

---

# Social Cohesion in English Cities: Policy, Progress and Prospects

---

Michael Parkinson

## 1 Cities matter

---

These are exciting – if challenging – times for cities in many countries. During the past decade many cities in many countries have emerged from a period of decline to find new economic, political and cultural niches. There has been a sea change in how they are regarded. Governments, the private sector and researchers increasingly see cities as the dynamos of national and regional economies rather than economic liabilities. Cities are becoming again “the wealth of nations”. Many have assets which make them more – not less – significant in an increasingly globalised world. Some are centres of strategic decision-making, exchange and communication. Many have concentrations of intellectual resources in universities and research institutions, which encourage high levels of innovation. Many cities have achieved substantial physical regeneration especially of their centres, which offer impressive commercial, residential and retail facilities. Many have substantial cultural resources, which are increasingly the source of economic growth and job creation.

But cities are not only economic assets – not merely marketplaces. They have great capacity to promote community development, social cohesion and civic and cultural identity. However, despite this potential, the pursuit of economic success has not led to the elimination of social problems in many different countries with very different institutional, economic and social arrangements and policies. Achieving economic success with social justice in sustainable cities remains a challenge to many governments and organisations – local, regional, national and international.

For all these reasons, across Europe, North America and beyond, cities are moving up the political agenda and have become the focus of many policy initiatives. Much of this attention has been generated by concerns about national prosperity in the face of growing internationalisation of the world economy and competition from the newly industrialising countries, particularly in

labour intensive, mass production manufacturing industries. In response to these competitive pressures many first world economies are developing activities based on high levels of knowledge where they still have the competitive edge in world markets. It is increasingly realised, however, that such actions do not take place on the head of the proverbial pin, but in real places – often cities. Initially, the policy focus was upon regions. More recently in many different countries it has shifted towards the relationships between cities and regions. As a result there is a growing recognition that the characteristics of cities – and the ways policies affect them – are crucial determinants of regional and national economic performance.

---

## 2 How are English cities performing?

---

### *The changing policy landscape of English cities*

This recognition of the significance of cities to the national economy is no greater than in the UK in recent years. There has been an enormous amount of activity and change in urban policy in England during the past seven years with a large number of independent and government reports assessing the conditions and prospects of English cities. The government has introduced a range of measures designed to:

- recognise that cities are economic drivers not liabilities
- reduce sprawl, suburbanisation and encourage central city sustainability
- change the balance of power between nation, region, city and neighbourhoods
- devolve responsibility by giving regional and local organisations more control over resources in return for good performance
- promote more collaboration between local, regional and national partners and more strategic, “joined up” governance
- modernise local government by creating stronger, visible, civic leadership, and rewarding achievement

---

Prof. Michael Parkinson  
European Institute for Urban  
Affairs  
Liverpool John Moores  
University  
51 Rodney Street  
Liverpool L1 9AT  
Großbritannien  
E-Mail:  
m.h.parkinson@ljmu.ac.uk

- improve the quality, value for money of local services and their responsiveness to communities
- encourage greater citizen engagement in decision-making.

#### *The State of the Cities Report*

What impact have all these policy changes had upon cities and upon social and economic conditions in them. Recently the UK government carried out State of the Cities Report (SOCR) to provide a comprehensive assessment of urban conditions and drivers of urban change in England. It reviews the impact of government policies upon cities, explores how they contribute to local, regional and national success and identifies key policy messages. What does it tell us? There is a lot of good news. There is much evidence that many English cities have improved their economic and social performance, are becoming more liveable and have developed better government arrangements in recent years. But despite these improvements, not all cities or groups and areas within them have had the same experience. Cities in the south and east are still more successful than cities in the north and west. Matching the performance of the most successful continental cities also remains a challenge for many. Sustaining the economic advances of our cities will also require the national economic growth of recent years to be continued. The next section focuses upon developments in social conditions in English cities.

### 3 Trends in social cohesion in English cities

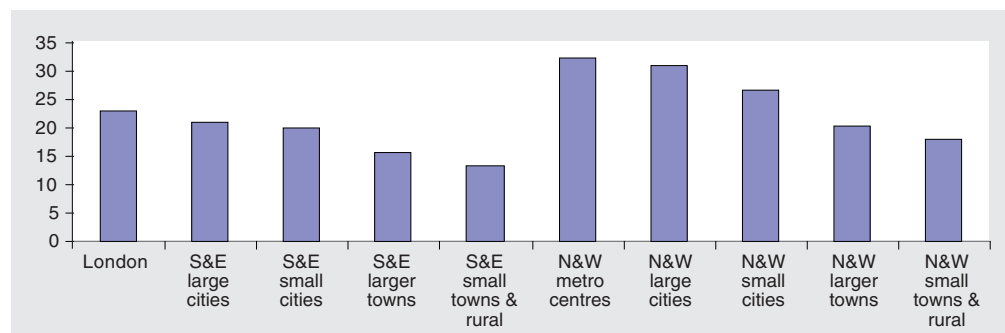
There has been improvement in social cohesion in cities in recent years, partly reflecting improved national performance. Employment conditions have improved

considerably in some of the poorest cities. Health conditions have improved generally and people everywhere are living longer. The gap in educational attainment between cities and the rest of the country has narrowed slightly in recent years. The proportion of people with degrees has risen everywhere in the last decade, especially in prosperous cities that already had many graduates. On recorded crime, robberies have increased slightly, while vehicle crime and burglaries have declined slightly.

But despite this progress, cities still face challenges of social exclusion and inequality. The level of deprivation is higher and more widespread in cities than in other parts of the country. There are higher levels of unemployment and worklessness. The state of health of the population in cities is generally worse. The gap between poor and better-off neighbourhoods is bigger than elsewhere. Social diversity is greater – between people of different races, cultures, religions and social class. Residential “sorting” is quite high, based on income, wealth, employment status and ethnicity. Educational attainment in schools is lower than elsewhere. The rate of recorded crime is generally higher.

There is also a regional difference. Cities in the north and west face bigger challenges than those in the south and east. They have greater deprivation, worse health conditions and more poor neighbourhoods, higher levels of child poverty and lone parenthood, higher rates of involuntary worklessness, lower employment rates for people with disabilities, for the over 50s and for ethnic minorities, more people with no qualifications and fewer people with degrees so as more areas with significantly more people from minority ethnic groups often overlapping with deprived neighbourhoods.

Figure 1  
Level of deprivation  
by city type 2004



Source:

The level of deprivation is higher and more widespread in cities than in towns and rural areas as Figure 1 shows. But conditions have been improving in most cities, especially in some of the poorest.

Cities with high worklessness have low incomes, so increasing employment is a key to tackling deprivation. Involuntary worklessness among households and neighbourhoods is higher in cities in the north and west than elsewhere. But conditions have undoubtedly improved over the last decade as Table 1 shows.

There is large variation in the level of educational attainment between cities and the rest of the country. Cities in the north and west have more people without qualifications and fewer people with degrees than elsewhere as Figure 2 shows. However, the gap has narrowed slightly in recent years. The proportion of people with degrees has risen everywhere in the last decade.

Table 1  
Employment rate by city type, 1994–2003 (in %)

	1994	1997	2000	2003
London	68.2	71.3	72.7	71.5
South and east large cities	72.0	75.1	77.5	76.6
South and east small cities	73.7	74.8	78.2	77.2
Metropolitan centres	66.1	68.3	69.8	70.6
North and west large cities	67.1	68.7	70.0	71.6
North and west small cities	70.5	70.7	74.4	74.6
Rest of England	75.2	77.3	78.5	78.5

Source:

Although patterns of crime are complex, it is generally higher in cities. It also tends to be higher in larger cities than in smaller cities and in the north and west than in the south and east. However, there are large variations between individual cities.

Cities and towns in the south and east have better all-round health profiles than the north and west. Larger cities tend to have worse health than towns and rural areas. However, health conditions are generally improving and people everywhere are living longer as Figure 3 shows.

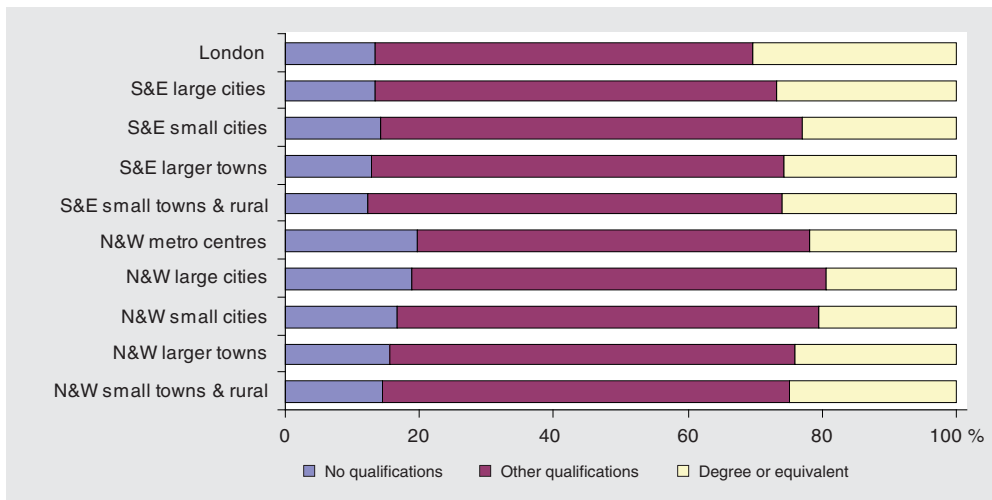


Figure 2  
Skills of the working age population by city type 2003

Source:

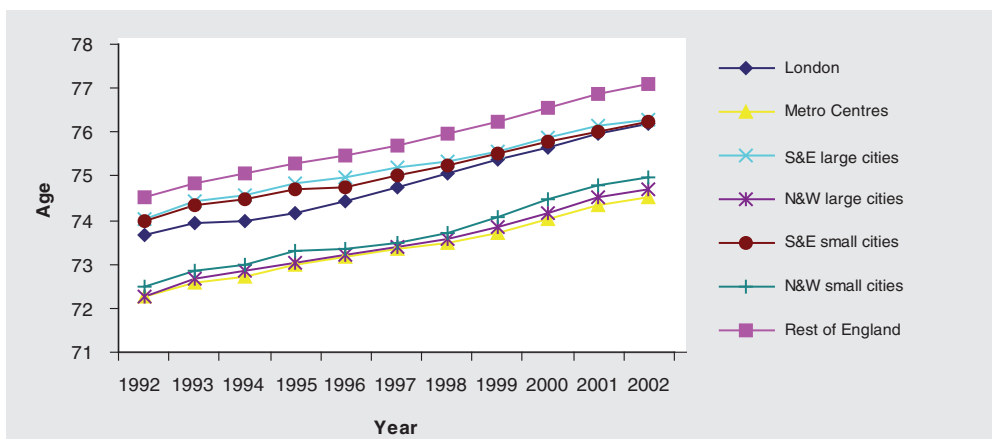


Figure 3  
Male life expectancy

Source:

*Cities are becoming more integrated*

The ethnic minority population of England rose between 1991-2001 from 3.06 million to 4.46 million. All types of cities increased their non-white population but London's increase was greatest. In 7 of the 10 city types the non-white population grew more than the white population. But the pattern of distribution of ethnic minority across particular cities barely changed during the decade (Figure 4).

Residential segregation between white and non-white groups is higher in cities in the north and west of England than in the south and east. Higher segregation is associated with lower earnings, higher unemployment, and fewer managerial and professional class employees at the city level, though these relationships are stronger in the south and east than in the north and west. Right across the country, there is a strong inverse relationship between the level of segregation and the rate of participation in further and higher education. Segregation by ethnic group has declined during the past decade. The level of residential segregation fell slightly between 1991 and 2001 in 48 out of the 56 cities. It increased in only 8 cities between 1991 and 2001. But this was by very small amounts in 6. In only 2 cases was the increase significant.

*Social cohesion in English cities – the overall balance sheet*

Three important trends emerge. First, all 56 cities across the country have improved

their performance in recent years. Second, however, cities in the south and east have higher rates of cohesion than those in the north and west. Third, the large majority of cities which were performing well at the start of the period, improved their performance more than those who had been performing less well. There has been progress across the country in increasing social cohesion. But more needs to be done to close the gap.

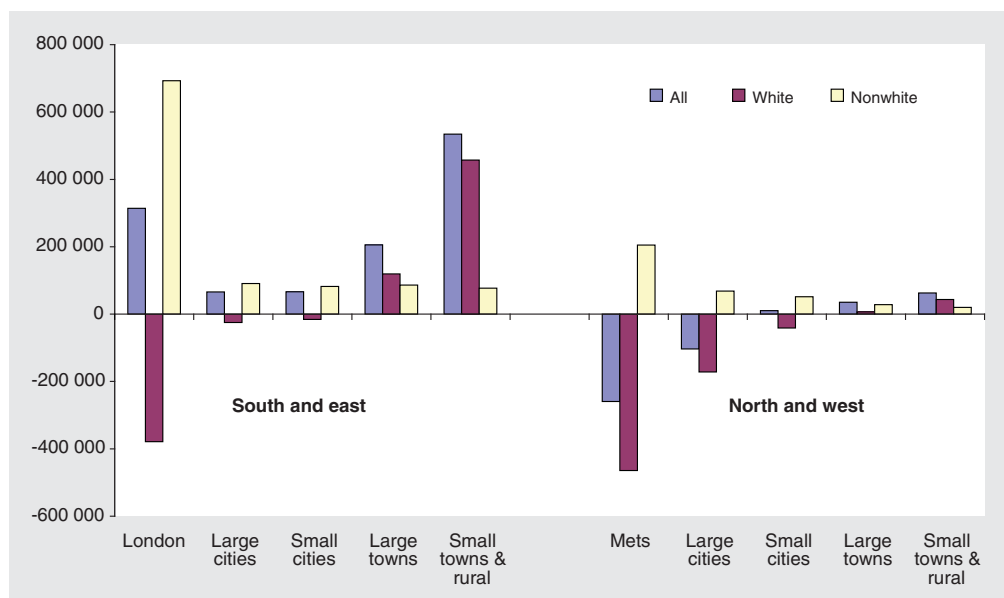
4 The economic performance of cities

The evidence on the economic competitiveness and performance shows many cities performing well. But it also underlines the scale of the economic challenge still faced by many others. The 56 cities vary considerably in terms of both income and productivity and some lag behind the national average. London and smaller cities in the south and east perform better than those in the north and west. However, changes in economic performance in recent years show some improvement.

Many English cities have improved, especially in the most recent years. Cities are picking up. Despite that progress, and in particular the economic successes of Manchester and Leeds, many cities in the north and west are not yet catching up with the most successful cities in the south and east. More needs to be done for that to happen and for English cities to catch up with the

Figure 4  
Change in numbers of all white and non-white residents, 1991–2001, by SOCR type

Source:



best in Europe. The full report shows that English cities perform as well as many continental cities overall. But in comparison with the most successful cities in Europe, many English cities lag behind in levels of income, productivity, innovation, employment, workforce qualifications, connectivity and accessibility. Also if cities are to stay up and maintain the improvements of recent years, the success of the national economy must be sustained.

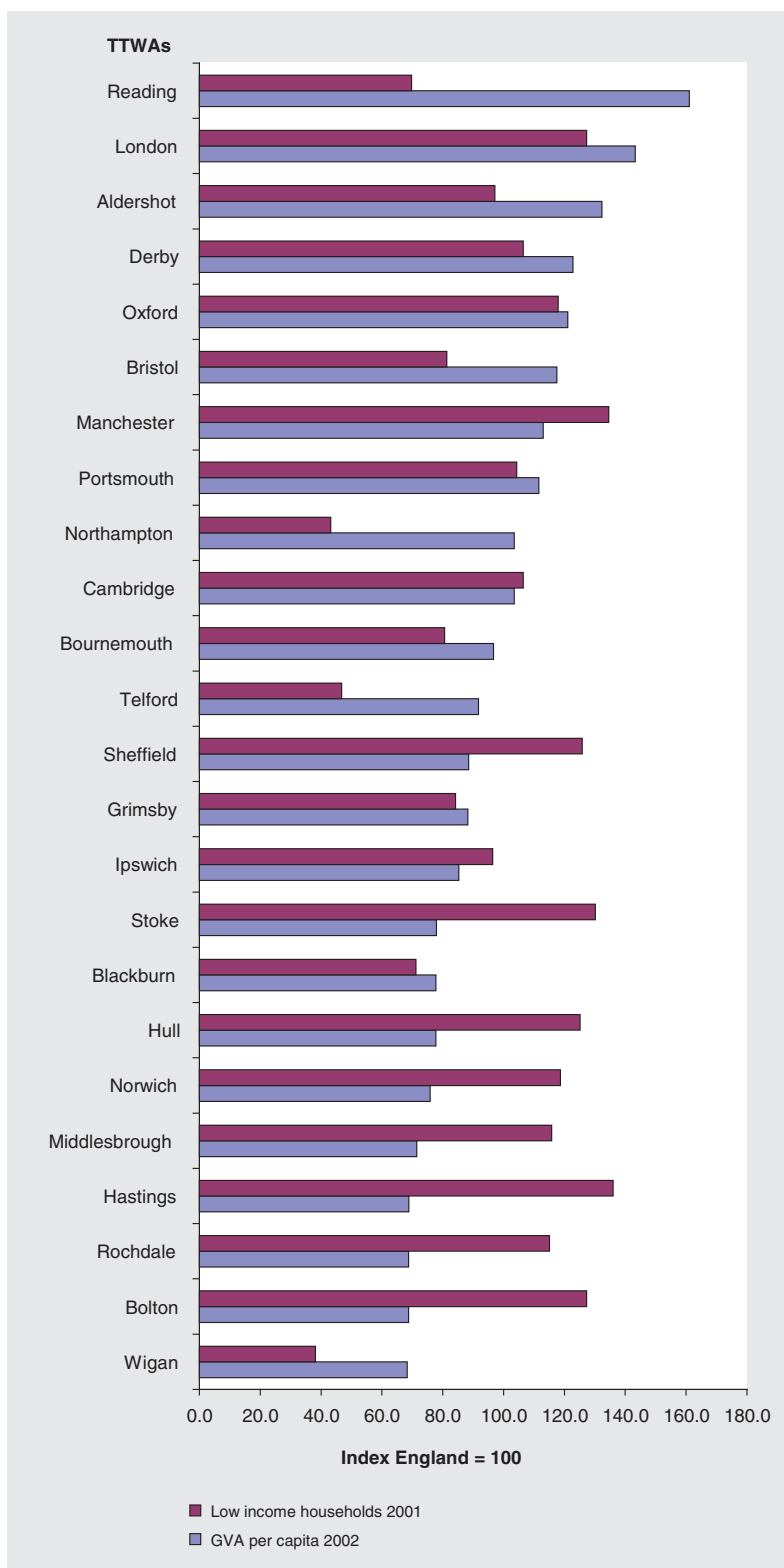
*Does economic success lead to social success?*

A key policy question is whether economic success in cities leads to social success. Figure 5 throws light on this by showing the relationship between productivity and low income. The relationship is not simple. Both more and less economically successful cities have low income households. Nevertheless, the chances of being income deprived are higher in cities where the economy is below the English average, than in those cities with more successful economies. Also our evidence on employment showed a strong inverse relationship between employment and income deprivation, which means that cities with more jobs tend to have less poverty and social exclusion. The search for economic competitiveness does not exclude a concern with social cohesion. A high value added, knowledge based high skill economy can lead to the achievement of wider social goals. It is easier to redistribute wealth than poverty. But it does not automatically happen. It requires policy intervention.

**5 How have policies affected the performance of English cities?**

The government's attempt to address market failures and improve mainstream services in the poorest neighbourhoods has begun to narrow the gap between them and the rest of England in educational achievement, employment rates and teenage pregnancy. Particular urban groups such as young children, the unemployed and the most vulnerable have benefited from more joined up, crosscutting strategies and initiatives. There have been significant improvements in many urban areas in terms of the quality of the worst social and private rented housing, incidence of burglary and vehicular crime.

Figure 5  
GVA per capita 2002 and low income households 2001



Source:

However, some aspects of educational and housing policy have worked in the opposite direction. Prospects for personal enhancement amongst the least qualified and the most disadvantaged have not yet improved in relation to national norms. The incidence of robbery and certain categories of violent crime and poor health remains high in more deprived urban areas. There are early signs that the government's recent focus on "liveability" is beginning to reverse the long-term deterioration in the quality of urban public spaces. Area-based interventions have generally become increasingly sophisticated in scope and more effective. However, they face powerful wider forces such as economic restructuring, growth in income inequality and divergent regional prospects. Further progress will hinge upon the degree to which neighbourhood interventions fit with policies to stimulate urban and regional economies and improve urban quality of life.

*How can policy help cities become more socially cohesive?*

- Address the causes as well as the consequences of exclusion

The most successful places have addressed the fundamental drivers as well as the more immediate features of social cohesion. They have consistently sought to improve the underlying material circumstances of urban communities and to enhance the less tangible aspects of human relationships and identities. Sustained policies to expand employment opportunities and help people to access jobs have proved crucial to lift households and communities out of poverty. Cities that have neglected their physical infrastructure and the supply of employment land have paid the price and become less competitive business locations. Similarly, cities that have struggled to improve their education, housing and transport systems have also fallen behind average living standards.

- Act across the wider territory

There is growing recognition among local authorities and their strategic partners that a more outward-looking, expansive, economically oriented perspective is important. Concentrations of poverty are often localised symptoms of more generalised citywide economic problems. Here it

is difficult to provide lasting solutions unless there are more opportunities available that enable general progression. Since local powers and resources tend to be geared to welfare services broadly defined, the main challenge for government is to ensure that city authorities have the incentives and resources to sustain their efforts to make their cities more productive and increase prosperity.

- Link opportunities, need and places

There are three broad kinds of urban policies. The first target need. The second seek to expand opportunities. The third try to link opportunities and needs, by improving the accessibility of unemployed people to jobs or tackling institutional barriers to economic and social inclusion. The balance between these will differ across different cities depending on local circumstances and levels of prosperity. In most cities there is considerable experience of neighbourhood programmes. In these places the main challenge for government is to provide the additional resources required on a sustained basis and to bend mainstream programmes to cities.

It is important to avoid the "needs" and "opportunities" policies being pursued independently of each other. Separate organisations are typically responsible for these two areas, creating the risk of inconsistency or even contradiction between them. Government needs to raise awareness of the importance of linking opportunities and needs more deliberately, and to help devise institutional arrangements and practical ways of reducing the barriers that prevent this from happening

A simple illustration of the imperative to link needs and opportunities stems from the fact that the UK employment rate for non-whites is only 59% compared with 76% for whites. Ethnic minorities live disproportionately in cities and currently make up about 8% of the UK population. But they will account for half of the growth in people of working age over the next decade. So it is important for both economic and social reasons that employment, training, anti-discrimination and other equal opportunities policies are brought together and focused more strongly on cities than they have been in the past.

- Competitiveness, cohesion and liveability all matter

Different governments in different periods have paid more or less attention to the economic, social or environmental challenges facing cities. But they should be connected. A policy for cities cannot simply be about either buildings, or deprived neighbourhoods, or wealth creation. A successful policy needs to address all three elements – as well as the best way of delivering policies at urban level.

- But focus on competitiveness

Although all three legs of the stool are important, the competitiveness of cities has been a neglected focus and should be strengthened. The creation of economic opportunities, wealth and jobs in our cities in principle would improve the prospects of achieving socially cohesive and environmentally sustainable cities. There are a variety of possible relationships between competitiveness and cohesion. There are economically successful places with large social problems. But the strong inverse relationship we showed between employment and income deprivation means that cities with more jobs tend to have less poverty and social exclusion. The connection is not automatic, but having a buoyant labour market clearly helps to promote social cohesion. European evidence also shows that the cities with the most buoyant economies often have the lowest unemployment rates. The search for economic competitiveness does not exclude a concern with social cohesion. A high value added, knowledge based high skill economy can lead to the achievement of wider social goals. Policy has increasingly focused upon the roots of competitiveness. That focus should be strengthened. And linkages between institutions which deliver the different elements of the competitiveness agenda need to be strengthened.

#### *What key policy messages for the UK?*

- The UK must sustain and expand the successful economic recovery of its cities

The first key message is that many English cities have been continuously economically successful during recent decades. Many others that have endured serious economic problems have begun a process of restructuring and are finding new niches. It is important not to underestimate the achievements that have been made, as well as to recognise the scale of challenges which remain. In 2006, English cities look and are different from the 1980s when many larger ones rapidly lost tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs and almost their whole economic rationale. Since then such cities have dramatically improved their performance. The process of urban renaissance, especially in city centres, is well entrenched. Many cities in the north and west have begun to expand and attract the economic sectors and are developing the qualities and assets which underpin successful urban economies - innovation, economic diversity, a skilled labour force, communications, quality of life and leadership capacity.

The urban renaissance must be sustained and widened. The economic success of cities must be spread more widely, within the cities themselves and also across the country. There are still great social and economic differences within English cities, whether or not they are successful economically. And the process of economic recovery is uneven across England. Many English cities have improved, especially in the most recent years. But many in the north and west are not yet catching up with London and the most successful cities in the south and east. They typically have economies based more upon high value added, knowledge-based industries and are often better connected to the global economy.

The urban renaissance must be sustained and widened. The economic success of cities must be spread more widely, within the cities themselves and also across the country. There are still great social and economic differences within English cities, whether or not they are successful economically. And the process of economic recovery is uneven across England. Many English cities have improved, especially in the most recent years. But many in the north and west are not yet catching up with London and the most successful cities in the south and east. They typically have economies based more upon high value added, knowledge-based industries and are often better connected to the global economy.

- The UK should learn from successful cities abroad

There is real evidence that many English cities are picking up in terms of their recent economic performance. But many, with the notable exception of the global player of London, are not performing as well as their competitors in Europe and beyond. Here the national policy framework matters a great deal. The broad trend in continental Europe is to decentralise decision-making and place powers at the lowest level. Where cities have been given more freedom and resources there is evidence they have responded by being more proactive, entrepreneurial and successful. Decentralisation in France has invigorated provincial cities during the past 20 years. The most successful cities in Europe in that period have

been German, which is the most decentralised country in Europe. The renaissance of Barcelona in part stems from regionalisation and the reduced grip of the capital city, Madrid. In addition some European governments have been moving towards more long-term contractual relationships between national and local government. We can learn lessons from this experience.

- The UK should trust and encourage cities and local leadership

Local leadership is important. Many of the advances of recent years have been a consequence of the sustained national economic recovery, which has provided a more supportive environment in which cities have flourished. But the advances are also the result of engaged local leaders, both public and private, exploiting favourable national economic performance. There is much evidence in the report that entrepreneurial, local leadership is crucial in helping to find new economic futures for cities, their businesses and residents.

- Cities matter – support them

The really key message of this report is that England's cities are now better placed than at any time since the end of the nineteenth century to become motors of national advance. The combination of sustained macro-economic growth, rising public investment in education, policing, health and transport, partnership with the private sector, growing higher education and a dynamic social and cultural scene is uniquely positive. The years of decline and decay have been overcome. There is now an opportunity to create centres of economic and social progress that will shape the country for a generation. There are big challenges ahead. Only the right policy decisions will deliver that positive future. But the opportunity is clear, present and exciting.