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Two cheers for the Urban White Paper

By Alan Harding, Simon Marvin and Stuart Wilks-Heeg, of the SURF Centre at the University of Salford

Reshaping urban policy?

IN NOVEMBER 2000, THE government finally published its Urban White Paper. *Our Towns and Cities: The Future* appeared over a year after the Rogers' Urban Task Force report, to which it provided an indirect official response, and no less than 23 years after the last such statement of government urban policy. It is a substantial piece of work spread over 160 pages and divided into eight chapters. It is also accompanied by further, weighty documents; one detailing the state of our towns and cities as we move into the 21st century, the other capturing contemporary, popular views about UK urban life.

Our Towns and Cities was always more likely to be a restatement and repackaging of urban policy and programmes than its 1977 predecessor, which started from a much emptier canvass. So it is no surprise that it has a mildly reformist, rather than revolutionary, tone, with observations drawn from 20-plus years' worth of experience. It has extensive descriptions of government's contribution to urban management and change and no less than 105 recommendations on how to improve present practice. At the same time, the core issues confronted by the two White Papers are so similar that questions are implicitly raised about how effective the approaches of the last quarter century have really been. Both

ask how we ensure that the benefits of economic and environmental change, much more apparent now than in the 1970s, support improvements in the quality of urban life rather than result in sprawl and the impoverishment of existing urban communities. This time around the driving force was the current government's determination to ensure that 60 per cent of all new housing is built on brown-field/urban, rather than green-field/suburban or rural land.

Lord Rogers' brief was to propose how this split might best be achieved but, in responding to it, his Task Force made it clear that a very diverse range of factors influences the attractiveness of UK urban areas. While Rogers interpreted his brief expansively, his Task Force still offered recommendations that focused overwhelmingly – and understandably – on environmental and design issues rather than economic and social drivers of change. The Task Force report was therefore too limited in scope to provide the basis for a comprehensive White Paper. The Urban White Paper should be judged against a wider framework than one purely focused on the adequacy of its response to Rogers. How else should we evaluate it, how does it stand up to any tests we might propose and what, if anything, is missing from it that might be important to our urban futures?

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Five tests for the White Paper

SO HOW DO WE EVALUATE IT taking into account the wider framework? And why did we need another report so soon after the Rogers' one? The answer is that for all the incremental improvements the pre-existing urban policy regime promoted, that had some obvious limitations beyond the under-utilisation of urban land, which needed to be addressed. Everyone has their own particular take on what those limitations were, but here we look at five broadly shared criticisms of urban policy since 1977 and see to what degree the proposals in the White Paper are likely to overcome them.

1. Urban policy has focused on the problems of cities and ignored their wider contribution to the national economy

HERE, THE WHITE PAPER PROVIDES promising signals of an important shift in perceptions. Since the late 1960s the term 'urban' in policy debate, has been synonymous with decline and all the problems – job loss, unemployment, loss of population, dereliction, hopelessness, rising crime rates and fear of crime, the fragmentation of communities, educational under-attainment and so on – that have accompanied it. This negative association helped create the myth, to which London was no more than a partial exception, that urban Britain was much of a muchness. That it was locked in a downward spiral, poorly managed and generally unable to offer the sorts of environment that people prefer to live and/or work in and visit.

Like all myths, this one has its roots in reality; in this case the profound structural economic change from which few towns and cities were lucky enough to escape lightly. Equally, though, it ignores the fact that towns and cities, for all their problems, remain profoundly important centres of economic, social and cultural activity and innovation that largely determine the quality of most of our lives.

There are signs that this penny has dropped in the White Paper and that urban economies, in particular, are

beginning to be acknowledged as having a massive bearing on the performance of the national economy in two contrasting senses. First, urban economic underperformance will always be a drag on the national economy if it remains uncorrected.

Second, and more positively, despite the locational freedom that is ostensibly offered to businesses by new information technologies, there are clear signs that key economic activities within the emerging information economy are becoming more, not less concentrated in cities. Such growth is also paralleled by increasing evidence that the centres of our towns and cities, in particular, are becoming more attractive as places to live, at least for certain sorts of households.

The Urban White Paper should be judged against a wider framework ... How else should we evaluate it, how does it stand up to any tests we might propose and what, if anything, is missing from it that might be important to our urban futures?

The Rogers report has clearly led the government to recognise that more can be done about residential attractiveness and that more attention to principles of design is critical to the creation of sustainable urban neighbourhoods and lively city centres. But fine words notwithstanding, there is little in the White Paper to suggest that future urban policy will be founded on a better understanding of how our major cities can contribute more effectively to national economic modernisation.

2. Cities vary massively in their problems and potentials but as far as urban policy has been concerned, one size fits all

ONE OF THE MAJOR CONCERNS OF sub-national policy makers and practitioners over the last 20 years has been that, despite many nationally sanctioned urban programmes, policy change has been driven from the centre rather than in partnership with people who know the particularities of places best. When allied to another major drive by government in the same period – to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public sector resources – this has led to an urban policy regime that has shifted in its orientation and content as the short term perceptions of government, and often of individual ministers, have changed. The result is a set of highly regulated and heavily audited programmes. What has been lost, it is argued, is the opportunity for innovation and creativity in providing local solutions to local problems. Instead the stress has been on initiatives that tick the right boxes and demonstrate the achievement of outputs felt to be most appropriate in Westminster and Whitehall.

Again, the White Paper is alive to this issue and calls for greater sensitivity on the part of national programmes about what makes most sense locally. At the same time, though, there is no apparent let-up in national prescriptiveness and the notion that the centre, ultimately, is the fount of all new ideas for urban change and must regulate and oversee all innovation. That is not to say, for example, that the promised expansion in the number of Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs) from the three pilot initiatives in Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield will not result in effective regeneration programmes. However it does suggest that the major contours of change continue to be shaped by the centre and that flexibility in local responses is just one possible outcome, rather than the most obvious one.

3. Urban policy has been overly dominated by 'special' initiatives and too little concerned with vastly more significant mainstream services and programmes

THOSE WHO FEEL 'SPECIAL' initiatives can't be fully effective unless they result in a change of culture and priorities in, for example, health, housing, education, transportation, employment, and policing policies and practice, criticise the distinction drawn between 'urban' and mainstream policies and programmes. As a result, the main service-providing agencies – particularly local authorities – have developed a somewhat schizophrenic approach to regeneration. To what extent should they focus on the needs of specific client groups? Should they take a holistic view of how being a recipient of a number of discrete services affects the behaviour and life chances of individuals and communities? To its credit, the White Paper recognises both the contribution that urban programmes have made in 'bending' mainline resources in support of sustainable regeneration, and the importance of mainline provision in underpinning the quality of urban life. It is therefore right to celebrate the fact that the government has begun to effect substantial increases in spending in established policy areas.

Even while making those observations, however, the White Paper makes it evident that the development of mainstream service provision will occur in parallel with a further upsurge in 'special' regeneration activity. To some extent this is unsurprising. In the real world of politics, a White Paper that proposed little in the way of new and immediate action would have been vulnerable. The fact remains, though, that it is unclear how disconnected lines of change – in mainstream provision and special regeneration initiatives – will connect with one another.

4. National government urban initiatives are highly fragmented, severely testing the capacity of local partnerships to ensure effective coordination between competing programme

WHILE 'JOINING UP' HAS BECOME a mantra for policy makers, it is still the case that urban policy under the current government has become more fragmented than ever. Special, area-based regeneration initiatives have

mushroomed, in a host of policy sectors – employment, health, education, housing, etc – that actively encourage partnership with other sectors but remain independently financed and delivered. Once again, the White Paper recognises the problem and the force of the critique advanced, for example, in a major report by the Performance and Innovation Unit last year about the absence of 'joined up action' in regeneration. But the sorts of mechanisms that are paraded as solutions are all at an early stage of development and appear not to have the clout needed to ensure a major realignment of policy and resources at a local or national level.

It is a laudable, functional guide to future government intentions rather than a document that sets out a 'big idea' for the future of the nation's cities.

5. The three big issues for urban policy – economic competitiveness, social inclusion and environmental sustainability – cannot be addressed within any single local authority area

THE WHITE PAPER ARGUES THAT the government's various attempts to reinvigorate local democracy and develop genuinely strategic local partnerships will help provide the means to address the 'wicked issues' of urban life. At the same time these welcome reforms, virtually by definition, focus on existing local authority districts whose boundaries make little sense to the way city economies work or the broader geographical areas where many people spend their lives. The White Paper makes few specific proposals about how the government intends to promote more strategic thinking and collaboration between issues and across districts, thereby guarding against parochialism and inter-district competition.

Rethinking urban policy

BRINGING THESE STRANDS together, it is clear that the White Paper presents a welcome reappraisal of urban policy that addresses many of the detailed recommendations of the Urban Task Force while taking on board many of the criticisms of previous policy and practice. But the sheer volume of description and analysis it contains means, paradoxically, that the overall impression is of a whole that is less than the sum of its parts. It is a laudable, functional guide to future government intentions rather than a document that sets out a 'big idea' for the future of the nation's cities. That it ultimately fails to do for urban policy what its predecessor achieved in much less favourable circumstances leaves readers feeling that opportunities were missed. What those opportunities are will obviously differ in the eyes of the beholder. But by way of conclusion it is worth raising five issues on which the verdict on the White Paper must be 'tries hard, but could do better'.

Customising urban policy

WHILE IT ACKNOWLEDGES THE need for solutions to be tailored to the needs of particular urban areas, the White Paper says remarkably little about particular cities, as opposed to successful regeneration initiatives in cities. So there is no sense of a national urban hierarchy or of the differential contributions of individual towns and cities to the national economy. Instead, the future of Bournemouth appears to be just as important, in national terms, as that of Birmingham. While there are obvious political difficulties for government in differentiating overtly between the potential of cities, it needs to be recognised that they are not all of a piece. Rather, the economic potential of key metropolitan areas needs to be maximised if we are to escape the situation whereby successive economic upturns are focused on London, the South East and key urban/suburban centres in the Eastern and South West regions, but have to

be dampened, through macro-economic policy instruments, before their effects feed through fully to provincial cities.

Urban policy has to be more carefully customised to meet the needs and exploit the potentials of different types of towns and cities. Policy needs to be targeted at groupings of cities that are able to interactively shape policy – the Core Cities group, freestanding cities and market towns are one obvious hierarchy.

Making urban connections

WHILE THE WHITE PAPER constantly refers to the need for more coordinated approaches and the avoidance of fragmentation, it is difficult to see how a combination of the mechanisms it offers as solutions – better departmental collaboration at national level through the new Regional Co-ordination Unit, beefed up government offices at regional level, and new local initiatives like the URCs and Local Strategic Partnerships – have the capacity to promote the necessary depth of change.

Proposals for more effective working and coordination at the level of national, regional and local level need to be strengthened. More thought needs to be given to mechanisms that develop effective conduits between these levels – not just in terms of imposing national policies on the periphery but allowing cities and regions to shape national policies and priorities.

Mainstreaming urban policy

WHILE THE PROPOSALS FOR better linkage between mainstream and ‘special’ regeneration programmes is more than welcome, they mean it is no longer clear what urban policy is in the early 21st century. Definitions have become blurred without there being any clearer view of the way mainstream programmes and regeneration initiatives can be ‘joined up’.

The needs and potential of cities are still ‘invisible’ to many mainstream

government departments. So considerable effort needs to be made in raising the visibility of urban issues and sensitivity of policies to the regeneration process in health, social services, education, the home office and the treasury. Until urban policy is fully mainstreamed, central policies are likely to provide conflicting and uncoordinated initiatives at a local level.

There is a need for central government, in partnership with cities, to develop the research and policy capacity that provides the tools and processes to identify, anticipate and simulate threats and opportunities in the development trajectories of cities.

Virtual governance

THE WHITE PAPER HAS VERY LITTLE to say about the relationship between ‘the urban agenda’ the managerial reforms internal to existing local authorities (mayors, cabinets, LSPs, Best Value, etc) and the government’s intentions in respect of regionalisation and devolution in England. Again it may seem counterintuitive, but there are good grounds for arguing that cities need to be strengthened through the devolution process in England. Also that there is no necessary antagonism between promoting more effective economic, social and environmental strategies at the sub-regional, often metropolitan, scale and the strengthening of regions.

Shifts in the style and structure of urban governance do not, in the first instance, need complex, costly and contested structural reform. Change could be based on more freedoms and flexibility for local public

agencies and the grouping of resources currently administered at a district scale by regional and national agencies in return for greater, strategic cross-district coordination. It may ultimately involve more formal, structural changes.

Constructing urban futures

WHILE THE URBAN WHITE PAPER has done a good job of collating much of our existing knowledge and experience of the effectiveness of urban policy, we still lack the capacity to develop a prospective understanding of the potential development trajectories of cities. Across many other areas of policy, central government has invested significant resources in developing its own foresight and futures capacity. Internationally, many governments have developed futures capacity to address the needs of cities and regions.

There is a need for central government, in partnership with cities, to start developing the research and policy capacity that provide the tools and processes to identify, anticipate and simulate threats and opportunities in the development trajectories of cities. Such capacity would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of urban policy and test the feasibility and complexity of urban policy shifts and initiatives.

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