



# Urban regeneration and sustainable development in Britain

## The example of the Liverpool Ropewalks Partnership

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Despite the emergence of urban regeneration and sustainable development as parallel strands of British urban policy, there has been little co-ordination between them and an imbalance in action with greater emphasis given to achieving urban regeneration, especially economic regeneration, than to sustainability. It can be argued that all urban regeneration contributes to sustainable development through the recycling of derelict land and buildings, reducing demand for peripheral development and facilitating the development of more compact cities. But below this strategic level British urban policy has yet to fully address the requirement for more sustainable development. This paper addresses this question through an examination of policy in Liverpool and a case study of Duke Street/Bold Street (the Rope Walks Partnership): a mixed use area adjoining the city centre. It is important to place local action within the context of national policies and so the paper begins with some discussion of the extent to which the principles of sustainable development are included within national urban regeneration policies before going on to examine policy at the metropolitan scale in Liverpool and then at the more detailed level of the Rope Walks area. The conclusions suggest that it is economic regeneration and more precisely property redevelopment, that is the main driving force regenerating the area and that there is some way to go before the city or the case study area achieve an environmentally sustainable regeneration process. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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### Introduction

Regeneration has become a major element of British urban policy. Since the passing of the Inner Urban Areas Act in 1978 an array of initiatives has been introduced, culminating in 1993 with the introduction of the Single Regeneration Budget and the regeneration agency for England: English Partnerships. Since the early 1990s, environmentally sustainable development has also emerged as an important element of urban policy. In *Sustainable Development: the UK*

*Strategy* (1994) the Government recognised the importance of urban regeneration in contributing to a sustainable pattern of development that uses “the already developed areas in the most efficient way, while making them more attractive places in which to live and work” (Department of the Environment, 1994, p. 158). Despite the emergence of urban regeneration and sustainable development as parallel strands of urban policy, there has been little co-ordination between them and an imbalance in action, with greater emphasis given to achieving urban regeneration, especially economic regeneration, than to sustainability. It can be argued that all urban regeneration contributes to sustainable development through the recycling of derelict land and buildings, reducing

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demand for peripheral development and facilitating the development of more compact cities. But below this strategic level, British urban policy has yet to fully address the requirement for more sustainable development. In 1997, the incoming Labour government showed some recognition of this problem, appointing Lord Rogers to lead the "Urban Task Force" (UTF). With the recent publication of the UTF final report "Towards an Urban Renaissance" (Urban Task Force, 1999), it is timely to consider regeneration policies in a British city and their contribution to sustainable development.

This paper addresses this question through an examination of policy in Liverpool and a case study of Duke Street/Bold Street (the Rope Walks Partnership): a mixed use area adjoining the city centre. It is important to place local action within the context of national policies and so the paper begins with some discussion of the extent to which the principles of sustainable development are included within national urban regeneration policies before going on to examine policy at the metropolitan scale in Liverpool, and then at the more detailed level of the Rope Walks area. The conclusions suggest that it is economic regeneration and more precisely property redevelopment, that is the main driving force regenerating the area and that there is some way to go before the city, or the case study area, achieve an environmentally sustainable regeneration process.

### **National policy background**

According to the UK Government's 1994 Strategy, sustainable development requires that decisions throughout society are taken with proper regard to their environmental impact in terms of minimising environmental pollution and conserving natural resources. However, there is an ambiguity about the Government's commitment to the environment that clouds the entire policy field. The definition of sustainable development provided by the Bruntland Commission is: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"; and that of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature is concerned with: "improving the quality of life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting systems". In contrast, the UK Government has chosen to state that: "sustainable development does not mean having less economic development: on the contrary, a healthy economy is better able to generate the resources to meet people's needs, and new investment and environmental improvement often go hand in hand" (Department of the Environment, 1994, p. 7). This attempt at a political compromise between economic development and environmental sustainability is at odds with the other definitions of sustainable development and creates an ambivalence and inherent weakness in sustainability policies that per-

meates through to the operational level. It is very much a "light green" approach.

It also implies that there are alternative views of what constitutes sustainable development. For us, however, it seems clear that one of the constants in policy making in this field is that: "cities must be made more attractive places in which to live and *their ecological footprint must be reduced* (authors' italics)" (Smith *et al.*, 1998, p. 213). Girardet takes a similar view, suggesting that a sustainable city is one in which citizens are able to meet their own needs without endangering the well-being of the natural world or the living conditions of other people, now or in the future (Girardet, 1999, p. 419). Thus while economic development may be a legitimate policy goal, to be sustainable it must be achieved within the context of reducing the ecological footprint. In the view of Smith, Whitelegg and Williams:

"achieving sustainability depends (in part) upon producing sustainable built environments from the cities and towns already in existence. In the short term, only limited changes can be made in a physical sense but more significant changes can be made in lifestyles. In the medium term, but starting immediately, the built environment can be changed in form to reflect and facilitate those lifestyles. The requirement is for steering rather than overnight radical change, whereby over a period of time gradual change to behaviour and action leads to substantial changes to the built environment". (Smith *et al.*, 1998, p. 213)

(A fuller theoretical discussion of what is required from planning and urban policies in order to achieve local sustainability can be found in a number of recent texts including Smith *et al.*, 1998, and also Selman, 1996.)

It is therefore pertinent to question the extent to which this approach is reflected in British urban regeneration policies and programmes. In recent years, the main policy drivers used by Government to fund urban regeneration were the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and the agency of English Partnerships (EP). The early bidding guidance produced by Government for the SRB Challenge Fund paid scant regard to environmental issues, concentrating heavily on indicators of economic development, employment creation and social inclusion. Even highway building was included as a positive indicator on the basis of supporting economic activity. The priorities of Government can be seen in a research report produced for the DOE in 1995 and entitled "The impact of environmental improvements on urban regeneration". The research was limited to an examination of the extent to which environmental improvement projects (such as landscaping, removing physical development constraints and providing infrastructure) had stimulated economic regeneration but contained no consideration of environmental improvements for their own sake or for ecological reasons (PIEDA, 1995).

Another more recent evaluation of the SRB simi-

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