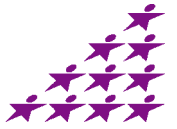


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*The Special Interest Group of Municipal
Authorities Within the LGA*



Local Government Association

spreading the benefits of town and city centre renewal

summary of findings of the LGA and SIGOMA enquiry

based on a report produced by URBED for
the LGA Urban Commission and SIGOMA

LGAresearch



The authors

Spreading the benefits of town and city centre renewal has been written by Dr Nicholas Falk and Christopher Cadell of URBED for the LGA Urban Commission and SIGOMA.

Further information about URBED is available at www.urbed.com

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Published by LGA Publications

Local Government Association,

Local Government House, Smith Square,

London SW1P 3HZ

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Fax 020 7664 3030

Copies of the full report priced £20 (£10 for member local authorities) can be purchased from LGconnect, LGA's information centre

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LGA code •••••

ISBN 1 84049 ••• •

spreading the benefits of town and city centre renewal

summary of findings

Background

Much of current urban policy is focused on the regeneration of urban centres and concentrates on the role of big cities as engines of regional economic growth. As a result, high-profile town and city centre renaissance – with stylish shopping centres, new jobs and apartment blocks – has been hitting the headlines in recent years.

But how can we maximise the benefits of these developments? What is the role of local councils and regional and national bodies? And what can they do to make sure that suburbs, smaller towns and outlying urban settlements – areas sometimes neglected in urban policy – share in the economic and cultural gains from city or town centre renewal?

To find out, the LGA's Urban Commission and the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities (SIGOMA) commissioned URBED to conduct an enquiry to look at how the benefits of town and city centre renewal can be spread more widely.

The central issues for the enquiry were:

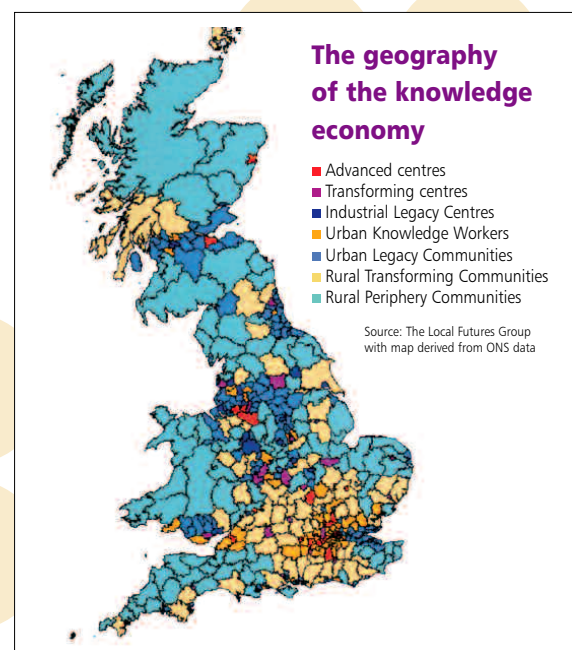
- do successful centres provide opportunities or threats to neighbouring centres?
- what tools are available for collaboration?
- what kinds of action need to be taken at local, regional and central government levels to encourage more investment in town centres with potential for growth or renewal?

The research involved an extensive literature review and initial report; a number of roundtable workshops; a survey of local authorities; interviews with experts and investors; four case studies; and a fringe meeting at the ODPM Sustainable Communities Summit in Manchester. The work has also benefited from discussions with those involved in research into the future of city-regions and the role of Core Cities.

What do we mean by 'spreading the benefits'?

'Spreading the benefits of town and city centre renewal' is about extending renewal to a much wider range of urban centres so that each sub-region improves its offer of lively and attractive places that are different, but complementary to one another. It should not be seen to be about diluting the success of any one city or town centre, but about building on – and adding to – the urban renaissance that has already begun. It means distinguishing between what is happening to different types of areas and between different types of conurbations and networks of centres.

The enquiry found that there is considerable potential for reducing disparities within, as well as between, regions by focusing more attention on the health of existing centres. The challenge of 'spreading the benefits' to what the report calls 'second tier towns' requires greater priority and thought by local, regional and national policy-makers. It will only work in areas that have effective joint working by all the local authorities within a sub-region, where partnerships develop explicit strategies for their centres, and where private investment can be attracted to promote more sustainable patterns of development.



Common goals

As part of the enquiry case studies were carried out in four areas: Leeds city-region, Bristol and the west of England, Northamptonshire and the South Midlands Growth Area, and Portsmouth and urban south Hampshire. Three overriding policy goals appeared to be common to all the areas that were looked at. They provide a strategic framework for understanding what needs to be done to spread the benefits:

- **Boosting productivity** Higher levels of productivity mean more benefits to spread. Although town and city centres are a natural focus for investment, enterprise development and the creation of new jobs, too often they are failing to support each other. They need to pursue distinctive, but mutually supportive roles to reach the critical mass that successful local economies require. Concentrating employment growth in and around town centres would also reduce reliance on the car and make job opportunities more accessible to disadvantaged communities.
- **Boosting liveability** The *cleaner, safer, greener* agenda of central and local government is helping to address some of the shortcomings of the environment and housing in many local areas. However, more work and resources are needed to provide the levels of confidence and quality that are required to attract private investment into a wider range of urban areas and make more people want to live in them. This means being able to create higher quality housing on the edge of town centres, upgrade the environment and ensure high levels of amenity and accessibility in many more areas. The benefits of boosting liveability include stemming the 'urban exodus', widening housing choice and increasing local spending power.
- **Boosting connectivity** Access (including walking, cycling and public transport) is the area where towns and cities outside London fall furthest behind their counterparts in mainland Europe. Smaller centres cannot compete in terms of the range of attractions they provide. They need to improve their local accessibility and their connections with the main city

centres and with neighbouring centres so as to attract people and investment. Experience shows that it is possible to reverse the drift of new jobs and housing to the periphery through better public transport infrastructure and better co-ordination between transport funding and economic development strategies. Boosting connectivity will make places more attractive to live and to work in, promote a more efficient use of natural resources and reduce levels of pollution.

Key principles

Discussions with local councillors and officers and with development experts highlighted seven principles that can form the basis for concordats between public agencies aimed at spreading the benefits in the future:

- **see** town and city centres as assets to be nurtured and managed, not liabilities to be ignored or milked;
- **focus** more on opportunities and areas that are at a tipping point, rather than just concentrating on the areas with the most acute problems;
- **treat** urban regeneration or growth as a holistic process to be promoted over a long period, not as a machine to be fixed in one go with a simple replacement part;
- **work** with existing organisations and build their capacity and confidence, instead of expecting to solve problems through continual reorganisation;
- **encourage** interaction and partnerships, not competitive bidding and fragmentation;
- **create** a climate of confidence in town and city centres that will attract appropriate private investment and reduce the drains on future public expenditure; and
- **keep** things simple and minimise the number of targets and regulations.

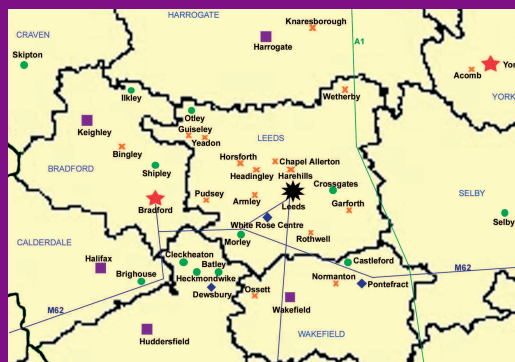
Conclusions

On the basis of these principles and the evidence of the enquiry, it is possible to make recommendations to local, regional and national policy-makers that will help develop a new vision for urban centres, allow them to find new roles and achieve sustainable change.

Developing the vision

- Thriving networks of centres** Local authorities should recognise the importance of their urban centres in their community strategies and local development frameworks. Councils need to take the lead in defining the distinctive roles for different centres in their areas. They need to ensure that their local aspirations and visions complement those of other neighbouring centres, and are developed collaboratively at a sub-regional level to reflect existing and future economic relationships. These strategies can in turn provide the basis for public-private partnerships, masterplans or development frameworks, and action plans for specific neighbourhoods.
- Joined-up planning** Planning should no longer be seen just as a specialist profession, concerned primarily with land use, but as involving a series of skills and values that are shared by all those concerned with making our towns and cities better places. The new National Academy for Sustainable Communities will have a key role to play in sharing lessons on how centres can be turned around and the skills that are required to do it.
- Culture change** We need to secure a change in the way we see both cities and planning. In effect, we need to behave a little more like Europeans, who take pride in all their centres, and less like Americans, who leave much more to market forces. Town centres should feel safe at all times and pedestrians should not be dominated by cars. This is crucial to making towns more liveable and in moving to a knowledge-based economy where everyone feels well-connected. Europe can also be a source of learning about

Different patterns of centres



Leeds city region

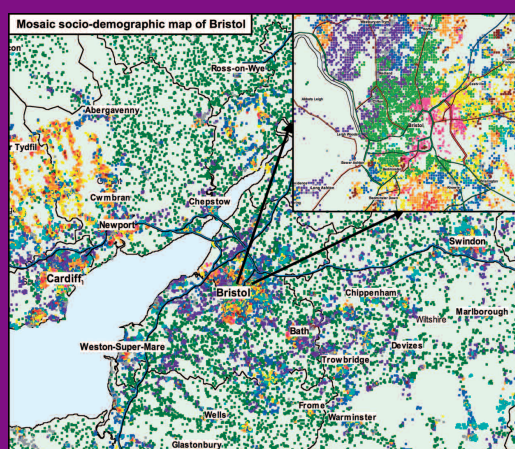
Source: URBED



Northamptonshire region

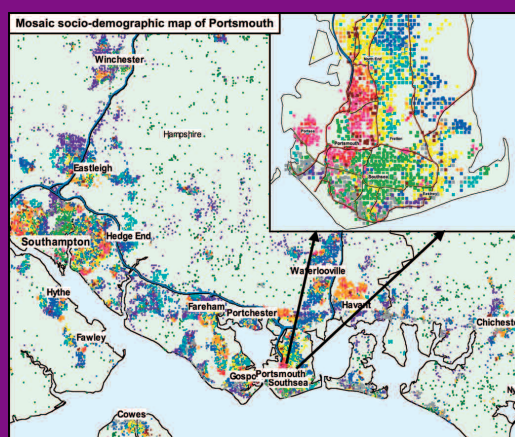
Source: URBED

Different demographic profiles



Bristol

Source: Experian Limited



Portsmouth

Source: Experian Limited

successful town and city centres and Britain should use its Presidency of the European Union to promote this.

Finding new roles

- **Living places** Town centres are the best places to achieve sustainable development, using positive planning and design strategies. New ways must be found to fund improvements to the public realm, and councils need to be able to fund and deliver local solutions, for example by capturing some of the increase in land value from new development to fund infrastructure, perhaps through a planning gain supplement or a wider use of prudential borrowing powers.
- **Learning communities** The enquiry has highlighted the importance of social capital as well as physical capital in enabling disadvantaged communities to benefit from urban renewal. Government can use investment in second tier town centres to build more cohesive communities and to break down social and racial barriers. The government is in a uniquely powerful position to use both the educational and health systems to help achieve this.
- **Ladders of opportunity** Thriving town centres have a crucial role to play in expanding training and 'stepping stone' jobs in locations that are accessible to all. The expansion of sectors like health or the evening economy may fill some of the gaps left by industrial decline, but this depends on avoiding places becoming 'no-go areas' while all the growth takes place out of town.
- **Safer streets** Town and local centres need to be the main focus for the *cleaner, safer, greener* agenda. People living in disadvantaged areas can easily lose out from urban renewal as the benefits do not trickle down by themselves. Funding and sustaining street improvements requires better co-ordination of local services, measures to give people priority over cars and real community engagement in the improvement process.

Making things happen

- **Charters and concordats** Regional Development Agencies should take the lead in getting the different professions and public agencies, including highway authorities, to commit themselves to working together to upgrade the public realm in the hearts of our towns. Town charters can provide a tangible output, generate enthusiasm and support among a wide body of interests, and help overcome the barriers of institutional inertia and professional rivalries. They should be enshrined in local area agreements and in the work of local strategic partnerships
- **Integrated transport strategies** Greater control over transport budgets needs to be devolved to the regional and local levels in ways that stimulate greater private investment. Change needs to be promoted at the level of the city-region, or employment catchment area, to make public transport a more attractive alternative to the private car. This should include promoting the use and refurbishment of the railway stations, which were once the hubs of most town centres.
- **Smarter local finance** Better value from public expenditure lies at the heart of any moves to devolve power. New ways must be found to finance local services that do not depend on competitive bids to government or complex formulas because these can undermine joint working at the local level. The most important single step would be to provide local authorities and regional agencies with both the means and the incentives to nurture their town and city centres. Smarter local finance also implies providing local authorities with a greater share of the surplus generated from rising property values, including that due to the success of their town centres.

These ideas might form the basis of an agenda which the LGA's Urban Commission and SIGOMA could take forward – in dialogue with government – through the piloting of proposals or more action-based research, as well as with more detailed policy based research on specific measures.

anytown 2020

a view from the future

Interview with the leader of Anytown Council, July 2020

"It all started with our **Vision** and **Framework** and the key to success was strong local leadership and enthusiastic local support. We also worked closely with the neighbouring towns in the sub-region, the regional development agency (RDA) and with the regional planning body. Extensive improvements to the 'public realm' in the town centre were funded through our **local area agreement**. This improved the look of the centre, allowed us to bring some key buildings back into use and helped to sort out our long-standing traffic and parking problems. The town centre is now much more pleasant to be in and far more accessible.

The RDA also helped us get our first **flagship scheme** off the blocks. They bought the freehold of the old market building and persuaded a regional developer to undertake an imaginative mixed-use scheme that vastly improved the market. A new bus station was provided, together with new shops and services and smart new housing. We insisted the developer met our **design standards** and the look of the town centre has been transformed. **The Regional Centre of Excellence** played an important role by showing us what was possible.

We continued working with our new partners in the sub-region on plans to upgrade public transport, especially local rail services. Together we formed a joint **transport infrastructure investment company**, responsible for the **sub-regional transport strategy** which is carefully integrated with all the **local development frameworks**. It controls a significant proportion of every council's receipts from **development charges** and **parking revenue**, and allocates them to high priority transport projects. It also **co-ordinates parking policies** across the sub-region.

At first we did not believe that our neighbouring city council would want to join in, but they saw that they had most to gain from reducing congestion and have made a major contribution. The city centre was starting to overheat and they understood that towns like ours could help to reduce the pressure on it if we were all linked by a decent transport system. One of the first benefits of the joint company was the **upgrading of our station and rail services**. This attracted two major commercial firms to set up in the town, and the improved service also helped us get our fair share of Civil Service relocations from London.

As we now **keep all the increase in our business rates**, we were able to use this future income to **raise extra funds** to kick-start the housing side of our **development framework**. We persuaded our development partner to build **high-quality flats** between the station and the town centre. This was something entirely new for the town, but we knew that prices here would be a lot cheaper than in the city. By then the town centre was picking up anyway and people from all over the town were enjoying using the centre again. By the time the flats were finished demand for them was strong and they sold for relatively high prices locally. Some of the first ones were bought by council officers who had previously lived outside the district.

Developer interest has really taken off now. And they are paying us – through **Section 106, extra Council Tax** and **extra Business Rates**. We are able to **spend more on services**, particularly education, youth facilities and services for older people. The local **college** is working closely with local employers and leading the drive to **upgrade skills**. It has just completed a stunning new extension. The town centre is buzzing until late in the evening, and not just with young people. It has its own **distinctive feel** and its **image** has changed dramatically. There are growing numbers of small businesses and some are beginning to make quite a name for themselves. Yet in spite of our better transport links the town itself is becoming much more self-sufficient. You can live, work, shop and enjoy yourself here and, anyway, the city is now only 20 minutes away by train. The

OVERMATTER FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

newcomers have fitted in really well and given the town a new life. Some of the new jobs are very well paid and you can see that there is a lot more money in the town.

There is real confidence too. That is what is behind our success over the last 15 years. That and our ability to work constructively with neighbouring councils and the regional bodies. Everyone is proud of how the place has improved and new people and businesses want to come here."

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LGA Code •••

ISBN 1 84049 ••• •

Designed by Murray Green Art and Design

Printed by •••

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