

# Towards an Urban Renaissance

Final Report of the Urban Task Force  
Chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside



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# **Towards an Urban Renaissance**

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

The Urban Task Force will identify causes of urban decline in England and recommend practical solutions to bring people back into our cities, towns and urban neighbourhoods. It will establish a new vision for urban regeneration founded on the principles of design excellence, social well-being and environmental responsibility within a viable economic and legislative framework.

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# **PREFACE**

**THE RT. HON. JOHN PRESCOTT, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER**



Over the past few decades many of our urban areas have suffered neglect and decline with an exodus from inner cities, driven by a lack of confidence in schools, fear of crime, an unhealthy environment, and poor housing. This is bad for our people, bad for quality of life, bad for our economy, and bad for society. One of the key political challenges of the new Century is to make Britain's towns and cities not just fit to live in, but thriving centres of human activity. There is no single solution and we need co-ordinated action based on the joint principles of design excellence, economic strength, environmental responsibility, good governance and social well-being.

In April 1998 I asked Lord Rogers to set up the Urban Task Force. Lord Rogers is not only an architect of global reputation, but an evangelist of urban renaissance, and he has certainly brought experience, intelligence, and inspiration to the Task Force. The Members were chosen for their expertise in the many key elements which are necessary for an urban renaissance, including social exclusion, sustainable development, urban design, and urban regeneration. The Task Force was asked to find out what has caused urban decline in England and to recommend practical solutions to turn our cities, towns and urban neighbourhoods into places where people actively want to live, work and play.

We have already taken a number of steps. We have started the modernisation of our planning system, including setting a 60% target for new homes to be built on previously developed land or by converting existing buildings and consulting on new planning guidance on housing. We have launched a comprehensive package to revive our urban areas and tackle social exclusion, including the New Deal for Communities to transform our most deprived estates, crime prevention measures to make our communities safer and Health Action Zones to tackle poor health in deprived areas. We have released £5 billion of capital receipts for social housing and regeneration and increased and improved the targeting of the Single Regeneration Budget. We have reformed local democracy to ensure that we get best value in our local services and we have put in place an integrated transport policy designed to make our urban and rural areas work. These are just a few of the initiatives under way but still more can be done.

I welcome the thrust of this report—it provides a wide range of interesting and forward-thinking recommendations to feed into ongoing work across Government and beyond. The Government will now be considering the recommendations in detail. It will inform us in preparing our White Paper on urban policy—the first in over 20 years. It will also inform the

complementary Rural White Paper, because reviving our towns and cities is key to relieving pressures in rural areas. The Urban Policy White Paper will set out the framework which the Government is committed to developing to ensure that towns and cities are not only competitive and prosperous, but offer a good quality of life for everyone who lives there.

As Lord Rogers says, cities make citizens, and citizens make cities. We can all make a difference, and I welcome views on this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John Prescott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "John" and the last name "Prescott" clearly distinguishable.

The Rt. Hon. John Prescott M.P.

# FOREWORD

PASQUAL MARAGALL, FORMER MAYOR OF BARCELONA



I feel privileged to be asked to say some words to preface an attempt to describe ways and means to improve English cities. If the experience of Barcelona has helped in any measure to influence this report, I would feel more than happy; not only as a former mayor of Barcelona, but also as a European citizen. Defending local in a global world takes courage. And this report demonstrates that this is being done in England today.

The best way to solve some of our global problems is breaking them down analytically into local ones. Not because local is easier; not at all. But because the roots of disenfranchisement, hate and misery always have local roots. It is in making safe and healthy neighbourhoods, towns and cities, that Europe will become what it was decided in 1945 that it should be, a land of peace and justice.

It is also by relating in a clever and efficient manner the well-being of cities to that of countryside, or more properly, it is by understanding human space as a network of centres of different size and density, that we will approach the goal of finding fitting solutions to real problems. It is critical to understand that improving public space is relevant to solving social and economic problems.

The renaissance of Barcelona has a lot to do with the fact that this is a city which is not a national state capital, but still a capital, a nodal city, a cultural stronghold. In Europe today you have chances to succeed if you are centrally placed, along the urban stream flowing from South East England, into the Rhine, and then either towards the Danube or towards the Rhone; or else if you are a state capital.

Barcelona did not have these chances. Therefore she has sought her fortune in two directions: through a rather well-perceived, moderately nationalistic project as the Catalan capital, and by way of improvement of her urban quality and international prestige.

The trick in Barcelona was quality first, quantity after. At the heart of our renaissance, the marriage between City Hall and the School of Architecture has been a happy and strong one. In fact, it is difficult to believe that the outstanding role of the city authorities throughout the process would have been accepted by other public and private actors, without this alliance.

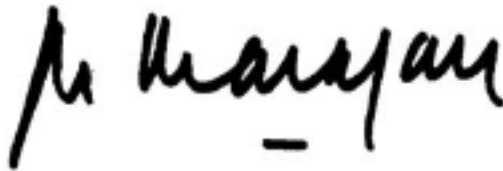
The 1992 Olympics were not the cause of Barcelona's design fame. For example, the prestigious Harvard University Prize was specifically given for the quality of urban design up to 1987. A commitment to develop networks of new plazas, parks

and buildings was the cause of our success. The Olympics helped to multiply the good works. And this year the Royal Institute of British Architects awarded the city the most prestigious Medal in recognition of its achievements. Previously, this award had always gone to an individual.

A further factor in our success has been the importance of consensus building. The fact that Barcelona didn't start with great works, (no money was available), created the base of the solid complicity between City Hall and the city at large when it came to engaging in the bigger works.

The projects in Barcelona came thick and fast, and were of the same quality whether at the centre or in the working class peripheral districts. This is another key to social acceptability of urban change.

I wish English towns and cities all the best in seeking to translate the important principles contained in this report to reflect your own circumstances. It will require strong leadership and a commitment to participatory democracy. It will require boldness and foresight. It will require risks to be taken but the lesson of Barcelona is that the rewards can be great.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'P. Maragall'.

Pasqual Maragall



# INTRODUCTION

## LORD ROGERS OF RIVERSIDE, CHAIRMAN



How can we improve the quality of both our towns and countryside while at the same time providing homes for almost 4 million additional households in England over a 25 year period?

This report is our response to that question.

We calculate that, on current policy assumptions, the Government is unlikely to meet its own target that 60% of new dwellings should be built on previously developed land. Achieving this target is fundamental to the health of society. Building more than 40% of new housing on greenfield sites is both unsustainable and unacceptable. It will lead to further erosion of the countryside. It will also increase traffic congestion and air pollution, accelerate the depletion of natural resources, damage biodiversity and increase social deprivation within our towns and cities.

But achieving an urban renaissance is not only about numbers and percentages. It is about creating the quality of life and vitality that makes urban living desirable. To stem a long period of decline and decay, pessimism and under-investment, we must bring about a change in urban attitudes so that towns and cities once again become attractive places in which to live, work and socialise.

The report marks the end of a year's intensive effort. We have gathered evidence from many organisations and places. We visited projects in all parts of England and considered the experience of Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the United States. In the quality of our urban design and strategic planning, we are probably 20 years behind places like Amsterdam and Barcelona.

What we learnt from these visits is that regeneration has to be design-led. But to be sustainable, regeneration also has to be placed within its economic and social context. There are essential issues—education, health, welfare and security—which fall outside the remit of this report. It is important that through the forthcoming Urban White Paper and into the future, government departments and institutions combine policies, powers and resources to achieve an integrated approach in meeting the needs of urban communities.

The report contains over 100 recommendations for change. They cover design, transport, management, regeneration, skills, planning and investment. Inevitably, we have not always been able to reflect within the report the full extent of the discussion and analysis which informed every recommendation. For that reason, we are also publishing a number of supporting reports



covering skills, fiscal issues, planning guidance and planning obligations. We have also handed across to the Government the many working papers produced by the Task Force and others over the last 12 months. The strength of the Task Force's work has been in its diverse membership, reflecting the breadth of the urban agenda. It is testament to our sense of common cause that we are able to promote a clear and unambiguous set of recommendations which have been agreed by all members of the Task Force.

Some 90% of us live in urban areas. We recognise there is a need for a wide variety of solutions to affect every street in every town, from the deprived inner-city council estate to the suburban neighbourhood. The complexity of the report and its recommendations reflect the complexity of the urban condition in England.

Since the industrial revolution we have lost ownership of our towns and cities, allowing them to become spoilt by poor design, economic dispersal and social polarisation. The beginning of the 21st century is a moment of change. There are three main drivers:

- the technical revolution—centred on information technology and exchange;
- the ecological threat—based on greater understanding of the implications of our rapid consumption of natural resources and the importance of sustainable development;
- the social transformation—flowing from increased life-expectancy and new lifestyle choices.

We need a vision that will drive the urban renaissance. We believe that cities should be well designed, be more compact and connected, and support a range of diverse uses—allowing people to live, work and enjoy themselves at close quarters—within a sustainable urban environment which is well integrated with public transport and adaptable to change.

Urban neighbourhoods must become places where people of all ages and circumstances want to live. We have to increase investment in our urban areas, using public finance and incentives to steer the market towards opportunities for lasting regeneration. And we must all take responsibility for the process of change, combining strengthened democratic local leadership with an increased commitment to public participation.

To be effective, our recommendations require a transformation in the quality of urban government. There is a need to re-think the role, the responsibilities and structure of local government in our urban areas. Our cities and towns need strong leadership and democratic structures which are meaningful and accessible to citizens. Local authorities must be empowered to lead the urban renaissance.

We are indebted to hundreds of people who have dedicated their time and expertise in helping us to produce this report. In particular, I would like to thank Jon Rouse, Miffa Salter and the other members of the Secretariat for their work. An urban renaissance is desirable, necessary, achievable and long overdue.



Lord Rogers of Riverside

# **THE KEY PROPOSALS**

## **THE KEY PROPOSALS**

The report is organised into the following five sections:

### **PART ONE: THE SUSTAINABLE CITY**

Establishes the importance of developing a higher quality urban product by creating compact urban developments, based upon a commitment to excellence in urban design and the creation of integrated urban transport systems that prioritise the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and public transport passengers.

- Create a national urban design framework, disseminating key design principles through land use planning and public funding guidance.
- Undertake area demonstration projects which illustrate the benefits of a design-led approach to the urban regeneration process.
- Make public funding and planning permissions for area regeneration schemes conditional upon the production of an integrated spatial masterplan.
- Commit a minimum 65% of transport public expenditure to programmes and projects which prioritise walking, cycling and public transport, over the next ten years.
- Place local transport plans on a statutory footing. They should include explicit targets for reducing car journeys, and increasing year on year the proportion of trips made on foot, bicycle and by public transport.
- Introduce Home Zones, in partnership with local communities, which give residential areas special legal status in controlling traffic movement through the neighbourhood.

### **PART TWO: MAKING TOWNS AND CITIES WORK**

Improve the management of the urban environment, targeting resources on the regeneration of areas of economic and social decline, and investing in skills and innovative capacity.

- Give local authorities a strategic role in managing the whole urban environment, with powers to ensure that other property owners maintain their land and premises to an acceptable standard.
- Create designated Urban Priority Areas, where special regeneration measures will apply, including a streamlined planning process, accelerated compulsory purchase powers and fiscal incentives.
- Develop a network of Regional Resource Centres for Urban Development, promoting regional innovation and good practice, co-ordinating urban development training and encouraging community involvement in the regeneration process.

### **PART THREE: MAKING THE MOST OF OUR URBAN ASSETS**

Developing on brownfield land and recycling existing buildings must become more attractive than building on greenfield land. The priority is to make the planning system operate more strategically and flexibly in securing urban renaissance objectives in partnership with local people.

- Make statutory development plans more strategic and flexible in scope, and devolve detailed planning policies for neighbourhood regeneration into targeted area plans.
- Produce dedicated Planning Policy Guidance to support the drive for an urban renaissance.
- Adopt a sequential approach to the release of land and buildings for housing, so that previously developed land and buildings get used first.
- Require local authorities to remove allocations of greenfield land for housing from development plans where the allocations are no longer consistent with planning policy objectives.
- Establish a national framework for dealing with the risks that arise throughout the assessment, treatment and after-care of contaminated sites.
- Require every local authority to maintain an empty property strategy that sets clear targets for reducing levels of vacant stock.
- Establish a Renaissance Fund whereby community groups and voluntary organisations can access the resources needed to tackle derelict buildings and other eyesores spoiling their urban neighbourhood.

#### **PART FOUR: MAKING THE INVESTMENT**

Sufficient public investment and fiscal measures must be used to lever in greater amounts of private investment into urban regeneration projects.

- Establish national public-private investment funds and regional investment companies, to attract additional funding for area regeneration projects.
- Introduce a new financial instrument for attracting institutional investment into the residential private rented sector.
- Introduce a package of tax measures, providing incentives for developers, investors, small landlords, owner-occupiers and tenants to contribute to the regeneration of urban land and buildings.
- Include the objective of an urban renaissance in the Government's spending review which will determine public expenditure priorities for the early years of the new millennium.
- Review the local government spending formula, which determines the allocation of central government resources, so that it reflects the financial needs of urban authorities in managing and maintaining their areas.

#### **PART FIVE: SUSTAINING THE RENAISSANCE**

New apparatus will be required to ensure that the goal of an urban renaissance remains a political priority over the 25 year period of the household projections.

- Publish an ambitious Urban White Paper, which addresses economic, social and environmental policy requirements, tying in all relevant government departments and institutions.
- Establish an Urban Policy Board which combines national, regional and local leadership in driving the renaissance at all levels of government.
- Introduce an annual 'State of the Towns and Cities' report to assess progress against key indicators.
- Create a special Parliamentary Scrutiny Committee to ensure government accountability for the delivery of urban policy objectives.

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