

What can stop the urban rot?

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A recent government report suggests that investment in deprived urban areas is not tackling the roots of their decline.

The report, called *The Effectiveness of Government Regeneration Initiatives*, was published last week by the Commons Urban Affairs Sub-Committee. It concludes that some urban districts are still locked in a spiral of decline despite years of government regeneration funding.

The main criticism of the committee was that there are too many government schemes which tackle urban decline. This causes local councils to apply for many schemes, regardless of their suitability to the local area.

Such schemes also cause councils to take a short term view towards urban regeneration. The major cause of urban decline is that of poverty. This has to be tackled through long term planning as short term employment opportunities cannot solve such a widespread problem. The report recommends that job creation schemes would be helped if government money is matched by local investment by businesses.

Urban decline can also be caused by poor planning of building and architecture. Many people attributed the problems of post war council estates to the negative atmosphere caused by the enclosing feel of concrete buildings. To tackle such a problem The Commons Urban Affairs sub-Committee suggests that an urban design guideline is established as recent poor quality Brownfield development has worsened the image of some areas.

One of the most important aspects of urban regeneration is the consultancy with the local community. Without an assessment of the needs of those living in deprived areas, regeneration cannot hope to succeed. Here again, the government's approach came in for criticism. The report recommends that the government makes their regeneration models more flexible to accommodate different regions with different needs, instead of imposing a one size fits all approach across the country.

Regeneration plans can also cause social divisions within regions as investment is concentrated in some areas and not others. The report suggest that this can be avoided by a more equal distribution of funding and initiatives and that the secrets of successful case studies of regeneration are shared between local authorities.

The regeneration of urban centres is key to the future economic success of the UK. British society is becoming ever more concentrated in urban centres and there are tough decisions to be made on how this population increase can be accommodated. One option is to allow the relentless sprawl of cities such as London. However, this would have a very negative effect on the environment, destroying the green belt which has attempted to prevent London's expansion over the last 50 years.

It is a fine balancing act. To accommodate the numbers who now locate in the economic cores of urban regions, the government must successfully regenerate declining urban centres to avoid sprawl. However, if such regeneration is successful, surges in popularity might raise the cost of living in city centres, pushing those who currently live there out. This can potentially be the cause of more social problems.