Governance and community involvement in regenerating UK cities

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Abstract

The Shrinking Cities phenomenon is now widespread in Europe. In the UK Government policy has been to try to combat rather than accept the process and there have been numerous regeneration initiatives in British cities. Some have focused on people, some on jobs and business and others on the built environment. Some have aimed at market adjustment through the supply of land or demolition or at stimulating demand through financial incentives. Some have been community led, but most have been top-down initiatives led by local government or developers. This paper will draw lessons from the UK experience over the last twenty years. It will also report attempts by the author to promote stakeholder dialogue in two cities experiencing decline – Burnley and Luton. The paper will reflect on the progress of these new approaches to community involvement in decision-making and speculate about the way forward.

Introduction

There have been numerous regeneration initiatives in British cities. Some have focused on people, some on jobs and business and others on the built environment. Some have aimed at market adjustment through the supply of land or demolition or at stimulating demand through financial incentives. Some have been community led, many have been top-down initiatives led by local government or developers. Can we say anything about which have been more successful or does it all depend on local circumstances? And how important is community involvement?

This paper will draw lessons from the UK experience over the last twenty years. Any major regeneration initiative has to engage the local community and devise community participation events. This paper will analyse existing models of participation from tokenism through consultation to effective involvement in strategic planning. It will address two key questions: what role has community involvement played in UK regeneration efforts and what models of
governance have proved most effective in guiding the process? The paper will cite evidence from various UK cities and will assess the effectiveness of community involvement.

It will report attempts by the author to improve public consultation and promoting stakeholder dialogue. It will describe setting up a futures forum that brought together local authority representatives and planners, business people, developers, architects, conservationists and local residents to develop alternative strategies in two cities experiencing decline – Burnley and Luton. Funded by CABE, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, the study devised a Building Futures Game that has since been published by CABE and the RIBA. The paper will reflect on the progress of these new approaches to community involvement and speculate about the way forward.

**Urban shrinkage in the UK**

The Shrinking Cities phenomenon is widespread in Europe. In the UK urban shrinkage has been caused by economic decline in structurally weak industrial cities and, in part at least, by suburbanization and a flight from the inner city. This is not a new phenomenon, numerous studies have analysed its causes, particularly in the United States. Nevertheless, we still know very little about what conditions contribute to the loss of skilled, qualified and creative people, and how urban actors might be able to preserve or regenerate city assets. In particular we lack governance mechanisms that bring together the various stakeholders, who are often in conflict about what needs to be done.

In England, London and the South East are prospering whilst manufacturing towns in the Midlands and North have declined. Imbalances of growth and decline mean that there is a shortage of housing in the South and an excess in the North. What is to be done? And how can citizens be involved in decision-making? In particular, how can an effective voice be given to the very broad range of stakeholders involved in and affected by the development and change in our towns and cities?

The population of the UK as a whole is growing. In 2008, the total UK population was estimated as 61.4 million. This is a growth of 6-7% over the previous decade. (Office of National Statistics, 2010) In the 1970s UK population was static but in the 80s and 90s it grew through natural increase and since the late 90s the main cause of growth has been migration. As in other countries, this growth, however, is unevenly distributed. Broadly speaking, the southern and eastern parts of England have prospered, in contrast with the rest of the UK. A comparison
of data from the 2001 and 1991 census (Lupton and Powers 2004) shows that the old industrial centres of the midlands and north have suffered population loss at the fastest rate.

Northern British conurbations of Glasgow, Merseyside (Liverpool), and Tyne and Wear (Newcastle) were in continuous decline throughout the entire post-WWII period, in particular, since 1960 and until at least 2005 (the latest data available). In contrast, mixed urban-rural areas (+5.1%) and remoter areas (+6.1%) gained in population. Nonetheless, the majority of UK cities experienced various periods of resurgence, with population in Swansea, West Midlands conurbation (Birmingham), South Yorkshire conurbation (Sheffield), Greater Manchester, and Plymouth growing since 2000, whilst West Yorkshire conurbation (Leeds-Bradford) and Edinburgh enjoyed a continuous increase in population since 1990. In contrast to other major metropolises in Europe, the population of London grew by 8% to 7.6 million during the period 1997-2007 and some cities, notably: Bristol, Greater Belfast, Nottingham, Derby, Portsmouth, and Blackpool all experienced long-term resurgence since 1980-2005. (Turok and Mykhnenko 2007).

**Reaction to urban shrinkage**

In some parts of Europe shrinkage is accepted as a natural consequence of economic restructuring. The coping strategies of some countries, such as those in Scandinavia, is to accept adapt and go with the flow; in Britain Government policy is to confront and combat the decline. For the past decade UK government policy has been to encourage urban living (Urban Task Force, 1999). In part this is a continuation of the traditional policy of protecting the countryside but it also responds to a sustainability agenda of reducing travel distances. The New Deal for Communities (NDC) and the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme have been key to this policy. (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001)

Home-owners in shrinking cities fear decline in property values and people find it difficult to get work. Faced with the stark realities of electoral politics governments opt for top down solutions that involve demolition and upgrading. This paper questions the wisdom and practicality of this approach. There is much too little money available for this strategy to be effective and this approach provokes citizen protest rather than mobilising local energy and enterprise.
UK Urban regeneration

All regeneration, as Tallon (2010) in a review of urban regeneration in the UK points out, is to mitigate the negative consequences of decline. As with any process of socio-economic change the benefits and problems are not evenly distributed. Since the 1970’s urban regeneration, Tallon suggests, has contributed to some spectacular improvements in built environment, local economies and the social life of residents. However, the results have been uneven both within cities and across regions.

Urban regeneration has played a major role in the UK in creating a construction boom in the decade 1995-2005 when the construction sector grew by over 25%. (Jones and Evans, 2008). Many UK towns and cities experienced a frenzy of development, driven not only by economic growth but also by demographic changes. People are living longer, people are having children later and there has been considerable immigration. As a result the number of households has risen by 8% in the past decade. As Jones and Evans point out, the majority of this increase is in one-person households which is an important factor in the boom in apartment building in city centres.

Since the rise in household numbers has outstripped the overall increase in population, average household size has fallen. This is particularly true of more prosperous areas of the country – perhaps because owner-occupied housing has been considered not only as accommodation, but also as an excellent investment. In shrinking regions, by contrast, average household size has slightly increased (data source: DEFRA 2007 Market Transformation Programme, www.mtprog.com). This increase in households has not been matched by a corresponding increase in house building, however, which has fuelled an increase in house prices of 114% in the same period. (www.nationwide.co.uk/hpi/historical.htm, (accessed 12 January 2010). The Barker Review (2004) set a target of 200,000 new dwellings per year. Until the financial crisis last year this target was being met.

The distribution of new house construction has however not been uniform: the majority of private investment has taken place in the South East. This imbalance, and attendant problems of “social exclusion” in the disadvantaged parts of shrinking cities have been a catalyst for action by the Labour government elected in 1997, notable the Housing Market Renewal Programme.

Housing Market Renewal

Local efforts at regeneration of the declining industrial cities in the UK have focussed on specific events or flagship projects, for example, the European City of Culture status for
Glasgow in 1990 and Liverpool in 2008. The Housing Market Renewal (HMR) programme aimed at more generalised intervention in areas where low property values were seen to be a barrier to investment. Launched in 2002 and extended in 2005, the programme targeted 9 specific “Pathfinder” areas, and was subsequently extended to 3 further areas of low housing demand, all in declining regions of England. (DCLG 2009)

The programme was intended to run for 15–20 years. Central government committed funding of over 2.6bn euros, mainly directed to site assembly for housing redevelopment: over 16,000 units have been demolished and 60,000 refurbished.

In its early years, the programme encountered opposition both at local level and in the national media (see Ferrari 2007). Site assembly was complicated by the fact that many residents of social housing had become owner-occupiers under the “Right to Buy” scheme begun by the Conservative government in the 1980s. Nevertheless, after five years the HMR programme could point to some success in meeting targets such as reducing unlet property and boosting house values in the Pathfinder areas.

Overall value for money of the programme was however moot: 2007 marked the height of a nationwide property boom. Although the value of certain houses in Pathfinder areas had risen by 100%, the general picture was one of only modest improvement by comparison with similar, non-Pathfinder locations. In the past two years, the boom has turned to bust. Values in Pathfinder areas have dropped even faster than those in the general market, perhaps because many would-be purchasers have difficulty in obtaining loans due to their poor credit histories (DCLG 2009). The future of the HMR programme, against a background of falling public investment, is uncertain.

Consultation, participation and stakeholder involvement

There is much agreement about the importance of involving local people in planning their own futures and about community led regeneration (ODPM, 1995; Sanoff, 1997; Ralph and Peterman, 2004; CABE, 2005). Taylor (2007) suggests that there is currently a strong political will for greater local engagement and community involvement in decision making structures. Given this emphasis on community engagement in Government policy one might assume that there would be many examples of effective involvement in strategic decisions about regeneration. It is perhaps not surprising, given the complexity of the problem and conflicting vested interests, that this is not the case. Many authors have commented that policy decisions about urban renewal disregard public participation (Blowers et al., 1982; Kitchen, 1997). Taylor
(2007) finds that although greater involvement in decision-making has been welcomed by voluntary and community organisations, many are still marginalised in the new governance spaces that have been created.

Consultation and participation are aspects of a much wider issue of local governance and participatory democracy. Jones and Evans (2008) elaborate four distinct forms of governance: governance by government, by partnership, by networks and by regime. This paper is specifically concerned with fostering one of these forms – governance by networks. Rhodes (1997) defined this form of governance as ‘self-organizing, inter-organisational networks’ that bring different actors together to accomplish a task. However, there is very little clarity about which mechanisms are most effective in ensuring local public bodies take account of the views of residents. (Newman et al, 2004). Other authors also raise questions about how to engage people effectively. (Irvin, 2004) (Dinham, 2005) (Stringer et., 2005). Swyngedouw (2005) warns that new arrangements of governance have created new institutions and empowered new actors, while disempowering others. He suggests that new patterns of governance-beyond-the-state are fundamentally ‘Janus-faced’, particularly in the face of market forces.

There is a tension in most regeneration initiatives between satisfying the needs of existing residents and businesses in an area and the wider needs of the town or sub-region. Often officials and politicians promoting regeneration visualise success in terms of attracting ‘better’ more middle class residents or more successful businesses; a process of gentrification that is desired by policy makers and abhorred by residents. The key issue in consultation and participation is that the different actors involved in regeneration have different agendas and different perspectives and it is difficult to reach a consensus about what needs to be done. Because of this inherent conflict of interest it is almost impossible to get politicians to be imaginative and to innovate. Decision makers need to be taken outside the normal remit of their job to be able to think imaginatively. (Oswald, 2010) Solutions demand a combination of local knowledge and outside networks, but most actors struggle to deal with the inherent complexity and uncertainty. Discussion of the issues tends to jump between sectors, for example from the economy to housing, and from issues affecting the neighbourhood to those affecting whole region. A framework is needed, therefore, to manage and document the twists and turns of any discussion in order to find areas of agreement. This paper proposes one such framework.

New Deal for Communities

The New Deal for Communities programme, launched in 1998, was a key part of the
Government's strategy to revitalise the country's poorest neighbourhoods. (ODPM, 2003) The desire to place communities ‘at the heart’ of the regeneration process was a defining feature of the Programme and NDC partnerships have strenuous efforts to involve local people. However, an evaluation of the New Deal for Communities (NDC) Programme was carried out between 2001 and 2010 by a consortium led by Sheffield Hallam University. They found that although most NDC partnerships had succeeded in consulting local people, only small numbers had been involved in decision-making and resource allocation. (Fordham, 2010; Batty, 2010). The authors report that the key policy implication is that future regeneration programmes need to ensure that there are a variety of opportunities for participation. Building resident participation into regeneration programmes before delivery takes place, and allowing for capacity to develop from the ‘bottom up’ may, the authors suggest, be more conducive to encouraging more residents to participate.

It is instructive to focus on one of the 39 NDC partnerships – Barton Hill in Bristol. Barton Hill is a working class tower block estate built in the 1950’s fifteen minutes walk from the city centre. Half way through the 10-year NDC regeneration programme Barton Hill was chosen for inclusion in the EU funded IMAGE Project. ‘Branding’ workshops were employed to give a fresh impetus to dialogue with residents. The main finding was that residents wanted to live in a working class neighbourhood without stigma rather than to end up with gentrification. In response to this community feedback, resources were targeted at increasing access to public services and developing economic opportunities and social capital instead of using regeneration money to improve the physical fabric of the estate. (The Image Project, 2008)

The author of this paper and students in the Department of Architecture at Nottingham University reviewed other NDC regeneration in Nottingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield. We found that residents vary in their aspirations and that there is no single solution that fits all. For example, in contrast to Barton Hill, residents of the NDC partnership in Radford and Hyson Green, a working class estate in Nottingham, felt that there had been too little emphasis on physical improvement and that there was little to show for all the effort and investment. In 2003, four years into the programme, members of the board resigned due to a lack community involvement and Jo Thorpe, the vice-chair, stated that ‘the organisation has singularly failed to engage local people’. (Thorpe, 2003). Resources were targeted at education and career development and Dave Brennan, chief executive of the Neighbourhood Development Company, argues that Radford has a high turnover of residents (35% per year) and that regeneration has evidently helped a lot of people who no longer live in the area. (Harrison,
2009)

In St Anns, a second NDC partnership in Nottingham residents seemed to have had a greater say in decision-making and opted for a drive to improve the environment. This involved redevelopment of two outdated housing complexes, Marple Square, and Cheverton Court by creating off-street parking, turning the backs of houses into fronts and dividing communal areas into private gardens. This physical change improved public appreciation of the regeneration process. In addition, a neighbourhood manager was appointed, the first in the UK, to promote resident involvement and on completion, a neighbourhood board, that included members of the community, took over management of the estate.

**Case studies of Burnley and Luton**

In 2004-5 the author undertook a study for the Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE) and the RIBA. (*Platt and Cooper, 2005*). This was a comparative case study of two towns that had lost their manufacturing base: Burnley in the Elevate East Lancashire Pathfinder area and Luton in the South East, outside the Pathfinder remit.

**IMAGE**

Both towns are recipients of Government regeneration funding and both are scenes of intense local government activity. The study reported people's aspirations and concerns and described the current regeneration initiatives and explores options for the future of the two neighbourhoods and towns. Most importantly it drew lessons from these two types of places – one with a buoyant economy and increasing population, the other with a struggling economy and declining population – about how to plan and implement urban futures more effectively.

**Methodology**

The approach was simple. Rather than try to quantify the factors that contribute to regeneration, the study set out to tell the ‘story’ about change in these two towns and neighbourhoods. Both towns were visited and the officers responsible for regeneration were interviewed. In each town, a single neighbourhood was chosen – Burnley Wood in Burnley and High Town in Luton. Both are inner-city neighbourhoods with Victorian terraced housing and low-value commercial property.

In each town, people were found to represent three different groups of stakeholders: policy makers, service providers and community members. From these selected interviewees, a broad
range of stakeholder aspirations and concerns were identified. All the people that had been interviewed were invited to workshops to explore the future of their town and it quickly became apparent that some way was required to make the wealth of material captured accessible to people coming to the workshops. An Urban Futures Game was devised to provide a framework to help participants think constructively about the future.

IMAGE

Comparison of the two towns

Before thinking about the future, it is important to understand the context. Burnley became a centre of weaving in the 18th century and, along with many other towns in the North of England, grew rapidly in the 19th century. By 1886 there were 100,000 looms in the town, together with several coal pits and factories producing machinery and steam engines, and Burnley was the biggest producer of cotton cloth in the world. Burnley Wood is just over the canal from the Weaver’s Triangle, next to the town centre. The new light engineering industries attracted to the town since the 1930s have nearly all gone. Since 1920 Burnley’s population has steadily declined at 2-3% a year and today is about 90,000.

Luton was the centre of the hat industry located in Platters Lea and High Town and as this declined the automotive industry took over. Recently the Vauxhall car factory closed down, but the economy, based on the airport and high tech industry, is still buoyant. High Town is just over the railway line from the town centre. Luton saw an increase in population above national average between 1880-1980. And since 1980 population growth has been similar to the rest of the country and today is 185,000, twice as big as Burnley.

The two towns are situated in very different regions. Burnley is in North East Lancashire, a region that has seen steady decline in its population over the last eighty years. Luton is in the prosperous South East and lies between two of the main growth areas in the country – the South Midlands/Milton Keynes area and the M11 corridor. Most significantly Luton has excellent rail connections to London while in Burnley travellers have to change in Preston or Hebden Bridge to get to Manchester. So although car journey times and from Luton to London are similar, train travel from Burnley to Manchester takes up to five times longer than from Luton to London. Both neighbourhoods are ten minutes walk from their town centres but, because of geography and infrastructure, both feel isolated. Burnley Wood is to the south of the Leeds Liverpool Canal while High Town is to the north of the railway line.
At first sight Burnley and Luton seem quite different. Yet in both towns there are
neighbourhoods, including Burnley Wood and High Town, amongst the 10% most deprived in
the country. Both towns have areas of derelict commercial property and poor housing. And in
both there are run-down areas of inner city Victorian terraces and outer suburbs of sixties
council housing in desperate need of maintenance or renewal. Both towns have a poor image.
Luton was voted the ‘Crappiest Town in Britain’ in an on-line poll of 20,000 people in 2004.
Both towns also look gritty and rough. Both have the working class feel of manufacturing towns
in decline. Although unemployment is low in Burnley, there is a lot of ‘make work’ – part time,
low paid jobs – and that is reflected in average earnings. And, despite Burnley’s notoriety, its
Asian population is smaller than in Luton. In summary, the two towns have things in common –
they both have similar small town inferiority complexes with similar low educational attainment
and similar low aspirations and expectations – but they each have very different economic
prospects.

What sets the two neighbourhoods of Burnley Wood and High Town in Luton apart is the state
of the housing market. In Burnley there has been a significant fall in house prices. A standard
‘two up and two down’ terraced house in Burnley Wood fetched about £25,000 in 1989. But
when Philip Chew, the vicar at St Stephens, came to live there in 2002 you could buy a terraced
house on a credit card. Currently compulsory purchase has fixed the going price at about
£20,000. Yet within five minute’s walk there are houses on sale for quarter of a million and
there are new infill terraces on Todmorden Road, on the edge of the neighbourhood, being built
by a private developer that will sell for £200,000. In sharp contrast, in High Town the average
price of a terraced house is £135,000. But the difference in the average price of semis and
larger houses is not nearly so marked. In a weak housing market, with a large excess supply, the
least desirable housing can sink to very low values. As the market strengthens, previously undesirable housing can of course become desirable. In summary the two neighbourhoods have a lot in common. They have similar patterns of Victorian terraces and mixed uses. They both feel ‘cut off’ from the town centre. In both the occupants are a mix of ‘transient’ incomers and the remnants of a more stable community. But each has very different regeneration prospects.

**Current initiatives**

Given their ‘deprived’ status, there are wide ranging Government initiatives in the two towns, Only those related directly to regeneration of the selected neighbourhoods are described here. In Burnley, Burnley Wood is one of three Neighbourhood Action Areas sharing £15 million Elevate Pathfinder funding from the ODPM. Regeneration is being tackled through direct intervention in the housing market. In the short term, this involves significant demolition and clearance. Whether it will produce benefits in the longer term is not clear, especially to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. In Luton, High Town is one of five priority areas similarly sharing £15 million of Single Regeneration Budget and EU Objective 2 funding. The money is going into a new community centre and upgrading the high street. It is hoped that proximity to London and regional growth will deliver further regeneration. These sums look large. But to put them in perspective, £22 billion is earmarked for the Thames Gateway compared with £500 million for all nine Pathfinders in the North and Midlands. Admittedly, the growth area figure covers the provision of infrastructure, not just housing. But the comparison does indicate a different order of magnitude.

Effective community engagement is a key issue in both towns. There has been lots of consultation, in fact both communities speak of consultation fatigue. But, in both towns, decision making rests with the Council whose main concern is, perhaps quite naturally, for the needs of the whole town, not just these two neighbourhoods. Wilks-Heeg and Clayton (2006) reported that only 5% of public spending in Burnley is controlled by the district council. Despite innumerable consultation exercises local people have no real mechanism for holding to account the non-elected bodies managing the bulk of public funding and only 16% of people in Burnley feel able to influence local decisions.

**The Urban Futures game**

A novel feature of the study was the development of the Urban Futures game mentioned earlier. The game was used to explore the aspirations and concerns of the inhabitants of both towns and to rehearse options for the future of the neighbourhoods selected as case studies. The game
combines the features of number of participation processes described by Sanoff (2000) including strategic planning charettes, focus groups and game simulation.

_Urban Futures workshop in Burnley_

We devised sets of playing cards on which we transcribed the aspirations and concerns voiced by interviewees. Since people in Burnley and Luton have different aspirations and concerns we made separate packs for each town. At the workshops, participants were asked to make choices by prioritising the cards. Participants then recorded their priorities using coloured circles on wall charts the column headings of which were: people, housing, community, infrastructure, economy, education, process and leadership. The wall chart thus provided an immediate graphic record of what the group felt was important.

Neighbourhood regeneration in both towns is constrained by a need to meet short-term goals. So we decided to devise options or scenarios to raise people’s horizons. We developed four broad generic options for how the case study neighbourhoods could regenerate over the next 10 to 20 years. At the workshops, these options were used to promote a dialogue between stakeholders about what might be done. We drew on the interviews to identify a wide range of criteria that people thought should be used to judge whether regeneration had been successful over this time.
scale. At the workshops, participants were asked to prioritise which criteria should be used to measure whether change had been successful in their neighbourhood. The game made the wealth of material collected and collated accessible to people coming to the workshop. It also made the process more enjoyable.

**Aspirations**

At first glance the spread of aspirations in the two towns looked similar. There are dots in all the columns of the wall chart which meant that there were a wide range of priorities in both towns. This complexity reflects what we learnt from the interviews – there are many ideas about regenerating these places and different people value different things. Nevertheless there were differences between the two towns. In Burnley the focus was on the Economy and Education columns, while in Luton it was on Community, Infrastructure and Process. There were also clear areas of agreement and disagreement between different interest groups. In Burnley everyone agreed that regeneration depends on the regional economy. Policy makers/providers then chose aspirations that describe current policy initiatives, while residents of Burnley Wood seemed to be thinking more holistically. In contrast, in Luton policy makers/providers were thinking more broadly in choosing to focus on the neighbourhood/town link and on continuity, while the community members chose issues closer to home that would improve the prospects of High Town.

**Concerns**

As one might expect from the diversity of aspirations given priority, there were widespread concerns about regeneration. In Burnley the overriding concern was about the economy while in Luton the primary focus was on infrastructure and the environment. This is not surprising. Burnley has a long history of false dawns and Luton, as Pevsner noted, has a tradition of poor architecture. In Burnley, as one might expect, both sides were concerned that the town will still be struggling in 20 years’ time. In sharp contrast, policy makers/providers in Burnley were more concerned about introducing aspiring households into the neighbourhood and raising the expectations of those who already live there, while community members were more concerned about the lack of vision and whether the current Pathfinder programme, with its focus on housing market renewal, stood any chance of working. In Luton, policy makers/providers were most concerned about High Town’s physical and social isolation. They thought that people harked back to the past rather than looking positively to the future. People in the community put a more positive spin on this. They wanted a thriving neighbourhood with local shops where
people take an active role in the community. Residents were also more concerned about quality of life and worried about increasing density, which they saw as cramming.

In summary, in terms of aspirations and concerns, there were areas of agreement in both towns. The differences revolved around the balance between the needs of existing residents and the future of the town as a whole.

**Options**

At the workshops people were asked to assess the options for regenerating towns and neighbourhoods like theirs over the next 10 to 20 years. What was immediately striking is that no single option is favoured in either town. This means that the preferred solution is likely to be a package of measures. The danger of course is that the plan ends up as a mishmash of ideas trying to satisfy everyone. In both towns all interest groups clearly preferred Option 3 *Small business incubator*. This obviously reflects their priority for education and economy. They also liked Option 1 *Commuter village* that would exploit each town’s relatively cheap housing and proximity to a major conurbation. Beyond this there are some differences. In Burnley, policy makers/providers preferred Option 4 *Design-led regeneration* while the community was prepared to consider Option 2 *Urban wood*. In Luton, perhaps because of the town’s poor record in this area, both community members also prioritised Option 4 *Design-led regeneration*. At both workshops, the consultants responsible for the, as yet unfinished, master plans for each neighbourhood were very interested in and drew on these outcomes.

**Success criteria**

The element of the workshops considered the success factors people would use in 10 or 20 years’ time to measure whether change has been effective. Although there were differences between the two towns, strikingly there was much more consensus between the various stakeholders in each town about success criteria than about aspirations and concerns. In Burnley both interest groups focused on educational attainment and the socio-economic status of future inhabitants. In Luton both groups chose quality of life issues and pride in the town. The game identified real opportunities here for consensus building. From this it would be possible to build an agreed platform about the way forward and also identify areas of conflict that need to be harnessed positively to bring about successful regeneration.
Using options to manage change

Futures methods are largely absent from the toolbox currently being used for urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal. Yet their effective use could help to mitigate some of the shortcomings of current methods of community engagement. The use of cards to represent stakeholders’ aspirations and concerns makes sorting and prioritising them fun. They also ensure that everybody’s voice is brought to the table, anonymously, for joint consideration. Displaying participants’ individual choices via wall charts is a good way of making opinions transparent, and aggregating these helps to identify shared and unshared preferences. This aids consensus-building as well as signposting areas of conflict that have to be managed positively.

Options are a powerful way of engaging stakeholders in thinking about the longer-term future of neighbourhoods and towns. They offer an opportunity to explore possible futures and help people to make leaps of the imagination. Options can be employed to clarify the range of hard choices available that confront a community and can be selected to give voice to all the various stakeholders involved and illustrate their underlying motives and concerns, regardless of their current power to impose their own preferred solutions. Options help keep the choices available open for longer. They can also clarify the goals that lie behind these choices and the means of achieving them. And this can happen before goals become buried beneath physical proposals in master plans and before funding begins. They can help untangle the complexity of choices and delivery mechanisms – holding them up for comparison, weighing them against each other. As a result, options are a useful mechanism for building consensus and for harnessing conflicts so that they can be exploited positively. And finally options can be used to raise awareness of the issue of design quality.

If this clarity is absent and plans push ahead without stakeholder support, then there is a strong chance that a regeneration programme will fail. If carefully selected, options can be used to explore innovative solutions and the front-end contribution from developers currently absent in both towns. Taken together, the aspirations, concerns, options and success criteria provided workshop participants with a framework within which to explore possible futures for their town and neighbourhood. Playing the Urban Futures game in Burnley and Luton showed that people from different sides of the process are able to talk about their aspirations and concerns and discuss options for the future in a constructive way. This experience provides lessons for elsewhere about how to manage both growth and shrinkage. The workshops clearly demonstrated how a broader shared platform for managing change could be built for urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal in both of the case study towns.
There’s an apocryphal tale about Burnley Alderman Tony Gallagher taking a deputation to London in the sixties to demand Government investment in jobs. Macmillan said that towns have disappeared throughout history and it wasn’t the Government’s job to try and stem the tide. Gallagher said that 100,000 people can’t just disappear and that Burnley demanded the same investment as people in the South. Burnley gained a new shopping centre, an inner ring road and new industry, industry that has now all gone. Towns like Burnley and Luton have to start from where they are now. Other places have shown that the damage of the sixties can be repaired and these studies demonstrate that enlightened leadership, that is prepared to engage with different interest groups, can develop a joint vision of the future.

Conclusions

A number of principles involved in deliberative decision making underlie this case study (Deliberative public decision-making, 2005). The Urban Futures game works by providing people with a framework for thinking about the future. It does this, principally, by offering a range of options for consideration. It also involves stakeholders from a wide variety of interest groups in discussing issues at a strategic level.

The process has the following steps:

• establish a forum: that brings stakeholders from different interest group together

• devise a framework: that clarifies and provides a structure for effective discussion and testing of the issues raised by these stakeholders

• devise options: that map out solutions and promote dialogue and negotiation pointing to a shared platform for moving forward

• report preferences and priorities: that help create a positive and pro-active climate of opinion about the future.

There is a democratic impulse underlying this approach. The cards, that summarise people’s aspirations and concerns, help bring everyone’s voice to the table. The engagement process creates a common platform that can be built on by stakeholders and used to identify, and if necessary to isolate, those areas of disagreement that need to be dealt with further. The study showed that, provided with a well-structured discussion space, constructive dialogue between stakeholders can alter the climate of opinion about change and development. There is currently a huge amount of public consultation about urban development and regeneration in the UK, but
there is little effective engagement with citizens at a strategic level. The study of Burnley and Luton showed that, if presented with well-grounded information about a range of options, people are quite capable of making reasoned choices and trade-offs and are often far less negative about change and redevelopment than politicians and council officers assume. Despite the obvious difficulties, it is important to involve citizens in strategic decision-making about regeneration. The author has shown that ordinary people are able to contribute to decisions about change in their town if presented with good information. (Platt, 1999 and 2004). Most recently, the Bauhaus, under the umbrella of the International Building Exhibition in Saxony-Anhalt (2010), has shown that citizen involvement brings a huge diversity of ideas and initiatives. Their hope is that projects developed will be more successful and sustainable because they are anchored in the local context. The scale of the issues involved in shrinkage and the scale of the resources needed for top-down approaches as so huge that harnessing local energy and enterprise is essential. If local economies can be repaired shrinking cities can compete with growth areas in attracting and retaining young families.

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