

# Urban Renaissance in England

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## 1 Introduction – The Long View

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- 1.1 The TCPA was founded in 1899 initially to promote the idea of Garden Cities, the first purpose of which was to open the opportunity to people and to industry to move to sustainable new communities created on land owned by the residents. The second purpose was to provide relief from development pressure for the overcrowded and unhealthy industrial cities, such that rebuilding to more humane standards could take place.
- 1.2 Later, the TCPA played a major role in the development of the post-war planning system. This included the New Towns Act (1946), by which the state was to take on the job of building new communities (on land owned by the taxpayer), and the Town and Country Planning Act (1947), by which land development rights were nationalised and arrangements made for comprehensive town planning schemes for urban and rural areas.
- 1.3 The TCPA has been deeply involved in urban policy debates at each major thrust of government activity, including those providing the roots of the current urban renaissance programme: the Home Office's Inner Area Studies of the 1970s; the urban development corporations of the 1980s; the various forms of 'strategic partnerships', EU-funded programmes, urban regeneration companies and the work of the Urban Task Force in the 1990s; and the revival of the urban development corporation mechanism for some of the South East 'growth areas' and the initiatives designed to tackle areas of market failure in northern cities in the Sustainable Communities programme, announced in February 2003, *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future*.

## 2 The Urban Task Force Report and The Urban White Paper

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- 2.1 The TCPA shared the feeling of mounting frustration at the lack of widespread transformational change in dying and derelict urban districts that spurred the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, to convene the Urban Task Force, which reported in July 1999. Successive government programmes were evidently not reaching the roots of social stress, or restraining the apparently inexorable exodus of businesses and relatively wealthy people from the major conurbations.
- 2.2 Some fresh creative thinking was needed to cut across established departmental boundaries in government and engage the latent energy and skills of urban communities. The TCPA was delighted that its then Chair, Professor Sir Peter Hall, was appointed as member of the Urban Task Force. Some of the Association's Trustees served the Task Force anonymously as Readers of parts of the emerging draft report, and advised in other ways.
- 2.3 The key proposition of the Urban Task Force was that there is a need to induce an 'urban renaissance'. The TCPA enthusiastically agrees – a rediscovery of the joys and advantages of urban living was obviously needed: the iconography of city living had become mostly negative, yet the sprawling car-dependant pseudo-suburbia invented in the 1970s and 1980s in the shire counties was obviously unsustainable and offered a hollow quality of life.
- 2.4 The Urban Task Force also argued that the remaking of towns and cities required conscious urban design, and major investment in education in urban design and city-building skills to meet the demand. The TCPA enthusiastically agrees with this, too.

- 2.5 The TCPA also supported the majority of the many detailed recommendations of the Urban Task Force, and most were taken up by the Government in the subsequent Urban White Paper. National planning policy has been revised to support the urban renaissance and discourage wasteful use of green fields for development. The Treasury has begun to remove disincentives and tentatively to create fiscal advantage for those who seek to re-use previously developed land and convert or restore older buildings. More urban development corporations and other types of special delivery vehicle have been created to spur the urban renaissance, and in the core of most towns and cities new urban neighbourhoods have been created and there is evidence of revitalised and re-invigorated communities. The population of core areas is rising.
- 2.6 The iconography of city centre living has become more positive and, for a significant proportion of small households, fashionable. Some businesses in the 'new economy' of knowledge-based and creative industries have found city centres to be ideal locations. In some city centres a civilised, inclusive culture of city street-life is beginning to emerge following an initial phase dominated by night-clubs and bars. Car usage in city centres is beginning to fall, and investment in new public transport systems is working its way through tortuous technical processes. These changes have been dramatic. The auspices for achieving the urban renaissance are good.

### 3 Unfinished Business – An Urban Renaissance for All

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- 3.1 The TCPA is working to widen the effects of the urban renaissance in urban England, and to moderate the excesses of policy that seek to apply to all urban areas the prescriptions devised for city centres. The unfinished business that should achieve an 'urban renaissance for all' may be summarised as follows:

- We need to press on with the **regeneration of suburban neighbourhoods and small and market towns**. Suburbs form the greater part of all urban areas, and contain the majority of the urban population. Car dependency needs to be greatly reduced, and more intensity of development and a wider mix of uses, including employment, need to be achieved at nodes on public transport systems (systems which, in turn, need to be made excellent). Housing conditions need improvement in many older suburbs, even though they may be in owner-occupation. The social mix and choice of housing tenures in suburbs and small and market towns need to be widened, and the social development of communities needs attention – often the institutions, networks, and facilities that form the social infrastructure of sustainable community life have collapsed. We need to re-establish the vision that the local school might be the school of first choice.

- We need to moderate enthusiasm for **very high densities**. The 30-50 dwellings per net development hectare currently required by national policy in PPG3: *Housing* is an acceptable target. It offers hope for families with children or those who feel the need for a private garden or green space in their lives, while enabling more compact living for those who would choose it, close to public transport. Beyond a certain level of intensity there is nothing gained by overcrowding – unless it is proposed to dispense with civilised standards for school playing fields, parks, allotments, daylight and fresh air, and a degree of privacy in the home. While the TCPA believes that under-utilised land in city centres can be wasteful and hinder the success of regeneration projects, not all low-value uses should be removed. Many have a valuable role to play.

- We need to confront **the geography of jobs**. As the TCPA demonstrated in *The People: Where Will They Work?*, the availability of jobs is still a key influence upon the choice of home. Outside the world financial centre in the City of London, most jobs and most job growth is located towards the urban fringe or in the market towns. Unless much more of the economy can be generated and retained deep within urban areas, the engine to drive a sustainable urban renaissance will be too weak.

- For the modern economy that is to be found at the urban fringe, there is a need to achieve an **urban renaissance from the 'outside in'** as well as from the 'inside out'. Under-used land needs to be developed for homes, and public transport links need to be created. Community facilities and a high-quality public realm must be delivered. This will create the springboard in appropriate places for 'sustainable urban extensions' if required.

■ The scale of housing need and the geography of its arising is such that we **must plan positively for the 'other half' of city-region policy – the greenfield development that is needed in addition to the urban renaissance**. The TCPA advocates a 'portfolio' approach by which an appropriate blend of types of housing land allocation – infill, town extension, or new communities – is crafted in each layer of statutory development plan. The TCPA is opposed to a national 'one size fits all' policy which requires a 'sequential approach' regardless of local circumstance. Specifically, the TCPA opposes policy which asserts that an 'urban extension' is always superior in planning terms to a new town or town expansion scheme some distance away.

■ The TCPA does not support the concept of a 'greenfield tax' on housing, on the grounds that greenfield housing will only arise as a result of due statutory plan-making. Communities that find – after due planning process – that they need a proportion of greenfield housing should not be punished for making such plans. On the other hand, the TCPA is interested in seeing linkages made such that **a fair share of the gross unearned increase in land value, that is often created by the grant of planning consent for greenfield development, should be captured for community benefit** – which might include helping to fund the urban renaissance.

■ The TCPA remains **opposed to a 'one size fits all' national target for the use of previously developed land**, regardless of the geography of its arising, its suitability for living, its relationship to work and transport, the potential it might have as greenspace of various types, and of the cost to the taxpayer of its recovery, decontamination, and physical development.

■ The TCPA wishes to see more careful consideration given to the **type of new housing that is needed**. It is a false argument that the growing proportion of small households – one or two people living alone – will accept small homes. It is also a false argument that most new homes should be small – new homes are a small addition to the total stock each year, and whether they should be family homes or small homes depends very much on local need and demand, and features of the location such as accessibility to work, or to good schools. The TCPA wishes to see generous housing standards, and flexibility in designs that will allow homes to be adapted to meet changing needs over successive generations.

■ The TCPA is working to **encourage community engagement in planning processes and projects**. The new 'Statements of Community Involvement' will provide the discipline of accounting in this regard, and the financing of planning aid<sup>1</sup> will provide a degree of community technical aid. But the ambition to harness the energy and skills of indigenous urban communities is turning out to be something of a chimera – there are legions of professional urban regenerators busy burning through the Government's budget for the urban renaissance, but ordinary people have other demands on their time, which limits their ability and willingness to inhabit the structures of numerous partnerships, stakeholder groups, and other unaccountable action programmes. In addition, important community representatives (such as pensioners, unemployed, or single parents) who work on government regeneration schemes risk having their benefits withdrawn if they are recompensed for their work. Benefit rules should be reformed to prevent this.

There is an abundance of bureaucratic structures, programmes, and initiatives – often with overlapping spatial territories – that confuse and bemuse. There is a tendency to fall back on relatively easy property-led regeneration schemes and environmental quick-fix projects, rather than confronting the underlying causes of poverty and the dysfunctional 'software' of urban life – schooling, policing, noise, air pollution, street cleaning. The Government's recent commitment to improving skills and training is welcome, but this needs to go further and raise overall awareness and interest in planning issues. The public needs to be aware of their ability to shape their communities for the better, and their role in the process. This needs to be built into the 'Changing the Culture of Planning' agenda.

- We need to complete **fiscal reforms to favour the urban renaissance**, including:
- the equalisation of VAT at 5 per cent on both the building of new houses and the conversion of existing ones;
  - the reform of stamp duty to reduce the burden on house purchasers and to act as a counter-balance to increases in VAT – the lower threshold should be raised to take account of increasing property prices;

- improvement upon the 150 per cent relief of corporation tax for the clean-up of contaminated land, with a targeted 30-year clean-up programme for all contaminated land;
- the creation of a 'civic fund' from lottery sources, which would be used to promote urban living over the long term – focusing, for example, on social cohesion, quality environments, good public transport, urban management and maintenance, and affordable housing; and
- the full investigation of the various revenue-raising methods (including property- and land-related taxes), with a view to increasing the portfolio of options that can be used in different circumstances.

■ We need to increase the **quantity, quality, and variety of affordable housing in locations accessible to public transport and job opportunities**. This to be achieved by a range of measures, including planning gain and – as promised in the *Sustainable Communities* plan – by greater funding through the Housing Corporation.

■ Standards for **sustainable construction, sustainable drainage, sustainable energy, and site layout** need to be raised, both in the building regulations and through the planning system. Guidance to local authorities needs to be developed and examples of good practice need to be championed by government. The TCPA's Sustainable Housing Forum has carried out extensive work on how overall standards can be raised.

■ The critical importance of ensuring that systems of **high-quality public transport**, including strategic networks, are in place at the time of development must be recognised by government. A variety of funding mechanisms for such schemes must be investigated, learning from examples in the UK and abroad. Such mechanisms would also be useful for funding community infrastructure.

■ In its frustration at the pace of change the Government has reached for a increasing range of draconian centralist measures to force its agenda on local government, demotivating elected councillors and disillusioning local electors. The TCPA is an enthusiastic supporter of **devolution to the regions, and seeks the restoration of true local government**.

#### **4 Moving Forward**

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- 4.1 The TCPA does not doubt the commitment of the Deputy Prime Minister and his Office to achieving an urban renaissance – John Prescott's very personal speech at the Urban Summit in Birmingham in November 2002 was evidence in abundance.
- 4.2 The Association seeks to make a constructive and creative contribution as we promote 'urban renaissance for all' – outwards from the city centres, and inwards from the dysfunctional suburbs and edge-city environments that have emerged.

#### **Note**

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- 1 Pioneered in practice by the TCPA in the 1970s and 1980s