

‘A lot to do but a lot to do it with’

Hilary Russell

As a leading American urban commentator said on looking around Liverpool: ‘A lot to do but a lot to do it with’. She was pinpointing the paradox of so much potential in the face of so many problems.

Liverpool’s problems are well known, albeit often exaggerated: 47% households live in poverty; unemployment at 7.3% is twice the national rate, though it has fallen in line with national trends. With four of the country’s ten most deprived ward and 12 in the top 50, it has extensive and intensive deprivation.

Its high rankings will perhaps surprise people less than finding Liverpool nip and tuck with Manchester in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2000 measures. Liverpool’s 72% of people lining in the worst 10% compares with Manchester’s 79%.

Escalating economic decline in the 1970s persisting through the 1980s set the geography and character of Liverpool’s social exclusion. The 1990s saw a new determination to resolve problems like low income, unemployment, poor housing and health and low educational attainment. Employment is key. So the 10% rise in jobs since 1996 is welcome: the first year-on-year for four decades.

Liverpool Partnership groups (LPG) prospectus, Liverpool First, provides a framework for the city’s strategies, combining levers for economic growth with social regeneration wide ranging social regeneration measures.

Sustainable neighbourhoods are at the heart of the City’s housing strategy which seeks to redress imbalances throughout the housing market. Liverpool’s population fell by over a third over the last 50 years. Many go on their bikes to find jobs. Others still work in Liverpool but moved beyond the city’s boundaries.

Low owner occupation, rock bottom prices, abandonment, high turnover and vacancies are concentrated in certain areas. The City’s inner core has about 37% of the properties but half the vacant properties. Research stresses the correlation between housing (un)popularity and levels of poverty and crime.

Residential stability requires more than physical renewal. Housing spend is needed, but so is a better quality of life and greater involvement in neighbourhood management.

Liverpool Housing Action Trust’s investment in jobs, training, health, transport, arts and tenant compacts illustrates the diversity of possible measures.

Safer neighbourhoods are more attractive neighbourhoods. Overall, Liverpool has the second lowest crime rate of any metropolitan area in the country. Domestic burglaries are the lowest for 25 years and half the rate of the 1980s.

Inevitably the picture is patchy. City Safe, the Community Safety Partnership, introduces a ‘safer terraces’ scheme in problematic neighbourhoods, that has become a national beacon. Installing gates across back alleys resulted in 50% fewer burglaries in one neighbourhood, a 30% in repeat victimisation and evidence of these positive effects radiating out more widely.

‘Alleygating’ has unanticipated benefits: fewer Fire Service call-outs because less rubbish is dumped; greater community solidarity leading to home watch groups.

Completing this virtuous circle, the gates are manufactures in an ex-offenders' workshop.

Disorder as well as crime undermines communities. Liverpool Anti-Social Behaviour Unit (LASBU) was the first in the country. Successful already as a reactive, punitive, re-engagement and diversionary service, it is developing a more outgoing, area-based approach.

Partnership working is routine. A Police Superintendent appointed as a chief officer of the Council manages its new responsibilities under the Crime and Disorder Act. His team works with RSLs and other partners on issues such as drugs and alcohol misuse. These initiatives, plus more focused neighbourhood policing, are well timed to fit with neighbourhood renewal.

Good schools and facilities for young people are also building blocks for sustainable neighbourhoods. Services are becoming more integrated and getting better results.

Mainstream and special initiatives are raising aspirations and attainment; five EAZs and four min-Action Zones; nine Beacon schools, seven Specialist schools, 15 involved in PFI initiatives and two IXT-based City Learning Centres. Excellence in Liverpool supports gifted children and those in danger of under-achieving.

The next three years will see C-Net developed, a £1.1m Children's Information Network to supply computers, internet access and website for disabled children and their carers.

Health scores are improving, but not yet catching up with the rest of the country. Over half Liverpool's wards have 50% higher SMRs than nationally. Again the link with poverty is well established. Liverpool has addressed wider determinants of health since appointing the first ever Director of Public Health in 1847. Today with Health Action Zone support, new projects focus on air quality, low income, worklessness, discrimination and crime prevention.

Examples include a health impact assessment of the Integrated Transport Strategy. Numerous project increase access to health, affordable food. A racism Hotline is yielding intelligence that the Police can act on about racial crimes. The Racial Harassment Prevention Unit addresses victims' needs.

The community is an essential partner for effective interventions. LPG wants to extend its existing voluntary sector representation. It is supporting 'bottom up' creation of infrastructure to encompass the diversity of groups and communities of place and interest and provide a menu of opportunities for participation.

Historically at the forefront of fighting poverty in Liverpool, voluntary social care organisations – with £15-20 million spend – still play a more significant role here than in comparable cities. They continue to pioneer fresh approaches to user involvement and engaging the most excluded.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, community-led housing and community development was exemplified by the Eldonians. Objective 1 Pathways Partnerships, SRB and related initiatives have given further opportunities for resident involvement in regeneration.

Decades of poverty fuel scepticism about the possibility of change. Yet there is no shortage of resilient,

