Reports and Surveys

Towards an Urban Renaissance: The Final Report of the Urban Task Force

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With over 100 recommendations, Towards an Urban Renaissance sets out a comprehensive, if not slightly bewildering, vision for reversing urban decline. As the chairman of the Task Force, Lord Rogers of Riverside, states in his introduction, ‘the complexity of the report . . . reflects the complexity of the urban condition in England’. Lord Rogers is right to qualify and excuse the report’s plethora of proposals. Towards an Urban Renaissance does not shy away from the scale and multiplicity of its task, and sets out many practical recommendations which the government would be wise to mirror in its much-awaited Urban White Paper. But does even Lord Rogers’ volume of extensive research and analysis go far enough in tackling the very deep-rooted malaise of our urban areas?

A time for change: the task at hand

The Task Force’s report describes the consequences of multiple urban failure with great clarity. The extent and nature of migration from Britain’s declining cities has left many urban areas unviable social and economic environments: vast estates of social housing where unemployment is critically high, swathes of industrial dereliction where no business would choose to locate. In looking to the future, the report identifies three key drivers which are already steering the direction of our urban areas. The first is the technical revolution, and the impact new technology has on the way people communicate and work together from the local to the global level. The second is the ecological threat and the need for a greater understanding of the implications of depletion of natural resources and the importance of sustainable development. And the third is the social transformation, both the consequences of increasing longevity and the development of new lifestyle choices.

The report uses as its starting point the projection that there will be 3.8 million additional households over the period to 2021. This clearly raises serious questions about the way we use land and buildings, and the threat that rapid development will have on sustainable urban life. More traffic on already overcrowded roads, greater pollution and intensified social polarisation are all highlighted as probable consequences of a laissez-faire approach to urban development. A bleak picture is painted of what might become of our cities without radical policy intervention; those who can afford to get out will do so, leaving the urban poor trapped in decaying inner cities. The report supports the view that our towns and cities will be further undermined unless we actively create an environment which can respond positively to new economic, social and economic drivers. It is no easy task.

The report, perhaps optimistically, in-
interprets the challenge of 3.8 million additional households as an opportunity to revitalise our towns and cities. As the report’s mission statement encapsulates, urban renaissance should be founded on ‘the principles of design excellence, economic strength, environmental responsibility, good governance and social well-being’. Acknowledging that there is no single solution, the report begins to develop a framework offering different places the opportunity to set out their own priorities and placing design-led regeneration at their heart.

**Design-led regeneration**

The report quickly points out that good design alone is insufficient to reverse urban decline. A good physical environment needs to be supported by investment in a range of welfare and public services, community safety and jobs. This passing reference to the role of jobs is not explored elsewhere in the report. Although perhaps perceived as outside its remit, this lack of analysis of the decline of employment in urban areas leads to a failure to tackle head-on the key structural reasons for urban decline, and a consequential failure to develop jobs-related policies vital to the success of an urban renaissance. With the failure to look at jobs, a vital piece of the urban renaissance jigsaw goes missing.

The strong and unsurprising (given the chair) emphasis on design leads to an extensive analysis of the subject and brings a refreshing perspective on how we can mend our broken cities—as well as an acknowledgement of past failure. The report recommends developing a national urban design framework to aid the dissemination of good practice, and undertaking a series of government-sponsored demonstration projects which will adopt an integrated approach to design-led regeneration. Clear design principles are set out which promote more compact, mixed and integrated neighbourhoods. The report is very much in sympathy with the growing consensus for mixed tenure and income communities, which is being advocated in related fields and by government. An integrated approach to designing urban space, with the need to promote efficient and environmentally sensitive methods of catering for people’s mobility needs, also puts transport reform high on the agenda.

**Making the connections: transport reform**

The Task Force makes few excuses for advocating reclaiming the streets for pedestrians and cyclists, and in positively discriminating in favour of public transport over car usage. This is interpreted as a necessary prerequisite to achieving a viable mix of uses and density, which will in turn further enhance urban capacity. There is, however, a realism in the analysis that people will choose to use their cars unless public transport is made more attractive, and the report recommends putting Local Transport Plans on a statutory footing and setting targets for year-on-year increases in journeys made by foot, bicycle or public transport. There is also an acceptance that people will still choose to use their cars whatever other means of transport are available, and that those who do so should pay a more realistic charge for the social and environmental costs they pass on to others. It will be interesting to see whether the government will be so open and resolute in the Urban White Paper in prioritising other means of travel above the motor car. Having dealt with transport reform in an admirably uncompromising way, the report also has no qualms in extending powers to local authorities to allow better management of urban neighbourhoods.
Regional, local and community responsibilities

The Task Force sees local authorities as the key strategic bodies for taking forward the urban renaissance. As Lord Rogers states, ‘There is a need to re-think the role, the responsibility and structures of local government in our urban areas. Our towns and cities need strong leadership and democratic structures which are meaningful, and accessible to citizens. Local authorities must be empowered to lead the urban renaissance.’ The report recommends that the government push aside any ideological opposition to involving local authorities left over from their predecessors, and increase their responsibilities, powers and funding. Only by being given powers to ensure that other property owners, including public utilities and agencies, maintain their land and premises will local authorities be able to undertake the ‘urban managers’ role that the report sees as critical. This is backed up by a recommendation that additional central resources be given to local authorities to manage and maintain the urban environment in each of the next seven years. The recognition that a long-term strategy requires long-term financial support is a welcome one. Urban Priority Areas are advocated as a new vehicle to enable local authorities to apply for a special package of powers and incentives to assist neighbourhood renewal.

The Task Force looked at different levels of governance and management, with the objective of increasing the coherence of urban policy at national, regional and local level. As well as recommending that local authorities be equipped to make strategic decisions about their urban regeneration priorities, the report also advocates new arm’s-length Urban Regeneration Companies to co-ordinate or deliver regeneration projects. It is suggested that a key task of Regional Development Agencies will be to garner the various sources of funding from the wide range of regeneration programmes and support local authorities by providing long-term commitments to block funds for area regeneration projects. And in tune with current government thinking on neighbourhood management, the report recommends piloting different models which give local people a stake in the decision-making process, by relaxing regulations and guidelines to make it easier to establish devolved arrangements. An increased commitment to public participation is a continuing theme throughout the report and is likely to be reflected in the Urban White Paper. The success of England’s urban renaissance will depend on different levels of government complementing each other, and on different government departments being able to join up to tackle the totality of the problems and opportunities.

Taking stock

A more specific remit for the Task Force was to assess the government’s ten-year target for 60 per cent of new homes to be built on recycled brownfield sites. On the basis of current policy assumptions, the report reckons that the government is unlikely to meet its own target and highlights the significant regional dimension in the country’s ability to tackle the shortfall. Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published in July 1999 reinforce the need to tackle the problem at a regional level. During 1991–8, the population of the northern half of England barely grew while that of the north-east actually fell. Meanwhile, London was exploding, with growth of 4.3 per cent. The figures project a further major population shift from the north to the south-east. This is good news for neither the north nor the south. Stabilisation policies should be a priority both for central government and for the new Regional Development Agencies.

‘Jobs and no homes in the south, and
homes and no jobs in the north’ generalises a much more complicated picture, but is the essence of England’s regional problem. The recent report by the Social Exclusion Unit’s Policy Action Team (PAT), on ‘Unpopular Housing’, also tackles one aspect of the regional problem: areas of low demand for housing. The PAT report found that the causes of unpopular housing and neighbourhood abandonment are complex and made a series of rather woolly recommendations. It fails to distinguish clearly between low demand and unpopular housing. This is not a distinction of terminology: low demand and unpopular housing have different causes and different solutions. The confusion of the two detracts from the effectiveness of the PAT report’s recommendations. The report does describe clearly the opportunity low demand areas have for developing desirable mixed communities and suggests the Housing Green Paper should look at radical options, for the future of social housing in particular, for greater tenure and income diversification. These recommendations echo ones made in the Urban Task Force report.

The debate on the need to stabilise the north–south divide, and possible interventionist policies, is skirted around by the Urban Task Force, which returns dutifully to more specific areas of concern. One such focus is a range of proposals to tackle empty and under-utilised buildings that currently blight urban areas and waste resources. The report recommends giving local authorities a statutory duty to maintain an empty property strategy that sets clear targets for reducing levels of stock. This would be complemented by the setting up of a Renaissance Fund: a ten-year national programme, whereby community groups and voluntary organisations can access resources to tackle derelict buildings and eyesores. Harmonising VAT at zero rate in respect of new building and conversions and refurbishment, to facilitate the above reforms, is a sensible and long overdue reform. And extending full payment of council tax to all owners of empty homes, and discretion to impose a higher charge if properties are left empty for over a year, completes a rounded package of recommendations.

The Urban White Paper

Whether the Urban White Paper will reflect the Urban Task Force’s recommendations is still unclear. Policy development and implementation in the field of urban regeneration is joined-up policy-making at its most complex. Government departments and institutions need to combine policies, powers and resources to achieve an integrated approach in meeting the needs of urban communities. It would be highly surprising if Whitehall departments were not struggling to reach consensus on the White Paper’s proposals. But it would be a wasted opportunity if internal Whitehall wrangling obscured the Urban Task Force’s objective analysis and recommendations.