



URBAN POLLINATORS

LOOKING UP - MARCH 2011

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS FROM JULIAN DOBSON

THIS MONTH: REGENERATING REGENERATION

WHY IS REGENERATION BACK ON THE AGENDA?

WHAT WE NEED TO LEARN FROM SCOTLAND

THREE KEY QUESTIONS WE SHOULD ASK

WELCOME

Urban Pollinators is a consultancy and practical think tank founded by Julian Dobson, commentator on regeneration, placemaking and community issues. This newsletter is part of a series of regular commentaries on topical subjects. We hope you find it useful and informative - please pass it on to anyone you think will be interested, and please let us have your views.

This month we examine why regeneration is back on the agenda, and pose three questions that need to be addressed in any future regeneration policies and programmes.

WHY REGENERATION NEEDS REGENERATING

Regeneration is back. After six months in which the word appeared to have been confined to the dustbin of New Labour policies and where discourse was dominated by ideas of localism and the 'big society', the UK government is starting to talk about regeneration again.

First the Department of Communities and Local Government put out a paper, *Regeneration to Enable Growth*,¹ which set out briefly its views on 'community-led regeneration'. Next, the parliamentary select committee that shadows DCLG's work announced an inquiry, posing five questions about the government's approach.² Meanwhile the Scottish Government published its own discussion paper, *Building a Sustainable Future*.³

This is welcome, not only because we've spent the last decade trying to support and encourage people engaged in regeneration in the UK through our work here and with [New Start](#) magazine, but also because it recognises this is an issue that won't go away. At a time when many of the structures that support regeneration are being removed, that's an important realisation.

We'll be responding to the select committee inquiry, and would encourage others to do so too. One of our key points will be about the need to preserve and promote learning so that regeneration practitioners can understand what they're doing and build on the experience of others. This newsletter won't cover the detail of that submission, but instead will make a few observations about the reappearance of regeneration on the policy landscape and suggest some key themes that need to inform future policy and practice.

¹ Department of Communities and Local Government (2011). *Regeneration to Enable Growth*, www.communities.gov.uk/publications/regeneration/communityledregeneration

² See: www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/news/regeneration---tof/

³ The Scottish Government (2011). *Building a Sustainable Future - Regeneration discussion paper*. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/02/07095554/0

Scotland's miles better

It is instructive to compare the DCLG approach with the discussion initiated by the Scottish Government. The Scottish paper begins by defining the issue. It states that 'regeneration is the holistic process of reversing the economic, social and physical decline of places where market forces alone will not suffice'. This encapsulates the view, based on decades of evidence and experience, that regeneration entails a systemic approach to complex problems; that it is required because a market economy by its nature creates losers as well as winners and leaves unsolved problems for which there is no commercial solution; and that it requires a combination of place- and people-based interventions.

Secondly, the Scottish Government paper seeks to open a dialogue. It invites contributions to 'a wider debate and discussion about how we make all of Scotland's communities resilient and attractive places to live, work and invest in'.

Third, it recognises that we cannot do regeneration - particularly the physical regeneration of towns and cities - as we have done in the past. It points out: 'The economic crisis has meant that many traditional models of regeneration are now fractured. Development activity fuelled by rising land and property prices, funded via debt finance has been shown to be unsustainable'.

By contrast, the DCLG publication fails to define regeneration, does not invite debate and lacks any analysis of what has worked and what hasn't. It offers a series of unevidenced assertions linking economic growth, housing development, localism and community regeneration with no reference to the wealth of knowledge garnered in the past, and no articulation of how circumstances have changed and what needs to be done about it. Indeed, its emphasis on incentives for new housing and on finance for infrastructure projects suggests DCLG is wedded to precisely the model of development linked to rising land values that the Scottish Government believes has failed.

On the positive side, DCLG's belief that local residents should determine regeneration priorities is sound. But we still need an analysis of why some places have failed, and what kind of intervention will support a locally-led approach. Are the failings in the markets, in social policies, or in the people themselves? DCLG appears to have no view on this. Without an understanding of the causes of decline, we can only ever hope to create sticking plasters for the symptoms. And a belief that the markets will regenerate the places the markets have left behind flies in the face of both logic and evidence.

DCLG argues that 'a new approach is needed to ensure that local economies prosper, parts of the country previously over-reliant on public funding see a resurgence in private sector enterprise and employment, and that everyone gets to share in the resulting growth'. But if previous growth during times of national prosperity has consistently left the poorest communities behind, why should we expect to achieve different results during times of economic hardship with reduced public resources? As the Scottish Government notes, economic turbulence drives a 'flight to quality' rather than extra investment in marginal markets.

The department is right in saying a new approach is needed. That view reflects the many discussions we have been involved in over the past year, reflected in the 'manifesto for regeneration' produced in April 2010 by *New Start* magazine⁴, and in a series of articles over the course of that year. But that new approach must recognise what has been learned, what has gone wrong, why we need to do things differently and what we need to do differently.

4 Available online at www.scribd.com/doc/46085325/Regeneration-Manifesto

In part that is because previous development-led models no longer work as they did; but there is more to regeneration than addressing market failure. That implies a deficit model of people and place, where action only begins when it may be too late. An asset based approach is needed that balances both a recognition of the value of local people and their potential and an awareness of the positive and the negative effects of the market economy. It should recognise that localities need strategic support to address issues such as climate change and demographic shift. It should focus on strengthening local capacity, creating places that are resilient and sustainable, and building local pride and civic responsibility. As *New Start* put it last year: 'Regeneration is the action of citizens and those who work with them to recreate home for new times, especially where there is poverty or disadvantage.'⁵

Three hard questions we should ask

There are three overriding and urgent challenges for public policy: how to live within environmental limits, how to create meaningful work and life chances for a generation that won't have their predecessors' access to cheap credit or affordable housing, and how to manage in a much harsher economic and public funding climate. The task can be summed up as creating resilience: environmental, social and economic.

i) Should we stop relying on growth?

The first question, which challenges the assumptions underpinning the approach of successive governments, is whether continuous growth is a realistic and valid objective in a world facing unprecedented environmental challenges.

The financial markets fell because the assets against which loans were secured proved worthless. At the same time the world has borrowed against environmental assets at an unsustainable level. The effect, ultimately, could be the same: the asset cannot cover the level of activity secured against it.

How will this affect regeneration? The areas most vulnerable to economic shocks will be among those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change: higher prices for commodities, shortages of energy, food or water, increasing costs of transport. So sustainability must be paramount in regeneration strategies, not just in terms of green technologies or energy efficiency, but through local sourcing of life's essentials wherever possible, and the creation of self-help networks that enable communities to withstand the unexpected. You can't have an intelligent discussion about growth or prosperity if you don't first have a coherent strategy for survival.

ii) Are the poor always with us?

The idea that we should live with continued poverty is quite rightly regarded as offensive. Yet poverty persists despite more than half a century of anti-poverty rhetoric. The previous government's regeneration framework⁶

⁵ See *In Pursuit of the Real Thing*, New Start, January 2010, available at www.scribd.com/doc/46130738/A-future-for-regeneration

⁶ Department for Communities and Local Government (2008). *Transforming Places; Changing Lives: A framework for regeneration*. London: DCLG.
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somewhat prematurely declared that mass unemployment and youth unemployment had been ‘conquered’ but recognised that worklessness had persisted in deprived communities. On its own analysis, the most significant difference between deprived areas and the rest had not changed.

There is nothing new about this. A study by the Office for National Statistics in 2003⁷ found that the employment rate for 15-64-year-olds in 2000 was remarkably similar to that in 1902: 71 per cent compared with 69 per cent. For a century or more between a fifth and a third of working age people have been outside the labour market.

Rather than seek new ways to coerce those out of work into jobs that don’t exist or where their chances of success are minimal, we need to rework the social contract in a way that values the time of those who are not working and sees them as contributors to society. Just as those in work pay a percentage of their income to the Exchequer, so those who cannot find a job should contribute a proportion of their time to the common good. In return, they should expect a level of state support that meets life’s needs and rises in line with the cost of living. Such a social contract would help to create a pool of community workers and carers who could help to realise the ambition of a ‘big society’.

iii) Are some places beyond regeneration?

The third hard question is already being asked in parts of the US, where cities like Flint and Detroit have seen large-scale abandonment. UK towns are, for the most part, a long way from that position.

Yet the logical conclusion of a localism that ignores market failures and seeks to pick winners may well be that some places will die - a position rejected by David Cameron when it appeared to be advocated by the Policy Exchange think tank. Ministers need to be open about whether they consider that an acceptable consequence of their approach.

There is an alternative to cutting the losers adrift. But it requires reconnecting places with wealth creation - with locally based activities and industries that reinvest in the locality, rather than fleetfooted multinationals that have no lasting commitment to a place or its workforce. Most places, given long term support and investment, can create a viable and flourishing future for themselves, but it may be on a more modest scale than in the past.

Ruskin famously said there is no wealth but life. The failure of early 21st century regeneration programmes has been to consider that wealth exists in everything else: property, finance, careers, spending, measurements of economic success. We now have a chance to redress the balance - not only at a national level in formulating and critiquing policy, but at local level as cities and districts seek to find more sustainable ways of creating a future.

IN OTHER NEWS...

Over the last month we’ve begun work with Genecon and Housing Vision on an exciting project for Sunderland City Council, developing a framework to assess how neighbourhoods can become ‘low carbon city villages’.

⁷ Lindsay, C. (2003) *A century of labour market change: 1900 to 2000*. Labour Market Trends, March 2003, pp 133-144. http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/labour_market_trends/century_labour_market_change_mar2003.pdf

We've also worked with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on their series of events on community assets (see our [blog post here](#), or download our report via [this link](#)). This month sees the conclusion of our work with the Bradford Regeneration Academy, which will now be taken up by an in-house team. We'll have more on this in our next newsletter; in the meantime we're on the lookout for new and challenging assignments.

To find out how we can help you, email julian@urbanpollinators.co.uk or call us on 0114 229 5726.

GIVE US A PIECE OF YOUR MIND

We'd like your feedback. Was this newsletter interesting or useful? Are there topics you'd like us to look at in the future?

If this is the first time you've received this newsletter, you might like to check out previous issues. Our first one, in January, dealt with the future provision of public services; our February newsletter looked at town centres and suggested seven steps we could take 'from ghost town to host town'. You can download them from [our website](#).

Please send your comments to Julian Dobson - email julian@urbanpollinators.co.uk - or find us on Twitter at [@urbanpollinator](#).

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