Chapter 5
The Misalignment of Policy and Practice in Sustainable Urban Design

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5.1 Introduction

A so-called urban renaissance throughout the UK's major cities began in the late 1990s as a policy response to the dominant trends in counter-urbanisation and inner-city decline. This urban policy encompassed the interconnected themes of sustainability and design quality as the basis for public sector investments into housing and urban infrastructure.

This chapter explores these ideas through a chronology of urban regeneration and neighbourhood planning policies and, in so doing, tracks the progression of sustainability and design quality and community engagement in the planning system and their involvement in urban redevelopment and supporting policy. These themes are presented from the perspective of an urban design practitioner who has spent much of the past 20 years working through the changing policy landscape. In consequence, it is intended to provide a different sort of a review of sustainable urban regeneration in England, one that is based on a practical knowledge of urban planning policy and personal experiences of the different national regeneration programmes, particularly as they have impacted on the North of England.

This chapter will present the lead authors' case study materials to highlight the implementation gap between the intent of urban design policy and the actual impact on the ground. It charts observations of unforeseen consequences, the changing targets and policy definitions, including the policy trajectory of sustainability and quality within the built environment and the move from centralisation towards bypassing local government to the promotion of community-led development.

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5.2   The Challenge for Cities

The genesis of the so-called urban renaissance in the UK was planted in the Garden Festivals and broader central government City Challenge programmes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Set against a decline in traditional industries, and a significant and measurable population movement away from the inner city and towards suburbia, the governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major initiated a number of urban policy programmes to arrest the decline in population occurring in most of the northern conurbations. This was predominantly through the drive of economic restructuring towards a service- or knowledge-based economy that, in practice, equated to a variety of out-of-town retail parks and a preponderance of customer call centres (Charles and Benneworth 2001).

Indeed, at the time, stopping the dominant trend of counter-urbanisation seemed almost unachievable as it was underpinned by economic decline and a complex raft of associated social problems. There was a debate around the ability, if not the commitment of successive governments, to effectively challenge and change these social trends. In an extract from a confidential letter to the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher which was released from the National Archives (2011), Chancellor of the Exchequer Geoffrey Howe, in referring to the city of Liverpool, wrote in August 1981 that 'I cannot help feeling that the option of managed decline … is one which we should not forget altogether. We must not expend all our resources in trying to make water flow uphill'. Mr. Howe emphasised the sensitivity of the issue a month later, when he wrote that "'managed decline' ... is not a term for use, even privately". As the Chancellor, he was basically questioning whether going against the trends was not just a waste of money.

Given the contrasting political allegiances of national and city governance, with most of the metropolitan and urban authorities in the north being Labour controlled but working in the context of the Conservative administrations, there were consistent suggestions of an implicit strategy for continued managed decline rather than investment and urban regeneration. Unfortunately in the early 1990s, centralised strategies for urban design and regeneration were already suffering from a healthy level of political scepticism, particularly from local city councillors' view of some of the earlier regeneration programmes (Beecham 1992). Seemingly the baggage attached to many programmes, because of the party political associations with those who initiated them, meant that they maintained an odour of unacceptability and a hint of bias towards a suburban rather than an inner-city and urban electorate.

At the time the *process* of urban regeneration was largely secondary to the anticipated *substantive* outcomes of any investment, as were any considerations around sustainability. Yet much of the policy and academic response to the actions of the *City Challenge* programme (Robinson 1997) and the more joined-up follow-up *Single Regeneration Budget* (SRB) programme stressed that sustainability is about process (Smith et al. 1999) and community involvement, capacity and empowerment (Chanan et al. 1999) rather than a technical issue. Yet, there was also an apparent consensus on the key challenges of stopping counter-urbanisation and addressing

the poor image and stigma attached to inner-city areas and the existing social housing stock across many of the northern conurbations. 'Most cities were losing population … (i)n some cases, there was simply too much housing in the wrong places. Inner city estates were in some ways easier to restore than outer estates. They were closer to shops, transport, jobs and other services. But breaking up these estates and blending them into the urban surroundings was always expensive and difficult. They often continue to stand out as "council housing" even after exceptional spending to integrate them' (Power and Tunstall 1995 p71–72). It was within this context and the assessment of the urban policy efforts to date that the procedural challenges of urban regeneration were carried forward into the membership of a newly formed Urban Task Force.

5.3   Towards an Urban Renaissance

There was a great excitement in local government planning when the new Labour government initiated their Urban Renaissance, particularly with the appointment of Lord Rodgers of Riverside to lead a task force and compile a report and recommendations. At the time, Rodgers was not so well known outside of the world of architecture, compared to his wife Ruth who had established and ran the River Café underneath his architectural office complex on the north bank of the Thames. Indeed, the printed Urban Task Force report borrowed much inspiration from the River Café Cookbook, in its shape, layout and contrasting mustard and plum colours and in its contents. It provided a set of ingredients and recipes for cooking up urban regeneration.

There was a significant pro-urban theory underpinning this new Urban Task Force, based on a polycentric city, understanding of mixed use communities, revised assumptions about how increasing urban density and integration with public transport has the potential to deliver a more sustainable urban form. This was a newly discovered conceptual model to guide policy intervention. It demonstrated a complex analytical model of understanding the entire conurbation/city, region and communities within the wider urban system through process models and substantive/physical examples of sustainable communities, perhaps seeding sustainable urban design as an integration between physical and social infrastructure and networks. In short, it started to explain what an integrated response to the urban challenge might look like.

However, what also appeared was a top-down critique of current practice and a plea for investments and interventions to have a strong evidence base. At the national level, this urban programme was supported by the creation of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, the Commission on Sustainable Development and the Commission for Integrated Transport, amongst others, as suitable quangos to deliver the necessary training, support and, where necessary, direct strategic intervention into the delivery of the programme. This was often repeated at a regional and local level with investment in design quality and sustainability

through a network of Architecture and Built Environment Centres of Excellence. These mixed organisations' self-accepted responsibility for building capacity and a skills base within local authorities and communities and the desire for an underlying evidence base for policy and capacity-building was to become a repeating theme over the next decade.

Yet, in a strangely contradictory way, individual members of the Task Force had already used their evidence base to make political and locality specific criticisms of current regeneration and planning practice in both Manchester and Newcastle upon Tyne. This was evident in the number of thinly veiled references to recent greenbelt releases and the anonymous references to the declining inner-city areas of Elswick, South Benwell, and Scotswood (aka Bankside and Riverview in Power and Mumford 1999 p48–62). 'Bankside has huge potential. Its housing is not only adequate, it is excellent'. ... 'The city has plans to extend onto the greenbelt because people do like to move out. But we have a site here that if it were ten miles further along the river would be worth millions. It's south facing, it's sunny and the views are stunning. There's no capital being made of the location'.

In this review, the challenge of sustainable urban regeneration was being explicitly linked to greenfield releases and suggestions that '(b)oth Manchester and Newcastle have been hard hit by sprawling greenfield building. … The statement within Newcastle's Plan that the city still suffers from housing shortages and too high density contradicts available evidence.' (Power and Mumford 1999 p73). In a partial rebuttal to this critique, the leader of Newcastle City Council at the time made it clear that urban regeneration is difficult if it 'ignores the market' (Flynn 2000), and the challenge was to deal with the area-wide stigma created, not so much by the physical environment as the levels of crime and poor services (Blackman 2001). This required a package of measures and interventions from a variety of stakeholders (Cole et al. 1999) in as coordinated a manner as possible.

These academic references in turn became part of the critique of the Urban Task Force itself, which did '… not accept the argument of certain northern planning authorities that the way to overcome low demand for housing in their area is to build on the surrounding greenfields, rather than tackling the regeneration of their urban heartlands. The release of such land will simply exacerbate their long term problems' (Urban Task Force 1999 p217–218). In making these arguments against piecemeal decision-making, particularly the separation between housing and other aspects of social investment, health, education and crime, they were highlighting how difficult inner urban regeneration would be, particularly when being hit by excessive amounts of suburban greenfield housing development at the same time.

Central to this challenge for sustainable regeneration was the need to address the perceived market and find a way to shape or change attitudes to urban living, to start marketing and branding the attractions of urban living in a more imaginative and creative way. One attempt to do this while informing the Urban Task Force was an influential and important report by MORI (et al. 1999). This was important in part because it coined the phrase 'urban pioneers' as the first potential wave of regeneration. It raised expectations that creative households would be the first to be attracted to a sustainable and compact urban form that provided more bespoke choices for

living in comparison to new housing on the outskirts of the city. It extended earlier work that demonstrated how views of cities and city living could change for the better, particularly how Manchester (Hebbert 2010) led the rise of city centre living and set significant precedent for other northern conurbations seeking to add additional choice and unique property typologies to the housing market (Chesterton 1998). This was supported by similar findings in qualitative research looking at different attitudinal groups such as 'committed residents', 'budding incomers' and 'probable leavers' within social housing areas (Dean and Hastings 2000) and more localised challenges within individual urban housing markets (Crilly et al. 2004, Townshend 2006), all in an attempt to understand the interrelated and complex issues of the housing property market within urban regeneration.

So in an appropriately suitable quirk of fate, and a response to the need for strong corporate and civic leadership, Richard Rodgers's firm was invited and appointed to work with Newcastle City Council to bring this thinking to Tyneside and jointly produce the 'Going for Growth' regeneration plans for the west end of the city (Newcastle City Council 2001). This district scale masterplan set out the expected polycentric model of revitalised urban communities throughout the west end of the city, supported by investments in green infrastructure, retail and community facilities. The plan also included a feasibility testing of an extension to the Tyne and Wear Metro system into the area as a network of street running trams. In addition, it set out options for significant, albeit targeted demolition and the creation of a new replacement urban village at Scotswood, an area on the river about two and half miles west of the city centre.

However, the response to this first wave of urban regeneration work in Newcastle, post Urban Renaissance and Task Force recommendations attracted familiar and severe criticism of the *process* (Walker 2002; Newcastle Unison 2002) as much as the *substantive* proposals, with the key critics highlighting the 'selective involvement' with existing community groups. From the outset, reviewers suggested that the well-intentioned corporate strategy would have many negative unexpected consequences relating to forced gentrification and the lack of coordination between housing and the critical element of schools. The regeneration agenda was confused at the local level through a mix of misdirection, misinformation and resultant misunderstandings. Responses were driven by mixed emotions, including some deliberate and politically motivated sabotage. Many of the reviews of this renaissance programme were politically influenced (Shaw 2000) and factually incorrect as a result, often, and ironically, missing the significance of the underlying evidence base used to inform decision-making.

This initial 'Going for Growth' regeneration strategy in Newcastle had press and researchers charting the adverse reaction to the radical strategy and the disaffection of the top-down process (Cameron 2003; Byrne 2000) with the view that '... the council has done the dirty on all the residents' associations' (Young and Dickinson 2000 p8). However, similar to much sociological research based on this regeneration strategy, there was explicit criticism without any clear changes or solutions being advocated beyond the basic platitudes of closer partnership working and community ownership of the proposals. These reviews (Coaffee 2004) ignored the more

fundamental issues of the necessary resources to make this work in practice. One interesting characteristic of this strategy was the imbalance in resources around delivery against external research—at one point there was up to six universities and twenty different research teams working on aspects of the schemes—far in excess of the resources given to supporting the delivery of the programme itself. Herein there was a practical paradox between resourcing community engagement and empowerment with promotion of the prevailing national pro-urbanist compact sustainable city agenda. Retrospectively it was clearly useful to understand Urban Task Force-guided local actions within the longer-term perspective of urban regeneration policies (Wilks-Heeg 2000), not least because of the continuing involvement of the same organisations and individuals. In part, this reaction to what was perceived as a demolition and gentrification strategy was more about maintaining the strong community networks (BKW Tenants & Residents Association 2000) that existed in the proposal areas than it was about the actual value of the bricks and mortar. The rationale behind many objections was to prevent the community being destroyed alongside the houses; it was about trusting the motives and the authors behind the proposals. It was also clear that the scale of addressing regeneration had to be at the city-region scale and thus required a different sort of collaborative coordination between multiple local authorities and agencies. It was never something that Newcastle City Council could have achieved on their own as a corporate body.

At first glance, central government appeared to be making the same, albeit more generic, points about the importance of effective community government (ODPM 2002) in setting out their position of community involvement. It was saying that coordination and integration of community involvement was a prerequisite for sustainable regeneration. It was also saying that the process being followed was as critical as the substance of the programme while suggesting that the role of existing local councillors with electoral mandates was not sufficient to represent the diverse and more localised urban communities.

5.4   Renewing the Housing Market

Putting this urban renaissance more firmly into national policy, John Prescott the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM 2003a) understood that 'low demand requires a new approach, to recreate places where people want to live—not leave. This means tackling not just housing but where we can, rebuilding sustainable communities'.

Thus, when resources finally came to support the urban regeneration process, it was largely through the *Housing Market Renewal* (HMR) *Pathfinder* programme. This was part of the wider Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM 2003b), a much larger and more comprehensive programme of investment into southern growth areas and decent 'social' homes which explicitly linked investment to sustainability and design quality, particularly at the scale of the neighbourhood. The *HMR Pathfinder* programme was arguably the best- resourced urban regeneration programme of the last 15 years and was based on significant levels of housing demolition

and clearance in areas of low demand. It was intended to address the poor quality of much of the existing older housing stock together with a rebalancing of the housing choices available within local markets in the northern conurbations.

Yet almost from the outset of the programme, there were concerns over the lack of clarity and coherence around the strategic objectives. There were warnings coming out of different central government departments, questioning the focus of the programme and the balance between demolition and refurbishment. Much of the 'quick fix' in the plans was about the demolition of unpopular housing, as a preparatory stage in the larger programme, rather than understanding the underlying complexity of urban attitudes and the housing preferences needed for the delivery of sustainable and affordable housing.

Also underlying the advocacy for better alignment and less single issue programmes (House of Commons 2003), in part a political nod towards maintaining the *Single Regeneration Budget*, there was pressure to include a real statement regarding resources, with regeneration activities requiring continuity over ensuring long-term funding for long-term projects, avoiding the unequal distribution of resources which is often seen as politically divisive and getting resources for better skilled and supported professionals (ODPM 2004a).

In mid-2003, early into the *HMR Pathfinder* programme, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) made a statement on behalf of all of the national agencies, saying '… (w)e have an opportunity that cannot be squandered; the policies and proposals of this government could impact around one million homes and the communities that live in them … (n)ot since the 19th and early 20th century has England had to deal with housing renewal on the scale envisaged for this programme. We have a once-in-a generation opportunity to get it right' (CABE 2003). This included the promotion of strategic advice on design quality, sustainability and, most significantly in practice, issues around the processes and procedures to follow to ensure quality and sustainability standards (CABE et al. 2003). In this context, there was a close national alignment between design quality and sustainability standards. CABE and others were saying that housing demolition should be a last resort and only undertaken after replacement proposals of higher-quality and sustainability standards have secured statutory planning approval and with funding for delivery already in place.

It was correct in identifying a central role for masterplans, particularly those that were better aligned with statutory plans and longer-term thinking. In a lot of ways, this was simply restating in a more forceful manner, earlier recommendations (CABE et al. 2003) that decisions are based on robust evidence and market analysis (NAO 2007a), supported by clear objectives within approved masterplans. This advice and support certainly supported more advisors and a rapid growth in the masterplanning industry.

There was a delayed reaction to these concerns, with recommendations that top-down government support was to include qualitative considerations into the policy scope for sustainable communities and not just to be about energy use (House of Commons 2005, ODPM 2005). Yet, short-term outcomes were being driven forward at the cost of adequate consultation and engagement processes. There was also

too much geographical focus on tightly defined boundaries. These boundaries limited the potential of wider northern conurbations to deal with areas of low demand while failing to address the structural imbalances of housing demand between the midlands, the north and the south-east growth areas.

The delivery of the *HMR Pathfinder* programme alongside the *Growth Areas* then began a rethink of the processes for housing delivery. Indeed, the balance between affordability and sustainability had been central to government policy leading into the 2007 Housing Green Paper (DCLG 2007), and throughout this chronology of policy there have been the repeating themes of quality, sustainability and affordability. So often 'best practice' precedents were sought to demonstrate firstly how these themes could be shown to be achievable together and secondly that the developing planning and development policy could in effect be internally consistent. This was evident in the launch of the *Code for Sustainable Homes* as a new national standard for zero carbon development. This was a standard that was tested at the strategic scale of the sustainable community in high-profile national initiatives such as the *Carbon Challenge* and the *Eco-Towns* initiative, each designed to demonstrate the delivery of zero carbon targets in practice by working in partnership with commercial developers. Yet, the tensions between raising standards and rapidly delivering housing numbers; or failing that, large numbers of demolition; remained unresolved.

In practice, the attraction of additional funding seemed to be too much of a draw for *HMR Pathfinder* bodies, alongside a second wave of authorities. Areas that were excluded from the first round of regeneration funding perceived themselves to be in competition for limited central government resources. At the time, many authorities considered it would be better to secure the funding through rapid action rather than long-term considered regeneration programmes.

For example, the second wave of pathfinder funding going to Teesside was initiated on the basis that 'HMR must not be seen as purely a clearance issue (para 12) … and that detailed collaborative masterplan and costed options to be created but led by the promise of central government funding' (Middlesbrough Council 2005a). The suspicion that the *HMR Pathfinder* was largely a funding-led approach originated when their consultant's report stated that '…(t)here is the prospect of major housing renewal resources for Middlesbrough's Older Housing, if the strategy for tackling it is right' (Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners 2004 p63).

This race for funding was in direct contrast to the policy objectives, where '(t)he objective for all the proposals is to firstly understand and establish the particular issues of the area concerned and endeavour to direct the market in these areas to a more sustainable position, removing their reliance upon public funding' (Chapman 2004 p32). Statutory requirements for local authority use of compulsory purchase powers for the purposes of land acquisition and assembly of development sites included the consideration of all viable options that implicitly included sustainable refurbishment. Yet sustainability, energy efficiency and the consideration of refurbishment as well as demolition and replacement were often ignored within practicable decision-making in direct contradiction to many strategic policy requirements. There was little government interest in addressing the sustainable refurbishment of

the existing housing stock through financial incentives (SDC 2005). This leads to several high-profile examples, particularly in Liverpool and the Tees Valley, of areas being targeted for demolition without looking at any alternatives.

Nationally, there were deep political concerns expressed (House of Commons 2005) that the programme reflects a demolition (Hetherington 2005) rather than a regeneration strategy, with '… criticisms (that) appear to confirm the worst fears of conservation groups, who claim there is no justification for pulling down historic terraces (and replacing) with poor-quality new homes' (Weaver 2005).

So, belatedly in the programme, design quality and sustainability standards were more forcefully introduced as a prerequisite for financial support for new development, including most of the high-profile exemplar projects. These standards were based on the accepted advocacy of CABE and others. In effect this was a policy acknowledgement of the findings of the underlying evidence base that drew on the prevailing set of collective standards being used throughout the planning system, albeit that the collective set of standards being adopted by the *HMR Pathfinders* was now recognisably that being used by central government agencies and as part of the 'common language' being promoted throughout the design and construction industry (NAO 2007b, Callcutt 2007). Throughout this period, the top-down imposition of quality and sustainability standards prevailed. These standards were defined at the national level, were restricted on the basis of practicality to quantitative measures that relate to individual houses and were imposed as a condition of public-sector funding rather than through local statutory planning. So outside of any funding agreement, they were seen and understood simply as advisory standards and thus largely ignored by the development industry.

Yet these quality and sustainability standards did not always change the actions undertaken as part of the *HMR Pathfinder* programme. Within the Hull regeneration area, the major problems being faced were described as structural within the housing market. Specifically, policy research suggested that there was a lack of diversity and resilience in the mix of types and tenures (Gateway Pathfinder 2006). The regeneration area was characterised by large areas of homogenous housing, with regard to age, size, condition and tenure. A continuation of these characteristics and trends was assumed to make the area housing market vulnerable, and thus demolition continued on the basis of a homogenous local housing market. Similarly, in Teesside, underlying concerns appeared to have been generally accepted in that there was an imbalance in supply and demand that was having a negative impact on the town's housing market. Yet, in reality this justifying evidence was crude and often 'anecdotal' (Middlesbrough Council 2005b para 18) with respect to local geography and spatial distinctions and guess work around the costs of stock improvement (para 25). Indeed, in spite of bespoke research highlighting that '(t)here is insufficient comprehensive research to the carbon emissions of refurbished housing compared to the emissions from new housing when considering the requirement to demolish the existing stock' (CABE Tees Valley 2007 p1), several authorities within Teesside utilised arguments around sustainability and reduced carbon emissions from 'potentially' better quality replacement new housing to promote large-scale demolition of the older housing stock. Even when these arguments

lacked supporting evidence, they still progressed to several high-profile public inquiries and became the basis for compulsory purchase orders needed for large-scale demolition.

And similar to the early criticisms of the regeneration work in Newcastle, the predominant fear in Middlesbrough was also about the destruction of existing communities, with high-profile professionals employed to undertake the work (Barrie 2009) stressing the value in strengthening and maintaining sustainable social networks as a precursor to effective urban regeneration.

The justification of low demand leading to proposals for demolition meant that it was being measured against property value or prices rather than affordability. This drew on planning methods from higher-level spatial planning, such as regional spatial strategies and strategic housing market analysis. Thus, in practice properties were being targeted in many cases because they were simply 'affordable'. Areas of homogenous housing were being targeted because they did not demonstrate the diversity and mix of types and tenures that were being advocated in these strategic planning documents. In many instances, people have had their properties compulsory purchase and have been unable to use the purchase cost to find any similar property that is affordable. It had the impact of increasing household bills (Ambrose and MacDonald 2001) and forced some families into poverty (McHardy 2001) as rents increase and other unexpected charges appear.

Indeed, the associated timescale for project delivery meant that planners were unable to address the existence and extent of supporting evidence used to both justify and inform decisions. The evidence-based approach to regeneration investment failed, due to the time delay between stated policy objectives, commissioned evidence base and the creation of supporting research. Much of the required rushed research and masterplanning was a simple regurgitation of old knowledge in new clothes. Quantitative materials dominated at the cost of understanding the importance of design quality, sustainability and the potential to influence household attitudes on urban living.

Towards the end of the programme, many communities that had experienced multiple well-meaning waves of regeneration, building up to the *HMR Pathfinder* tsunami, suffered from 'regeneration fatigue' (Armstrong and Pattison 2012). It seemed that the disconnection between different parts of the *HMR Pathfinder* programme and different delivery teams, at all levels of government, meant that there was a gap between the programme ambitions and the anticipated and actual outcomes.

5.5   Finding the Northern Way

In a speech to the Core Cities summit, John Prescott (2003) raised the importance of cities as regional economic drivers, saying that '(y)ou can't have a sustainable community without a strong local economy and the jobs that come with it. Previous government's forgot that. They built houses but they didn't build communities. … (t)

hey forgot about what makes people want to live in cities. They forgot about people'. Prescott thought that '(b)y getting architects, town planners and developers to work together … (it had) … created a new "wow" factor in the North' (ODPM 2004b p5). Yet, this so-called wow factor was underpinned by quantitative evidence around infrastructure and inward investment as much as any evidence about better quality design or sustainability standards. And to continue with this collaborative 'wow' factor, procedurally, regional development agencies (RDAs) and local partnerships remained in the driving seat with local authorities having a limited role alongside community sector, business and central government interests.

Following this, the 'Northern Way' as part of the wider *Sustainable Communities Plan* also embodied the idea of extending devolved power from central government to regional assemblies and regionally elected mayors with more power to coordinate activities. There were also significant roles for new *Urban Regeneration Companies* aimed at focussed and strategic interventions. Again, the proposed approach was to support coordination, integration and partnership working. Yet, in practice, it seemed that there were many political appointments sitting on the board of these agencies and corporations. Partnership working became a mystical process around internal coordination and agreement between the plethora of new agencies. There seemed to be a certain lack of trust of local politicians in allocating regeneration resources through this pick and mix approach to partnership building.

The financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the subsequent general election of 2010 started to change things. The crisis around high-risk mortgages started at *Northern Rock* and their headquarters in the Newcastle's suburb of Gosforth. In the midst of the first run on a bank in over 150 years, the underlying assumptions about the housing markets in the northern conurbations changed radically. In a period of growing austerity that seemed to affect the north most dramatically with its higher proportion of public sector employees, the 2010 general election removed Labour from power and returned a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government. They wasted little time and little thought in halting many of the centrally funded regeneration programmes and organisations removing them in what became known as the 'bonfire of the quangos' (HM Government 2010).

With a change in national government came the inevitable shift in policy emphasis. Firstly, more focus was placed on housing as a sector. The collation government became interested in the delivery of more residential units at a national level. This took place in a context where there had been significant shortfalls in the number of actual housing completions compared with the aspirational targets set against the demand evident in the strategic housing market assessments underpinning statutory planning documents around the country.

They also seemed to be suggesting that local government and the planning system were failing alongside other limiting factors imposed on the housing development sector, including the skills deficit within the construction sector (CITB 2003).

The coalition government's assessment of the original *HMR Pathfinder* scheme as articulated by the Housing Minister Grant Shapps at the time was that '… local communities in some of the most deprived areas of the country were told they would see a transformation of their areas. But in reality, this amounted to bulldozing

buildings and knocking down neighbourhoods, pitting neighbour against neighbour, demolishing our Victorian heritage and leaving families trapped in abandoned streets. This programme was a failure and an abject lesson to policy makers' (DCLG 2011). Yet, damming criticism of the programme was not restricted to politicians. Writing about the Liverpool experience, comedian Alexei Sayle said that "… John Prescott's cretinous *Pathfinder* scheme (working with) … the deposed leader of the city council, admitted that their efforts connected with Pathfinder … to compulsorily purchase and demolish thousands of 19th century homes had left many communities 'looking like warzones'" (2012 p30). Localised anger around the plethora of poor outcomes from the *HMR Pathfinder* programme was almost universal, and what each individual programme team perceived in isolation to be NIMBY-based resistance to change was, in actuality, the dominant community response to the ill-thought-out programme throughout the country. Alongside multiple admissions, or accusations, of failure at national and local levels was a fresh funding initiative to clear up the mess.

The resultant planning and regeneration blight is now being dealt with in a somewhat reactionary manner by throwing more resources at the perceived problems alongside the (re)setting of familiar metrics for assessing the benefit of spending this additional money. These included considerations such as the number of homes demolished and more positively the number of empty properties brought back into beneficial use. This was driven by an imposed requirement for the Department for Communities and Local Government to consider refurbishment options. Yet again, underlying this allocation of funding is a centralised approach, set out in bidding criteria (DCLG and HCA 2011) for local authorities aiming to produce 'exit strategies' that are targeted at streets or urban blocks that are more than 50% vacant. On investigation, this metric was not derived from any sound evidence. Perhaps more worryingly was the potential for local authorities to 'fix' this figure by defining street and block boundaries to include the footprint of already demolished properties as part of the 50% of properties that can be considered vacant. In this approach to the calculations of the metric, the central government agencies and local authorities were able to manipulate and direct their funding as they felt was required to finish the demolition job.

There were certainly aspects of self-interest for some local authorities in this clean-up funding. It seemed to be the case that completing the job of housing clearances brought benefits in efficiency to the local authority and service partners with no more need for temporary site hoardings, security patrols, refuse collections and similar. It seems so obvious to policy makers that short-term limited capital expenditure to remove a problem is a better value to the public purse than the uncertainty of ongoing revenue expenses. There were also a range of quantifiable benefits and revenue savings arising out of the reduced need, or improved efficiency, in the provision of services (e.g. in the key performance criteria service savings; p5 DCLG and HCA 2011) that were being required in this new period of austerity.

So following a critique of a centralised programme that measured its success in part on the number of housing demolitions was another centralised programme with a similar trend in demolition metrics. This approach seems to be repeating so much

recent history for the 'demolition-mad paternalism' of the 1980s housing regeneration that has been described as '… a classic example of an anonymous bungling bureaucracy destroying a living community' (Wates and Knevitt 1987 p51). So more criticism (Waite 2012) emerged, this time of the replacement 'clean-up' programme, yet again around additional demolition proposals in Liverpool, Teesside (Polley 2010) and other locations.

Reflecting on the outcomes which have fallen significantly short of addressing the policy aspirations, it now seems that any potential legacy of the *HMR Pathfinder* programme is the implicit approach to national retrofitting policy, albeit starting at the individual household scale. The basis for a significant level of demolition was on the basis of low demand and the poor quality of the existing older housing stock. Yet sustainability, energy efficiency and the consideration of carbon emissions were largely ignored within practicable decision-making in direct contradiction to many strategic policy requirements.

5.6 Creating the Big Society

Throughout this transition period with the new coalition government, there was also a distinct, and suspiciously ideological, change in the policy emphasis from physical to cultural and social regeneration activities with the corresponding focus on localisation and the growth of codesign as an integral part of the planning and redevelopment process. Although commentators (O'Brian and Matthews, 2015) recognised this shift in political emphasis, it was accepted as one of several sudden and reactionary changes to urban policy. The idea of 'new localism' became a fashionable 'buzzword' as well as an approach to pass decision-making responsibilities from central government agencies to local communities and with this any perceived blame for failures to deliver successful regeneration projects

This is perceived to be as much a move by the government to bypass inappropriate and ineffective local authorities as it was about empowering local communities. It did however maintain an emphasis on sustainable design inasmuch as evidence does show there is a significant overlap, if not direct correlation, between community-led enterprises and the emphasis on sustainability (Seyfang 2010). Yet it does seem to be difficult to then take these local sustainable practices and procedural innovations and niche markets and support them at a larger scale. Devolved regeneration and support for sustainable communities also suggested multiple approaches, options and solutions. Expectations were that a diversity of planning approaches might emerge within the systems and that this 'new localism' would mean less of the top-down imposition of central government policies.

One key shift was the National Planning Policy Framework (CLG 2012) that, while placing sustainable development as a key function of the statutory planning system, also introduced wider requirements that collectively aimed to increase the delivery of housing numbers. This included assessment for '… people wishing to build their own homes' (CLG 2012 para 159 p39) that bypassed local government

and placed responsibility and devolved budgets into the hands of local community organisations. The default approach was to approve and support the delivery of what in effect was a watered-down definition of sustainable development.

There was also a reinterpretation of 'best value' benefits for local authority working with the community sector. Devolved services and contracts could underpin co-operative groups and have multiple regeneration benefits (Boyle 2012), albeit it that community sector provision was possibly more attractive because it was cheaper.

The idea of design quality remained on the broad agenda and was supported by a national review of quality and sustainability standards through a review led by architect Terry Farrell. The consensus that assessing and measuring quality could remain objective enough for the statutory planning system to implement some minimum standards remained. However, the standards started to relate to 'evidence-based design' (RIBA 2015) where lessons were being learnt through the life of practical projects, from technical assessment through to post-occupation evaluation.

The devolution of funding around the sustainable retrofitting of individual homes also became part the Big Society focus. Schemes such as the Renewable Heat Incentive, the Green Deal and Energy Company Obligation (ECO) emerged as a means to achieve legally binding carbon-saving (Climate Change Act 2008) and fuel poverty targets (Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000) which were focused on the older building stock that was responsible for around one third of all carbon emissions. Yet, with poor financial incentives, overly bureaucratic procedures and centralised management and validation procedures, all of these renewable energy and sustainable retrofitting programmes died a death, alongside the idea of the Big Society.

5.7   Investing in the Northern Powerhouse

At the point of writing, the *Northern Way* is being rebranded and turned into a strategic statement of intent and investment strategy that links employment, training, connectivity and some limited investment on cultural initiatives. This *Northern Powerhouse* (HM Government 2016) is presented as a start for an ongoing conversation with stakeholders. Yet the scope of the programme has been reduced to that of strategic infrastructure provision and regional economic development, hinting towards a strong economic bias in any ongoing investment programme.

At the same time, and under pressure from the development industry, central government has prevented local authorities from enforcing anything other than nationally recognised standards of sustainability through the statutory planning system. The justification for this was superficially about simplifying the regulatory environment to support the delivery of housing. Yet under additional commercial pressure, they have simultaneously removed the *Code for Sustainable Homes* as a nationally recognised standard of sustainable design. This was justified on the basis

that statutory building regulations are of a sufficiently high standard to make any other standard redundant. In so doing, the implicit definition of sustainable design has been limited to energy in use. Many of the broader social and environmental aspects of sustainable design, and considerations at different scales of intervention, are simply being abandoned.

5.8   Summary

The changing intentions behind urban design policy over the last 20 years have shifted from simple economic benefits to a wider integrated approach to environmental and social benefits and then back to an economic focus. Yet, the challenges of building sustainable communities include the need to maintain a strategic overview of, and broad thematic scope for, planning. This is within an institutional and policy context where the dominant trend is for increasing specialisms and substantive outcomes over process.

In the developing world of urban design policy, there has been a repeating paradox between the requirements for speed and responsiveness in decision-making and the bias towards lengthy statutory processes that maintains consultation periods and opportunities for debate. This mismatch between the timescales required for policy formation and politicised decision-making remains. There is an organisational investment in the time and resources needed to get any meaningful masterplan adopted. This has too often resulted in a misplaced momentum being generated behind the wrong sort of strategy.

The prevalent political confidence, that urban forms of development are inherently more sustainable and will become a marketing attraction for the northern housing market, remains to be proven. Urban planners, architects and designers seem to be able to make people think positively about cities and give it a 'wow factor' but not necessarily to the point of getting people to actually move there. In a similar way, the assumption that sustainability, design quality and innovation, even supported by the right type of marketing, can address locational stigma and compensate for higher density living in neighbourhoods with social problems and comparatively poor educational attainment levels may be slightly naive.

The idea of 'patient money' and thinking about quality and sustainability in the long term has been sidelined in policy. In spite of the extensive and mixed evidence regarding the value of sustainability and good design in theory, this has been unconvincing in practice. The separation of capital and revenue costs arising from following a traditional speculative development model has limited incentives for investment in quality and sustainability for those responsible for initiating development and little influence for those responsible for ongoing management and running costs.

Many of these practitioner concerns have been and are still the basis for discussions around the reasons for why big plans fail. Whatever happens next in the progression of urban policy, there is a historical and procedural context within which any professional or politician works. This context, positive or negative, will have an

impact on trust, accountability, cooperation and support ultimately what could be understood as successful regeneration.

The need for an underlying robust evidence base remains strong and can underpin and justify the development of urban policy, even though there has been an empirical bias in the overtly technical and data-driven evidence that has too often misdirected a politically motivated process. Thus, this evidence base has to be broader in scope and include the anecdotal and qualitative views from communities with a real knowledge of the economic challenges they are facing. This is important to balance the often misleading views stated and repeated in much corporate spin associated with many public bodies and organisations hoping to talk up the positive changes of a region or a city undergoing radical restructuring. The evidence has to help see through the hype.

What seems to be repeating too often is the historical emphasis on 'end-state planning', imposed from dislocated ministers in London, and the failure to understand the nature of transition and adaptation. Perhaps we would be better to try and understand the dynamic and procedural aspects of planning and managing cities, accepting the inevitability of mistakes and failure within this process.

Finally, we would suggest that urban design is first and foremost a composite political act. The use of evidence and implicit bias within it, the distribution and criteria-based control of resources, the dominant ideology of the property market controlling regeneration (Webb 2010), the empowerment or disenfranchisement of communities and local councils, the evaluation of sustainability against viability and the 'badging' of successful projects are all small but significantly political acts that have supported the progression of a group of political cronies (Rodgers 2017) as they move from one reorganised regeneration quango to the next.

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