all views are aligned for more than a nano second is tough. Making a scheme attractive and appropriate for developers; making a scheme attractive and appropriate for residents and the wider community; managing the risk.

There are so many unknowns and variables which are not controllable. But the fear is outweighed by opportunity to transform people's lives, improve life chances and create opportunities that leave a lasting mark.

## **Large versus small**

The scale of some of the regeneration programmes in London over the last decade has raised the profile of supersized developers and international investors. The regeneration of Elephant and Castle, Nine Elms, Victoria, Kings Cross: supersized developers for supersized developments and the associated super project and planning gain. Everyone is a winner, right? Maybe, given the right conditions and the right opportunities for any existing residents. So it is back to the local council to ensure that whatever the scale of change, the process is inclusive and transparent.

But most regeneration programmes are not of this scale and involve developers of a much smaller capital base and lower appetite for risk. Getting the right message out for developers is crucial for a local authority. Whether through design briefs, SPDs, local policy or showcasing schemes already delivered, being clear about the economic, environmental and social objectives for an area and "asks" of any scheme in design and delivery are paramount. This includes clear expectations of community involvement and not just those directly impacted but those who work in the areas, travel through or live on the fringes. The relationship has to be invested in and there has to be trust. And a local authority will play a big part in ensuring that those relationships can work by setting out expectations and, where necessary, engendering trust.

## **Regeneration past**

And what of central government's role? There have been numerous attempts to "organise" regeneration from the centre: City Challenge; Single Regeneration Budget; Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and so on.

All bringing a particular perspective, setting frameworks, funding competitions and distribution methods. Some have worked better than others in meeting certain objectives; some drained, or drowned, the good ideas. And certainly the intention of the Single Regeneration Budget, designed to bring together over 20 separate regeneration programmes, with a focus on the most deprived areas, and a recognition of capacity building and support for community based initiatives as vital, was a step or a nod in the right direction.

In Deptford, the use of SRB in the late 1990s did have impact. By starting with people, and especially young people, as designers, creating the ideas. Doing with, not to. Compare with the essence of the PFI models of regeneration, aimed at bringing in the big investment often needed for large scale redevelopment in housing or hospitals. But, being finance driven, with the risk of too much focus on infrastructure, not enough on people.

So regeneration is not a pure science, it's not just complicated, it's emotive. We are dealing with homes, not just houses; creating livelihoods as well as jobs; and using opportunities to activate space now and create landmarks of the future. Regeneration is not an add-on or nice to do for a local authority. Regeneration is central, not just to the local government agenda but to all those involved in supporting communities and places to reach their potential.

Lessons can be learned. We know the players, the ingredients and the sequence to follow so what works may well follow a pattern of good practice. But what makes for truly successful regeneration, places which have the wow and communities that thrive, is the people. It's back to the local authority in galvanising the efforts of all the players, setting tone and ambition, being a place to do business and investing in strong, trusting relationships.

## **Planning in the future**

But what next for regeneration? How does local government carry those lessons forward into the future? A future with a gloomy financial backdrop, a deal or no deal Brexit, a new generation of young people who know only the digital world and have very different expectations of where and how they will live. We need to re-programme and fast. A modern local authority will have to be creative, prepared to take a wide view, and must understand aspiration as much as "need" for our communities and places. It's no longer enough to engage or involve, or even co-produce. Future regeneration will truly need to be "total place". Our organisational boundaries, governance structures and finance regimes, across services and tiers of government, have to be far more flexible and seamless, supporting not hindering, recognising the distinctiveness of places down to the smallest of neighbourhoods.

Approaches to a new form of collaboration, with partners and communities, are emerging. The local authority may well still be the only organisation with the mandate, but the pressure is on to turn outwards, starting with the resident voice. It may well be that future regeneration is driven more by culture and community clean ups than property and planning.