

STATE OF THE DESTINATION

Whither the urban agenda?

The collapse of industrial and manufacturing economies throughout Europe has left many inner-city areas blighted by unemployment and riddled with poor housing. In recent years, however, attempts have been made to reverse this decline by improving the physical structure and, more importantly and elusively, the economy of those areas. Today, brownfield locations are being targeted as priority development sites by Governments across Europe, both for their cheap land costs to developers and the fact that they negate the need for further development in environmentally sensitive green-belt areas.

In England, urban areas are home to 90 per cent of the country's population, 91 per cent of economic output, and 89 per cent of all jobs. But one in four people living in urban neighbourhoods in England think that their local environment has got worse in recent years, compared with only one in ten who believe it has improved. It is over a year now since the British Government published its Urban White Paper, following recommendations made by Lord Rogers and his colleagues on

the Urban Task Force. Lord Rogers has recently expressed his concern to *The Guardian* (28 January) that the cause of urban regeneration had slipped down the Government's list of priorities: 'I have not heard the Prime Minister or the Chancellor express a vision for towns and cities and without that there is no clout. There is a lack of leadership. In the same interview, he also bemoaned the lack of progress he had seen on the ground: 'If we don't get on with urban regeneration now, we'll never compete with the best and we're not even catching up with Europe.'

It is worth reminding ourselves exactly what it was that the Government said in its Urban White Paper, published in November 2000. It made a series of policy commitments to aid urban regeneration, some fiscal, some strategic. The key commitments are summarised in the Table below.

Has the Government been seen to be delivering on these promises? Certainly, guidance has been issued by the Government to help local authorities implement brownfield

Urban White Paper, 2000: Key Government Commitments

- Set up a new Urban Cabinet Committee to coordinate policy on health, education and economic regeneration
- Set up an Urban Policy Unit within DTLR, to act independently of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (the group responsible for implementing the Action Plan for Neighbourhood Renewal and policies targeted at neighbourhoods, such as the New Deal for Communities)
- Create 12 new Urban Regeneration Companies to coordinate redevelopment work, and offer them tax breaks
- Create Local Strategic Partnerships to work in partnership with RDAs
- Issue guidelines to ensure that brownfield land is used or development before new land (official target: 60 per cent of all new development to take place on brownfield sites)
- Strengthen the role of regeneration and 'urban renaissance' in the land use planning system
- Introduce a £1 billion package of national taxation measures to encourage greater investment in urban areas
- Reduce VAT on the conversion and repair of old buildings
- Abolish stamp duty on homes in towns and cities in certain areas
- Invest £180 billion in a ten-year plan modernisation plan for public transport, in order to reduce dependence on the car
- Stage an urban summit in November 2002 to check on progress

development policies. Fiscal measures to aid the regeneration process were announced by Gordon Brown in the 2001 Budget. These included tax breaks on the cleaning up of contaminated land, and the reduction of VAT on residential to residential conversions and the sale of renovated homes. And in December 2000, monies for public transport investment were made available in the Local Transport Settlement.

Additionally, the Urban Policy Unit called for in the Urban Task Force report has been established within DTLR. Its role is 'to work with partners on (a) the integrated delivery of policies and programmes, including specifically Thames Gateway; and (b) more effective monitoring, analysis and understanding of urban processes and change'. On the ground, the Regional Development Agencies, who in March 2001 were given access to all outstanding monies earmarked for the Single Regeneration Budget, are now the Government's front-line weapons in the war on urban decline. The RDAs are directly responsible for drawing up and implementing their own regional strategies for regeneration.

Where does the private sector fit into the Government's plans? The strategic role of the RDAs is clear, but confusion still reigns over their interaction with private companies in the delivery of initiatives.

One private developer with his very own urban agenda is Tom Bloxham, founder and Chairman of Urban Splash. He has been developing mixed-use schemes in run-down parts of Manchester and Liverpool for almost ten years now, long before the Urban White Paper and the birth of the RDAs. The Urban Splash approach is to target particularly downtrodden locations and properties - which include old buildings gutted by fire, derelict factories, and swathes of industrial wasteland - and transform them into places in which people want to 'live, work and play'. This holistic vision of urban destinations has brought the company enormous success, in the form of handsome profits and numerous awards. Interestingly, Mr Bloxham reports in his interview in the following pages that, contrary to popular belief, the most successful Urban Splash projects have not involved public sector partners. This has been largely due to the fact that the public sector remains, for the

most part, preoccupied with issues of secondary concern, such as the division of reward upon the release of schemes to market. Far more important to Bloxham is for local authorities and other agents of regeneration to evolve close working relationships with private developers such as himself, who have the experience, supply networks and determination to see these projects through to a profitable conclusion. Are the UK's regeneration authorities up to this challenge?

As the RDAs launch their initial strategies for urban renewal throughout England, will there be room for input from such entrepreneurial, forward-thinking companies as Urban Splash? Can private sector firms really become the 'partners', rather than simply suppliers, of the RDAs?

Recent announcements by one RDA suggest that things are moving in the right direction. Yorkshire Forward, the RDA for Yorkshire and Humber, has formed the Urban Renaissance Panel, a collection of private sector experts who have been brought together to work with Yorkshire Forward for the economic benefit of targeted 'renaissance towns' across the region, including Scarborough, Doncaster, Wakefield, Huddersfield, Grimsby and Barnsley. The Panel, comprising international architects, consultants and designers, has been tasked in the pilot phase of the project with identifying the economic needs of the renaissance towns, and looking at the future direction and potential of each over the next 25 years. As a key member of the Urban Renaissance Panel, Locum Destination Consulting is making numerous contributions to the initiative, the first of which is an in-depth analysis of the Wakefield district. This is precisely the sort of pioneering, partnership-based effort that is required if real improvements are to be made to the built environment and economies of neglected urban locations. Let us hope it is just the first of many.