Urban Regeneration Companies and City Centres

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Introduction

Urban regeneration has proved to be a testing and on-going challenge for both central government and local authorities within the UK and successful solutions have proved to be elusive, at best partial rather than comprehensive and often difficult to sustain. Long-term structural economic decline, the continuing shift from a manufacturing to a service and knowledge based economy, the relentless suburbanisation of the population and the emergence of new employment locations and retail and leisure facilities on green field sites in edge of town and out of town locations and the natural ageing of the urban fabric have all contributed to decline, decay, dereliction and deprivation in many central and older parts of towns and cities throughout the UK.

During the past five decades a wide and varied range of policies, initiatives and programmes have been pursued in an attempt to tackle these problems. Roberts (2000) defines regeneration as “comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change” (p.17). He charts the evolution of urban regeneration policy over the past five decades in an alliterative sequencing running from ‘reconstruction’ through ‘revitalisation’, ‘renewal’ and ‘redevelopment’ to ‘regeneration’. Other authors have examined the characteristics of some of these periods in more detail. Blackburn (1995), for example traces regeneration policies back to the Urban Programme of the late 1960s which sought to provide central government support to local authorities faced with high levels of social need, urban deprivation and racial tension. In the 1970s there was a growing awareness of the importance of economic and environmental regeneration in conjunction with social projects (Thornly 1993). While many such programmes and projects were initially largely publicly funded the advent of the Conservative Government in 1979 brought the private sector much more to the fore and promoted what Oakley (1995) described as an over reliance on property led regeneration. More recently themes of partnership, strategic perspectives, greater balance between public, private and voluntary funding, an emphasis on the role of community and sustainability have assumed an increasingly high profile (Bailey 1995: Atkinson 1999: Roberts 2000).

The establishment from 1999 onwards of a number of Urban Regeneration Companies (URC’s) is the latest in a long line of policies, programmes
and initiatives designed to address regeneration agendas. A number of these URCs have been set up to promote and deliver regeneration within city centres. This article provides a general introductory outline of the origins and aims of the URCs, examines the specific focus on city centres within some of the URCs and discusses some of the issues associated with attempts to promote sustainable city centre regeneration.

**Origins and Characteristics**

The concept of Urban Regeneration Companies was first recommended in the wide ranging Urban Task Force Report published in 1999 (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 1999). Here the argument was that “The pace of regeneration could be increased if responsibility for delivering area programmes was placed in the hands of ‘arms length’ organisations, owned by local partnerships. Urban Regeneration Companies could not only oversee work to completion, but also raise private finance and undertake direct development where necessary” (p.3). As such the URCs were seen to offer a new approach to urban regeneration which represented “a recognition of the failure of the market mechanism in many areas of our towns and cities and of the inability of past public sector interventions to correct these failures and create lasting improvements”. Each of the URCs is an independent company with three core partners viz. the local authority, the Regional Development Agency and English Partnerships.

The focus was to be on engaging the private sector in physical and economic regeneration but this was to be seen within the wider context of a comprehensive approach to tackling the problems and identifying the opportunities within the designated URC area. The government stressed that the URC partners would need to commit and prioritise considerable public sector funding over a 10-15 year period in order to bring in the substantial private investment required to effect sustainable regeneration and that the partners would also have to be prepared to pool their decision-making processes to allow the URC to manage the regeneration process. The establishment of a URC does not provide access to any additional resources or powers over and above those that the partners themselves are willing to commit.

The government clearly recognised that the strategy and delivery mechanism within each URC area will very much depend on that area’s problems and opportunities and while there has been no desire to set out prescriptive rules a number of ‘guiding principles’ are seen to underpin the URC approach to urban regeneration. The primary role was to address latent development opportunities through the development and management of an agreed plan for self-sustaining physical and economic regeneration. The area covered by the URC should be coherent and logical. On the one hand it should be large enough to offer development opportunities that will in turn generate positive spread effects for the city and ideally for the region while
on the other hand it should be small enough to ensure that resources are not too thinly spread. The process of regeneration should be based upon an agreed strategic plan that sets out a comprehensive framework for the area. These strategic plans were seen to need to address three distinct aspects of the delivery process viz. a conventional land use plan; a matrix of responsibilities; and an indicative timetable. The URCs were to have an agreed life span sufficient to ensure the development and delivery of a sustainable regeneration strategy. Process evaluation has been built into the on-going development of individual URCs but the government have also stressed the need for a longer term evaluation of the impact of the URC initiative.

Initially three ‘pilot’ URCs were launched by the government in Liverpool, Sheffield and Manchester but by the autumn of 2002 a further eight had been established, (See Table 1). While each URC has its own particular characteristics and regeneration needs and priorities, eight of them viz. Liverpool, Sheffield, Corby, Hull, Leicester, Sunderland, Bradford and Swindon, have a specific city/town centre focus.

City Centre Problems and Regeneration Agendas

The first URC - Liverpool Vision - was established in 1999 covering an area of some 600 hectares focused upon the city centre and the waterfront, which had a resident population of 9,000 people and contained businesses employing an estimated 75,000 people. The city centre is seen to be very much at the heart of the Liverpool and Merseyside economy that has been characterised by a range of deep-seated economic and social problems. The city’s economic and demographic decline has certainly been seen to have an impact on the city centre which was widely acknowledged to have had a number of problems relating to image; property and development; environment and transport; and leadership and delivery. Liverpool was seen by the business community to have a poor external image as a place to do business. These perceptions were seen to centre on unsuitable buildings and infrastructure, skill and staff shortages, environmental problems and a parochial self-image. Property and development problems centred upon a seemingly unwanted surplus of office accommodation and high levels of vacancy and obsolescence, land ownership was highly fragmented, a number of landowners were seen to be reluctant to pursue new development opportunities, there was a shortage of people willing to invest in the city and security was perceived to be poor. The general environment was seen to be poor and limited local authority budgets for maintenance, refuse collection, lighting and security services and the lack of a co-ordinated approach to city centre management all contributed to a continuing and visible spiral of environmental decline. Transport gateways to the city centre were seen to be poor and little priority had been given to pedestrianisation. Finally there was a wide-ranging belief that the city centre was not a political priority and that there was no effective city centre leadership. In spite of this interwoven catalogue of problems there was also recognition that the city centre offered
an attractive range of potential development opportunities. In positive terms the city centre has the largest concentration of office employment and the largest shopping centre on Merseyside, a range of tourist, leisure and cultural activities and the hub of Merseyside’s public transport system.

Liverpool Vision seeks to establish the city as a world class city for the 21st century and to ensure that the city centre is recognised as a physically and economically attractive magnet for commercial investment, residential expansion and enhanced leisure and tourism industries. The accent is to be on boosting wealth creation, investment and sustainable job creation. The £1.5 billion regeneration programme has identified a number of ‘Action Areas’ viz. the Pier Head, the Commercial District, Castle Street, a Cultural Quarter to include Lime Street Station, the Retail Core and the Hope Street Quarter. A number of city centre wide supporting themes are designed to provide physical, economic and social connections between the six areas. These currently include a bid for Liverpool to become European capital of culture 2008, a bid for World Heritage Status, enhanced community engagement, business development and move to reinforce the vitality of city centre communities.

Sheffield One’s mission is to develop the city centre as a vibrant and attractive European city and as a driver of regional economic growth and competitiveness. The URC have developed an agreed £1 billion Masterplan designed to guide the regeneration of the city centre over a 10-15 year period. Within this Masterplan there is a clear recognition that no single policy or project will provide a panacea for the city centre’s problems but four principal strategic objectives have been identified viz. building a new high technology based economy in the city; creating a vibrant city as a centre for learning, culture, retail, leisure and living; improving accessibility to the city centre by all modes of transport; and celebrating the public realm by creating high quality public spaces in all parts of the city centre. The overall vision is of a functionally cohesive central area where individual projects and programmes reinforce and support each other and the whole becomes greater than the sum of the individual parts. More generally and perhaps more ambitiously the aim is to ensure that the benefits of city centre regeneration reach out to the most deprived communities within the city and beyond to the sub-region.

Retailing is seen to be very much at the heart of Sheffield One’s vision. The URC believes that the regeneration of the city centre will not succeed unless the existing retail core can be revitalised and given a dynamic new focus. The city’s retail offer has certainly been seen to be falling behind other leading northern city centres such as Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle. The focus is to be on a ‘step change’ to create the confidence to attract leading investors, developers and retailers back to the city centre. The plan is to create a new high quality retail quarter around the city’s Peace Gardens. The new retail floor space so created will underpin and strengthen the existing prime
retail areas of Fergate and the northern end of the Moor and will link into the
new mixed use areas being created around the Peace Gardens, City Hall and
Tudor Square. This will create a critical mass of high quality urban activities
within a relatively compact area. These retail plans are grounded in market
research that suggests that there is a substantial unsatisfied demand for mod-
ern space within the centre of Sheffield and the proposals are to provide
some 65,000 square metres of modern retail accommodation as a means of
re-establishing the city as a regional retail centre. The provision of new prest-
gigious residential accommodation is also a vital part of the URCs overall
strategy.

The desire to re-establish Sheffield city centre as a destination of first
choice for leisure and cultural activities is linked to plans to provide a con-
temporary and exciting range of facilities. Planned projects here include the
refurbishment and development to the Grade II listed Leopold Street com-
plex for a mix of uses including residential accommodation, the develop-
ment of the former National Union of Mineworkers HQ building and
adjacent car parks to provide a fitting context for City Hall which itself is to
be upgraded and cleaned. Improving access to, and ease of movement
within the city centre are also key components in the Sheffield One Master-
plan. A number of projects have been identified including the creation of a
high quality, safe and pedestrian dominated city centre; the refocusing of
the public transport system to respond to the changing patterns of activity and
passenger need; improving key gateways into the city centre; providing bet-
ter signage to, and within, the city centre; and continuing to divert through
traffic away from the city centre.

While the first three URCs were all in large cities in the north of England
some have now been established in smaller towns and cities and in southern
England. Swindon is widely considered to be a prosperous town housing
many of the South West region’s major inward investors and having a low
unemployment rate. However much of the investment and development has
taken place on formerly green field sites on the edge of the town and the
town centre is now not seen to do justice to the town. It is seen to lack the fa-
cilities to attract the staff the town as a whole needs to survive and the estab-
lishment of the URC is seen to give Swindon a challenging opportunity to
stimulate and accelerate the regeneration of the town centre. The accent is to
be on encouraging investment in a sustainable town centre that will attract
new businesses, tourists and residents and on improving the range and qual-
ity of facilities within the town centre. In Corby the regeneration of the town
centre has been widely acknowledged as the key to the regeneration of the
town as a whole. The closure of the steel works in 1979 and the eventual loss
of some 11,000 jobs initially led to the town’s unemployment rate rising to
over 30% and while many thousands of new employment opportunities
were eventually created they have been predominantly in low value sectors.
Discussion

All the current URCs are still in the early stages of development and it will be some time before any detailed and comprehensive evaluation of their contribution to sustainable urban regeneration can be made. However a preliminary examination of the agendas and plans being drawn up in those URCs with a specific city/town centre focus suggests that a number of themes merit attention. The demand for, and the ability to attract, new high quality retail investment within city and town centres is seen to be a crucial element in the regeneration process. While a wide range of quality shopping opportunities has traditionally been widely recognised as one of the defining characteristics of a successful town and city centre it would be simplistic to assume that new retail investment and development will automatically guarantee the success of the regeneration process.

Potential investors, developers and retailers must share the URCs confidence that the provision of new high quality retail space will attract a customer base. Davies and Ward (2002) stress that the physical environment for retailing is multi-layered and they identify two particular layers. An ‘upper level’ which is concerned with the centre of shopping be it the high street, precinct or mall and a ‘lower level’ concerned with the specifics of the retail unit itself as being important in creating an appropriate space for retail consumption. While new developers and retailers can design and manage the immediate external appearance and the internal lay-out, facilities and ambience of a shop or store it is much more difficult to design and manage the surrounding environment or the surrounding retail mix. If new retail outlets and immediately surrounding public space become little more than an island of new development in a run down environment then it may be difficult to attract new customers and hence expenditure into town and city centres. In a similar vein new retail organisations and spaces cannot be seen in isolation from the wider retail offering within a town or city centre. The addition of new high quality outlets will not, of itself, necessarily or immediately enhance the overall image of a town or city centre in the minds of consumers.

The focus on new retail investment as a key element in town and city centre regeneration should also be seen in the light of changes in retail hierarchies. For most of the twentieth century town and city centres were very much at the apex of the retail hierarchy but from the 1970s onwards the growth and increasing diversification of out of town shopping has provided a growing challenge to traditional retail hierarchies. This out of town exodus can be traced back to the development of food superstores from the mid 1960s onwards and despite seemingly restrictive planning regulations this process continued largely unchecked until the late 1990s. A wide range of out of town retail developments including large free standing food superstores, retail warehouses, retail parks, outlet centres and regional shopping centres such as Meadowhall, Bluewater and Trafford Park collectively now
have a massive physical presence in the retail landscape and in retail hierarchies and also a powerful presence in the nation’s shopping and consumption psyche. The success of new high quality retail investments in town and city centres as part of URC regeneration strategies will in part be measured by their ability to confront either of these presences.

Leisure is also an important component in a number of town and city centre regeneration strategies. Traditionally leisure property has been seen as a fragile market but the 1990s saw a significant change in leisure property yields as ‘eager purchasers jumped on the bandwagon of leisure development’ (Waller 2000). The focus on leisure led and or fed town and city centre regeneration raises a range of issues but two in particular merit attention here. Firstly while a number of popular leisure facilities, for example cinemas, dance halls and night clubs, bingo clubs, restaurants and public houses, have traditionally been located in town and city centres but from the early 1990s onwards a new style of purpose built multi-leisure complex has become an increasingly common and visible component within the urban landscape. By 2002 there were over 100 such complexes throughout the UK and while some are in town and city centre locations many more are in edge of town and out of town locations. While these developments vary in character they offer a range of entertainment and leisure facilities that might typically include a 12 screen multiplex cinema, a nightclub, themed bars, conventional and fast food restaurants, a bingo club, ten pin bowling facilities, a leisure swimming pool and a health and fitness club as well as dedicated car parking facilities. These complexes offer a varied ‘one stop shop’ range of leisure and entertainment opportunities for families and groups of friends and in some parts of the UK they may prove to be a powerful and readily accessible competitor and counter attraction to new leisure facilities developed as part of URC town and city centre masterplans.

A second set of issues concerns the characteristics of the new leisure economy within town and city centres. While many ‘day time’ leisure and entertainment facilities may well enhance the overall appeal of town and city centres this is also where ‘night time’ attractions might be seen by some sections of the population as being virtually synonymous with a range of undesirable and anti-social activities. These might include a heavy concentration of so called ‘superpubs’ and nightclubs. At best development of this nature might be seen to promote a ‘youth culture’ and late night unsociable behaviour neither of which holds much appeal for older consumers or to potential town and city centre residents. At worst it might lead to the promotion of what some sections of the population might perceive as an alcohol and drug centred culture with damaging effects on the overall image of the town or city centre.

While a focus on both the economic and physical regeneration of town and city centres are rightly fundamental elements in the URC strategies it is also important to recognise that communities are also important stakehold-
ers in the regeneration process. Some URCs have an explicit focus on social and community issues. Sheffield One, for example, is committed to addressing the needs of the most vulnerable people in the city centre and they have carried out extensive public consultation on the development of their Masterplan. At the same time the URC report that they have had difficulties in building effective relationships with those local agencies that are concerned with social inclusion and they recognise that there is some scepticism amongst local communities about the ability to deliver what is perceived to be an ambitious regeneration programme. In Liverpool there have been criticisms of the very limited truly local representation on the URC Board and its committees. Its Community Web Page commitment that existing city centre communities must not be overlooked when the city centre population grows is hardly a ringing endorsement of social inclusion.

Improving accessibility into, and within, town and city centres is clearly important in a number of URC regeneration plans but the focus on what Liverpool Vision describes as a ‘balanced movement strategy’ may prove partly elusive. At a time when urban road congestion appears to be getting ever worse the ability to provide uncongested road links directly to new town and city centre attractions may prove difficult, in itself, and existing urban lay-outs may make the development of such routes incompatible with the creation of comprehensive city centre wide pedestrianisation schemes or pedestrianisation priority areas. Sustainability can also be an elusive goal. While successful retailers, for example, will continually re-invest in upgrading and refurbishing their outlets others may have more limited resources for upgrading and this may affect the overall image of the town and city centre. The management of regenerated town and city centres raises both practical and more theoretical issues. At a practical level a lack of sustained long term funding has been a problem for the majority of town centre management (TCM) schemes and relatively modest financial contributions from the retail community has often left a short fall that has threatened the long term viability of what have often been modest TCM schemes. Some of the URC town and city centre regeneration plans seem more ambitious than many existing TCM schemes and unless the private sector is prepared to fund continuing maintenance and management of the so called ‘public realm’ then the financial burden seems likely to fall heavily on local authorities. If they are unable to fully fund some continuing works then such spaces may well be left to fall into the decay and decline that has all too often characterised previous urban environmental improvement schemes and this will have an all too damaging impact on the overall image of town and city centres. At a more theoretical level the creation of new high quality retail and leisure spaces within town and city centres links into debates about the ways in which such spaces are organised in an attempt to facilitate consumption (Lowe and Wrigley 1996). Much of the initial work on the landscapes of consumption was concerned with the department store and the shopping mall but more recently the focus of this work has been broadened to include ‘the street’ and more general leisure spaces (Wrigley and Lowe 2002). The
creation of new retail and leisure spaces within URC town and city centre schemes will provide further research opportunities to explore the ways in which developers and retailers plan and design spaces to facilitate and induce consumption.

**Conclusion**

A number of the URCs established since 1999 to address urban regeneration agendas have a specific city/town centre focus. Each of the URC city/town centre masterplans has its own distinctive characteristics which in turn reflect specific opportunities, challenges and problems but all include proposals for high quality retail, leisure, commercial, residential and public space developments and for transport and pedestrianisation schemes. The masterplans are certainly very ambitious in that they are looking not only to facilitate and effect regeneration within their designated town or city centre but also to act as a catalyst for more wide scale regeneration across the wider town or city.
References


