

# subr:im bulletin

CL:AIRE's SUBR:IM bulletins present practical outcomes of research by the SUBR:IM consortium which have direct application to the brownfield and contaminated land communities. This bulletin focuses on decision-making processes in brownfield development, and the interactions of the key stakeholders within two case study areas.

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## Community Engagement, Urban Regeneration, and Sustainability

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This bulletin draws on the findings of an in-depth, two year research project on the redevelopment of Salford Quays in Greater Manchester and Paddington Basin, in Central London. The project was part of the EPSRC's SUBR:IM Research Consortium, funded under the Sustainable Urban Environments Initiative. Its aim was to focus on the decision-making processes that surround sustainable brownfield development and to focus, in particular, on the negotiations and discussions that took place between technical experts and engineers, planners, developers, and local communities. Key questions for analysis therefore included:

- Who makes/takes decisions about sustainable planning agendas and how are priorities determined?
- What role do engineers and other technical experts have in the development of brownfield sites?
- Which institutions shape development agendas and what are their sources of power and funding?
- What control do local people have over the form and character of development projects?

The sites were selected as both have been described by *The Economist*, amongst others, as some of the most successful inner urban regeneration programmes of their type in Western Europe. The research involved in-depth archival work, over 100 semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, surveys of existing local businesses, and a series of focus groups with (new and old) community representatives. The discussion that follows begins by highlighting some of the key issues surrounding the governance of sustainable brownfield development before turning to the research's key findings and some pointers for best practice elsewhere.

### 2. GOVERNING AND DELIVERING SUSTAINABLE URBAN BROWNFIELDS

In the planning and policy literature the term 'sustainability' has become a rather fuzzy concept that is used to justify a number of different things. It usually refers to the findings of the *Brundtland Commission* of 1987 that called for a balanced approach to economic growth and stressed the need for societies to use resources prudently whilst simultaneously addressing the environmental and social impacts of growth and development. Brownfield regeneration has often been termed sustainable as this involves the re-use of land, generates new forms of growth in deprived urban areas, and creates space for the expansion of new urban communities. If properly managed and delivered, brownfield regeneration also has the potential to tackle some of the long standing environmental problems left behind by the closure of urban industries in the 1970s and 1980s. If polluted and contaminated sites can be cleaned up and brought back into active use, the health and well-being of urban communities will be significantly improved creating a win-win scenario for policy makers, engineers and technical experts, developers, and urban communities.



Exclusive apartments under construction in Salford Quays

However, the process of implementing sustainable urban development is far from straightforward. The breadth of meanings associated with the term leaves much room for multiple interpretations and understandings to emerge. Sometimes this variety nurtures more effective inter-disciplinary approaches to development. Sometimes, however, the failure to develop coherent and shared definitions of the term creates confusion or leads to forms of development that are not environmentally-friendly and do not, necessarily, enhance the well-being of local people. In fact, the use of the word sustainability can, inadvertently, silence criticism as it is a particularly difficult concept to criticise.

During this research a number of contrasting definitions of sustainability were uncovered, not all of which sat easily together. The discussion is divided up into four different groups of respondents:

(i) *Technical scientists and engineers*: For this group sustainable urban development was primarily concerned with identifying and tackling specific engineering problems, often in the early phases of the regeneration projects. In Salford, for example, a sustainable solution to the poor quality of the water in the Manchester Ship Canal was to implement a long term programme of aeration and oxygenation. The process has proved to be extremely successful as the water ecology of the area has significantly improved and some of the worst pollutants and residues from the industrial era are gradually being broken down. In terms of land clearance many of the toxins associated with the former uses of the docks have been cleared and development is proceeding rapidly. Similarly in Paddington major projects have been undertaken to bring sites alongside the old canal basin back in to active use in order to facilitate high-density development projects. The additional problem in Paddington has been the relative tightness of the site – it is surrounded by heavy transport infrastructure – and the on-going need to preserve local industrial heritage. Such problems presented significant engineering challenges and have generated innovative and largely successful solutions as measured in technical terms.

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Housing estates near Salford Quays

However, the relationships between these engineering projects and broader questions surrounding sustainability and urban development were not always uppermost in the minds of respondents. For many, the role of the engineer is not to think about what the *longer term uses* of development sites will be but what the short term, and highly specific, environmental problems are that need to be resolved. Sustainability was equated with the longevity of particular technical interventions rather than the wider social and economic uses of a site. Engineers tendered for projects not on the basis of what their longer term sustainability credentials might be, but on the basis of income, cost, and the need to attract short term contractual work. In both Salford and Paddington, and at subsequent SUBR:IM related events, it was difficult to find examples of where projects had been rejected, or significantly adapted, by engineering consultants on the grounds that subsequent uses of the site would contribute to an effective, longer term sustainability strategy.

When asked to think about sustainability in more conceptual terms many respondents defined sustainability in relation to fixed, quantifiable time periods based on their knowledge of particular materials and the track record of existing remediation and renovation techniques. If a particular pollutant containment practice, for instance, lasted 80-100 years then this was described as 'sustainable'. Overall, whilst there was evidence that technical experts were increasingly committed to the concept of sustainability, there were few if any instances uncovered in the research of where this had had a significant impact on technical practices. It was felt that this softer side of the regeneration process (i.e. negotiating objectives with communities, developing forms of consultation etc.) was a job for 'somebody else', such as policy-makers or social scientists, to consider.

There were also few examples found of where local interests had had a significant impact on the technical decisions taken over brownfield sites. Within the sustainability literature effective consultation is seen as an essential element of any development as it both informs the wider stakeholder community of the decisions taken by experts and has the potential to change the practices of experts themselves. By increasing accountability through dialogue, it is argued, the quality of interventions and their wider outcomes will be enhanced. However, in both case studies technical interventions were perceived to be beyond the understanding of local interests and there was little attempt to engage local groups in 'up-stream' decision-making processes, even though these early decisions shaped the contours of subsequent development.

(ii) *Developers and investors:* For this group of respondents the sustainability label posed significant dilemmas. On the one hand, those investing in the physical regeneration of sites were keen to maximise their short-term investment returns. The construction of expensive and exclusive properties was seen as a priority, whatever the wider impacts on social, economic, and environmental sustainability. On the other hand, there was also some evidence of a changing set of priorities and a greater concern with the legacies of development. Interviewees were clear that they were now thinking about wider questions over, for example, the appropriate number of new car parking spaces that should be created or the use of sustainable construction materials. However, many were

caught in a genuine dilemma over the distribution of costs and benefits over time. Should short-term costs be increased for existing and new residents in order to pay for longer term improvements to the urban environment? Shouldn't future generations of residents and developers also be asked to meet the longer-term costs of sustainable construction?

These tensions and dilemmas were particularly significant in discussions over the quality of new buildings and how long they should be designed to last. Demands for sustainable design and construction had to be measured against practical issues such as the costs and development regulations. The net result was that many buildings in Salford and Paddington have been constructed for relatively short to medium term use. There has been relatively little thought given to sustainable designs (such as designing for deconstruction, see SUB6) or the environmental costs of re-building on recently regenerated sites. It was noted by some respondents that getting this balance right was a particular challenge. Once investors are satisfied that the long term economic prospects of a development site are secure they are more likely to engage in more significant investments. Until then, however, many remain cautious and are unwilling to over-commit. The net result is that the first round of buildings, particularly those in Salford, will require major renovation and/or re-building in the near future even though they have only been in place for a relatively short time.

(iii) *Development planners and policy-makers:* Conceptions of sustainability from these respondents were diverse and often linked to rather different time frames. In order for a development to be sustainable, it was argued, new forms of economic activity had to be generated and new types of communities had to be created. One term that dominated the thinking concerning sustainable regeneration was that of the 'balanced community'. Before the developments began, both areas were characterised by high levels of social housing, unemployment, and crime. Through regeneration, it was hoped, new communities of affluent and professional people would be encouraged to move in. This, in the longer term, would ensure the success and sustainability of the regeneration projects as wealthier in-comers would stimulate local property markets, encourage new forms of investment, and bring new life and vibrancy to run-down areas. Their presence, it was argued, would also encourage local people to change their own aspirations, thereby improving their prospects of success. Alongside this there has also been an enhanced focus on the creation of denser, more compact forms of urban development, whatever the wider social, economic, and environmental consequences. Increased density enables public services to be provided more cheaply and, in theory, reduces the need for carbon-emitting travel.

These ways of thinking about sustainability have had a significant impact on the form and character of regeneration. High-density, apartment-dominated forms of development have predominated. Even though a range of research has shown that families are core components of any thriving, mixed and sustainable community these developments are *not* designed for children or families. Instead, they are designed for professional individuals or childless couples who often see their property as a short to medium term investment or convenience option rather than a long term place to live. This has had major implications for community change and continuity in the regeneration areas, turning developments that are ostensibly 'sustainable' (i.e. on brownfields, increasing urban density and compactness, creating urban spaces out of former polluted sites and so on) into areas characterised by rapid population turnover and change.

(iv) *Local residents and businesses:* The views of sustainability amongst local interests varied significantly from those above. Small businesses in both areas indicated a general concern that they were not seen as a development priority. Local planning blueprints consistently had little to say about the longer term future of the small manufacturing and re-cycling firms that still existed in the regeneration areas. Instead, the focus has been on the introduction of new commercial and retail spaces with the implicit and sometimes explicit acceptance that what is 'new' is better than that which already exists. Many small firms were concerned about their longer term survival prospects and did not see the future in optimistic terms.



New waterfront spaces in Paddington



New waterfront spaces in Salford Quays

Similar concerns were also expressed in interviews and focus groups with local residents in both Paddington and Salford. The longer term implications of development were perceived to be wholesale change and the removal of less wealthy residents from the development areas. The process of 'balancing' communities was equated with the gradual removal of those whose presence was not a development priority. Indeed, it was argued by some that their longer term removal would be a logical consequence of a 'sustainable development' agenda. There was relatively little discussion of environmental sustainability and the ways in which the new developments either did, or did not, contribute to wider environmental concerns surrounding issues such as transport use, carbon emissions, and climate change.

However, it should also be noted that in both Salford and Paddington the residents were not blindly resistant to the regeneration that was taking place around them. Many respondents were delighted to see new investment in the areas in which they lived and expressed a sense of gratitude towards those responsible. The opening up of new waterside spaces, as shown above, in particular, was seen as a real boost and there was also a sense of pride in some of the more significant, high profile projects, such as the Lowry Centre in the heart of Salford. There was also, however, a lack of knowledge about the contributions made to the regeneration by different groups and interests, particularly the role that engineers and other technical experts had played in making regeneration projects happen. Planners were seen as the most important actors, with the roles and responsibilities of others not really understood or even thought about.

To summarise this section has highlighted the following key findings:

- There is no one clearly defined, agreed on, definition of sustainability that is used in major urban development projects such as those in Salford and Paddington. While most respondents warmly embraced the general concept of sustainability, there was little evidence that it was having a significant effect on the day-to-day practices of professionals and other regeneration experts.
- There is a danger that the umbrella terms of 'sustainability' and 'brownfield regeneration' become used as a cover for other, less politically palatable policy agendas. There was some evidence of a 'box-ticking' approach to sustainability being adopted in which interventions were labelled as 'sustainable' if they met particular pre-defined criteria, such as being on a brownfield site or expanding the supply of housing.
- For engineers and technical experts sustainable development is often concerned with specific technical interventions that aim to diagnose and tackle environmental 'obstacles' to regeneration. Less thought is given to the longer term uses of a site and/or the extent to which such uses lead to particular social and economic outcomes.
- Even seemingly neutral terms such as a 'balanced community' are, in practice, loaded towards the needs of particular interests. Sustainable policies that aim to create balanced communities can, ironically, lead to the widespread gentrification of regeneration areas, the loss of existing industries, and the eventual exclusion of the residents that projects originally aimed to help.

- The 'urban environment' featured relatively little in local debates over sustainability. The consequence of this was that the value of often significant and innovative technical work on the sites has been forgotten as debates have shifted towards other concerns over housing and employment. The 'invisibility' and low profile of technical experts makes it relatively difficult for interactive consultation and communication to be established between different groups. Technical work is often taken for granted and it is sometimes assumed that whatever plans policy-makers and others draw up, the technical expertise and the resources exist to bring them to fruition.

### 3. MOVING TOWARDS BEST PRACTICE

The bulletin has thus far set out some of the key findings from the research. This section highlights some key areas of best practice that can be applied to sustainable urban brownfield regeneration elsewhere.

1. Consultation over sustainable development plans needs to be organised so that views are identified and assessed earlier on, or *up-stream*, in the development process. Whilst the research indicated that processes of community identification and inclusion are complex and difficult and to a large extent depend on the specific contexts of action, some broader generalisations can also be made. First, there needs to be an explicit recognition of *difference* within regeneration neighbourhoods. There is no one single community or group that can simply be consulted and involved. Second, these differences also mean that regeneration projects cannot be said to benefit everybody in the same way. There has to be a greater willingness for regeneration experts to accept that regeneration projects have multiple effects. Rather than focusing on a consensus-approach, the local politics of regeneration needs to be broken open with the implications for specific groups made clear at the outset. For example, in Salford community respondents from all areas saw themselves as abandoned citizens, whose presence was either ignored or taken for granted by policy-makers and developers. Wealthier in-migrants complained that there were few connections with established local community groups and they had suffered from a growing incidence of crime, particularly mugging and car theft. Established groups complained that the redevelopments around them had only made things worse. It is, therefore, essential that a local politics of sustainable development is opened up and that differences of opinion and diverse needs are not crowded out by a suffocating emphasis on 'consensus'. There are real opportunities to build on the support of local residents by opening up new urban (public) spaces in an inclusive way. In so doing, new forms of ownership can be established in which local people feel that development is 'for them', rather than for others.
2. The research also indicated that engineers and technical experts need to think carefully about the social and economic consequences of their project interventions. If a specific programme of land clearance is purposefully used to create unequal and/or divisive forms of development, is it then ethical to proceed with a project? If sustainable developments are to create more inclusive forms of regeneration then it may be necessary to draw up new codes of practice for all those involved in the development process, including engineers and



Public art in Paddington

technical experts. The research has highlighted the potential value of interdisciplinary approaches to brownfield development and a sharing of knowledge between different groups of stakeholders. Additional training may be of benefit to engineers and technical workers in order to enhance their knowledge of the social and economic impacts of urban development. Likewise, a greater understanding of the technical challenges that have to be overcome in order for regeneration to proceed could significantly raise the profile of engineers amongst local interests and encourage new forms of engagement. At the very least there needs to be a greater sensitivity to the ethical implications of any development activity.

3. Tighter regulations and controls are also needed on the construction industry in order to ensure that new developments reach a sufficient level of design quality and do not have to be pulled down again shortly after completion. In some cases we are already witnessing the regeneration of recently regenerated sites, something that represents a profligate and unsustainable use of resources and skills. As discussed above there is a particular problem with *certainty* and *risk* in the development process. Without certainly investors and developers are unwilling to commit significant resources to a particular regeneration for fear that it might not be successful in market terms. In order to reduce uncertainly sustainability planning needs to be underpinned by stronger forms of democratically negotiated master planning. The irony of stronger planning frameworks is that they encourage greater private sector certainty, which in turn incentivises the creation of higher quality urban environments. They can also provide greater clarity over decision-making processes and structures for all interests, something that can add to the wider legitimacy of development practices.

4. In terms of community-building in urban areas there needs to be a greater focus on family-centred housing and a move away from the reliance on small apartments and high-density housing. As discussed earlier, family units are urgently needed in many urban centres if some sense of a 'sustainable community' is to be constructed. It is essential that the current one-dimensional approach to urban regeneration is challenged and replaced by a more open and wide-ranging set of imaginations about urban areas and what they may become. On a more practical level, family accommodation has to be at the heart of a new urban sustainability agenda if development plans are to meet their ambitious rhetorical objectives. The notion of a 'balanced community' has to be redefined to take on board these wider understandings of what urban communities consist of.

5. On a related point, more focus is also required on the broader provision of public and private sector services within urban communities. The existence of high quality local schools, for example, is critical to the longer-term success of a regeneration initiative as is the availability of affordable and accessible public transport options. Too often the presence of well-run and well-maintained public infrastructure is not being considered. The assumption is made that it is up to others, such as Health Trusts and Local Education Authorities to plan for provision independently of the development planning process. Similar factors are at work with regard to community infrastructure. In some areas regeneration plans overlook existing facilities and/or replace them with new infrastructure that meets the needs of new in-coming communities but becomes disconnected from those already living in an area. Again there needs to be stronger community



Rejuvenated water spaces in Salford Quays

planning, perhaps along the lines of that undertaken in the British New Towns of the 1940s and 1950s where the provision of 'community infrastructure', underpinned by strong government agencies, was a key element of any development proposals. Regrettably, regeneration agendas are moving away from such an approach. For at the same time as the government has pushed its urban sustainability agendas, it has also initiated a new set of 'choice-based', individualised approaches to public services that are already having an effect on community cohesion. In Paddington, in particular, parents noted that their children were increasingly travelling longer distances to go to school and that community networks were consequently becoming more spread out and a sense of community was being lost. The provision of high quality *local* services is the key to the sustainability of sustainable communities.

6. The research picked up on the key role of local authorities in managing and shaping development partnerships, even though their powers and resources are being consistently undermined by central government. One way of enhancing the quality and accountability of regeneration projects is, therefore, to expand the role of local government, without imposing centrally-defined, tick-box definitions of sustainability from on high. Local planners, working in and through local contexts, would then be able to tailor projects more closely to local needs and develop more grounded and useful approaches to urban sustainability.

7. It is also important that regeneration projects do not overlook the existing activities taking place in development areas, particularly the activities of small businesses. There is a tendency to see regeneration areas as 'blank slates' to be worked on and re-made by policy. And yet, such areas often possess clusters of small firms whose success depends on the marginal nature of their sites. These firms often employ local people in relatively well paid semi-skilled work. Their removal, in the name of commercial development, can directly undermine local jobs and prosperity.

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