

Seven principles for regeneration

A MANIFESTO FOR THE INCOMING GOVERNMENT

1 Sustain success

Recognise the achievements of the past and build on them.

DO: Ensure lessons are learned and information is available and disseminated. The last 30 years have seen a wealth of experience in devising and delivering regeneration programmes. Some have been good, others poor. It is vital to avoid having to learn those lessons again.

DO: Maintain capacity. Local authority teams in many cases work effectively and act as powerful advocates for their communities. Grassroots groups and organisations have built up extensive expertise, often through huge personal effort by those involved. Investment, particularly in poor and disadvantaged communities, must continue and must be directed by those who know the patch and understand what works there.

DON'T: Throw the baby out with the bathwater. There are some programmes and approaches that shouldn't continue, and some people and organisations that perform poorly. That doesn't mean regeneration has failed.

DON'T: Wait for a riot. Too much regeneration policy has been a response to social unrest. It's wasteful and damaging to wait until there is violence in the streets before tackling underlying problems.

2 Let go, or get out of the way

Focus on enabling citizens to take action. That's done by transferring powers, responsibilities and funds – and not blocking those who want get things done.

DO: Listen to local people and build ways of delivering programmes and services that respond to their needs and views, and have the courage to stick with new ideas. The neighbourhood level is most important and power needs to be devolved from central government to cities and city-regions, from the city to the locality, and from the locality to the community. We should aspire after 'human city states' that are responsive to their citizens, not to centrally imposed agendas.

DO: Transfer funding to go with transfers of responsibility. This gives investors confidence and enables citizens to take action, often at far less cost than agencies of central government. Build the role of local government as a key enabler and investor in local activities.

DON'T: Assume this absolves the state of responsibility. There are some things the state has to do and should do well. It should ensure funds are distributed equitably, broker agreements where necessary, and be ready to intervene and support in a crisis.

DON'T: Confuse local government with localism. Local government needs to let go too. If local government is a purchaser of services, should it also be the provider? Municipal action should be encouraged, but that need not mean municipal delivery.

3 Recognise communities' potential

Local communities have enormous energy that can be unleashed to everyone's benefit.

DO: Seek to understand communities better. Every community is different and we need to appreciate each one's outlook – the enthusiasm and aspirations of local people, what they like and what they hate, and what resources there are in terms of social capital.

DO: Work to build local resilience. It is essential to nurture adaptability – the skills and qualities needed to respond to change and absorb future shocks. This can be done in a host of ways, from training to neighbourhood management, from the promotion of co-ops and community land trusts to the transfer of public assets.

DON'T: Underestimate the difficulties. Many communities will need long-term support and assistance before their potential can be realised. The idea of participation has vanished in many places and needs to be rebuilt. Relationships between communities and funders (whether central or local) need to be governed by an ethical framework and fair dealing. Regeneration isn't 'magic dust' – it can't deal with every problem.

DON'T: Confuse interference with support. One of the most repeated criticisms of regeneration programmes is that they get taken over by the professionals. The professionals need to recognise they are the servants of the citizens, so accountability needs to be downwards to the neighbourhood as well as upwards to central government.

4 Keep tackling inequality

Local and central government need to appreciate how a focus on the most disadvantaged benefits everyone.

DO: Examine the evidence. There is a wealth of material – locally, nationally and internationally – that shows the social and economic benefits of raising the income and quality of life of the poorest. It is important to keep publicising and updating this evidence in the face of popular myths that people are poor because of their own irresponsibility and should be encouraged into work through punitive sanctions. In particular, the economic case for narrowing the gap between the best-off and worst-off areas should be made clearly and consistently.

DO: Link needs with opportunities. It is especially important as the city-regions develop momentum and more urban areas choose elected mayors that the worst-off areas are not left behind. This includes isolated rural communities and outlying urban estates as well as traditional inner cities. Employment and skills training should focus on building connections between the most disadvantaged areas and areas of opportunity.

DON'T: Imagine inequality can be addressed only through the tax and benefits system. Human support is needed to change aspirations and enable transitions from welfare to work.

DON'T: Fragment assistance for the most deprived areas between organisations that fail to communicate with each other or work to conflicting targets. Bring together different public services under locally accountable managers and avoid continually referring decisions upwards.

5 Focus on education and skills

No regeneration initiative will work unless we address people's aspirations, education and skills.

DO: Support the most disadvantaged areas when allocating education resources. Schools in poor areas are dealing with the results of complex social and economic difficulties. They need to be developed as community hubs.

DO: Relate assistance to the real hopes and aspirations of people in deprived communities. This doesn't mean just offering courses in hairdressing and car mechanics: it means taking time to offer personal routes to fulfilment rather than simply trying to slot people into available vacancies. We need to promote indigenous economic growth, arising from the communities most in need.

DON'T: Think of physical regeneration as a substitute for working with people. New buildings may be a great photo-opportunity but it's the activity inside them that matters. The decline in public funding is an opportunity to shift resources from expensive capital projects to less costly capacity-building.

DON'T: Only focus on high-end skills and university qualifications without creating routes into such learning for those without qualifications. Many of the poorest communities will simply be bypassed if resources are focused on higher education.

6 Promote quality of life and quality of place

High quality, sustainable neighbourhoods need to be at the heart of regeneration.

DO: Learn from Europe. There are outstanding examples of liveable, cohesive cities across Europe and sustainable technologies are applied more effectively in many places. We need to be less insular and start learning from our counterparts.

DO: Take wellbeing seriously. The way people feel about their lives and their neighbourhoods makes a difference to their aspirations and willingness to get involved.

DON'T: Think the built environment is all that matters in placemaking. There are serious doubts about the quality of, for example, the Olympic legacy. When the athletes have all gone home in 2012, what opportunities will the grand structures of east London have left for local people?

DON'T: Divorce the issues of regeneration and environmental sustainability. The goal of creating a genuinely sustainable environment and society needs to be at the heart of our activity, not a bolt-on if we happen to have sufficient funds.

7 Reform the banking system

This must be at the top of the new government's agenda because the banks and financial institutions are directly responsible for the public spending cuts we now face.

DO: Encourage 'just banking' through a Community Reinvestment Act and greater support for community finance. Banks and financial institutions should reinvest their wealth in the communities their customers are drawn from.

DO: Promote mutual models of ownership as an alternative to corporations whose first priorities are the returns demanded by shareholders and the bonuses demanded by top staff.

DON'T: Stop at the finance sector. Mutual models of ownership can also be a solution for housing and local services.

DON'T: Miss the opportunity. The chance to make financial institutions accountable to citizens and to require them to invest significant sums in local regeneration is unlikely to come around again.

