

# City survival

Local authorities must seize the chance to revive cities, says Peter Hetherington

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[The Guardian](#)

Over three years ago, the Guardian produced a 20-page supplement titled Cities Reborn. While in part celebratory, it was meant to be challenging - balancing the upside of reborn city centres with the downside of rundown, partly abandoned neighbourhoods cheek by jowl with swanky penthouses. At the time, Brian Robson, head of Manchester University's Centre for Urban Policy Studies, noted that such a gulf between prosperity and squalor had never been more evident, with "the affluent young next to the impoverished poor".

Since then, much has improved. While searching questions need to be asked about the application of John Prescott's housing market renewal programme in some areas - too much demolition, perhaps, and a failure to bring local communities on board? - the deputy prime minister should be given credit for addressing a deep-seated problem on the edge of city centres.

Elsewhere, urban regeneration companies, underpinned by the government's regeneration agency, English Partnerships, have hastened the revival of centres themselves. In the case of Sheffield, for instance, that involves a new central core and reshaping the entire centre with new public squares, gardens, and much more. Nearby, Leeds and Manchester have been transformed beyond recognition. And Liverpool, still beset by decay and dereliction on a worrying scale, could be turning the corner.

So there's much to celebrate - which is why Prescott's Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) could afford to welcome a ground-breaking State of the Cities report last week, produced by a team led by Michael Parkinson, of Liverpool John Moores University.

It focuses on 58 English towns and cities, and the ODPM trumpets that they are recovering "after years of decline ... since 1997, a combination of sustained economic growth, rising public investment, and strong local leadership means that once again they are becoming successful places to live, work and enjoy". (Arguably, a network of urban development corporations, launched by the last Conservative government well before 1997, helped to launch that revival.)

The website of John Moores University put a slightly different spin on the Parkinson report: "England's cities have improved in recent years but still lag behind the top cities in Europe." Only London (ranked 23rd), Bristol (34th) and Leeds (43rd) made it into the league table of the top 50 European cities with the highest gross domestic product.

The good news is that the ODPM believes the impressive Parkinson report provides the foundation for a recalibration of urban policy - namely, devolving more powers to cities and surrounding conurbations, and giving them more financial autonomy. That

means a substantial cultural shift, with Whitehall and ministers learning to let go after two decades in which power has increasingly been pulled to the centre.

David Miliband, the local government and communities minister, has been setting the tone with a series of city-region summits, at which council leaders have been invited to come forward with suggestions for new forms of conurbation governance. Some have seized the opportunity; others can't agree on a way forward. That's a pity, because it's time to take the government at its word, produce new structures for city regions - particularly over transport, planning and skills - and present them to Miliband and his team. Then it will be up to ministers to deliver the goods.

One clue will be the government's response to the mayor of London's call for more powers over areas such as skills. The ODPM appears to be up for more devolution. But what of the other departments?

- Peter Hetherington writes on regeneration and community affairs