

Sustainable Urban Development: A Case Study in the Developed World

Karen Leeming

*Edge Hill College, United Kingdom**

Abstract

The theme of this paper is successful sustainable urban development in the UK. The paper explores the distinctive approach of a community in Liverpool, Merseyside to successful sustainable urban development by providing a reflective, contextualised account of its social, economic, political and historical development. It suggests that it is this particular combination of factors that has enabled the community to transform from one on the brink of destruction two decades ago to a 'best practice' model of urban development today.



Introduction

The problems associated with urban development are not just confined to the developing world, in the West cities are seen as a very real problem to local, central and international governments. The increasingly complex patterns of the global economy caused by the fragmentation and geographical relocation of traditional and new industries has led to formerly prosperous regions and cities experiencing accelerated rates of unemployment and population decline. This is creating major stresses within the social fabric of these areas. These stresses are similar to those experienced within Third World cities, namely; poor housing, high crime rates, deteriorated environments, poor health, lack of education and training and few prospects.

In the UK, until the early 1990s, the policies aimed at the regeneration of these de-industrialised areas focused on ideas formulated at the national level concerning the re-training and re-education of the workforce and the enticement of industry back into depressed regions (Allen and Massey, 1988). However, in many de-industrialised regions these policies failed and it was this ineffectuality in dealing with the decline of these areas that has prompted development initiatives that focus on the purely local level (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1993).

During this same period, concern regarding the pollution and degradation of the global environment has come to the fore. World conferences such as the 1992 'Earth Summit' at Rio de Janeiro have highlighted the need for global problems to be tackled at the local level. Globalisation not only has social and economic costs but also environmental costs, and it is through the gradual awareness of these environmental costs that there is "...a growing opinion that we should strive to live our lives more locally, making better use of the human and natural resources that are around us" (Gilchrist, 2000, p149).

This need for environmental awareness combined with local development initiatives that tackle economic regeneration in de-industrialising regions has culminated in the - sometimes grudging - acceptance for the need for sustainable urban development. Elliott (1994, p102) considers that successful sustainable urban development has a number of common characteristics that include:

* Department of Urban Policy Studies, Edge Hill, United Kingdom. Email:leemingk@edgehill.ac.uk

- Housing is also a people's problem;
- The need to build communities;
- The need to organise communities;
- The importance of outsiders;
- The importance of external funding.

Barton (2000, p52) also emphasises the need to strengthen communities in order to facilitate a number of protective environmental objectives including:

- Reducing the need to travel;
- Reduce car reliance;
- Promotion of local heritage and distinctiveness;
- Reduce fear of violence;
- Accessible jobs for those tied to the locality;
- Facilitate social networks;
- Increase user/citizen control;
- Management of decentralised systems.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the importance of stable local communities has been reflected in many of the UK's urban policy initiatives and is now a readily identifiable goal of many local authority urban regeneration initiatives, however, this was not always the case as the following case study exemplifies.

Historical Context

The hub of Merseyside is the city and port of Liverpool, and the inner city problems that have been identified by so many authors (see, for example, Cox, 1973; Harloe, 1977; Harvey, 1973; Herbert and Smith, 1989) have been with this city for at least a century. The idiosyncratic culture of working-class Merseyside and its particular social problems rest on the fact that the whole economy of Liverpool has been based on and around the port.

Although to non-residents of the UK, Liverpool is probably best known for producing the Beatles pop group in the 1960s its history began a long time before that and until the turn of the twentieth century it was the '...western gateway to the World' (Lane, 1997, p1) with an economy and infrastructure that was based almost completely on the movement and storage of goods. The port had developed rapidly because of its geographical position - it was in the ideal position for the industries of Lancashire and Cheshire to export their manufactured goods from and, for the importation of raw materials from the New World and the Colonies (Meegan, 1995; Middleton, 1991). Liverpool was also a primary port for those embarking on emigration to the New World, which encouraged massive migration in to the city and its environs from the rest of the country and from Europe - Ireland in particular (Lane, 1997; Meegan, 1995; Prestwich and Taylor, 1990). This meant that not only did the port expand rapidly, but so did the population - from 4,240 in 1700 to 222,954 by 1841 (Simey, 1992). The sheer pressure of these numbers ensured that the majority of the populace lived in appalling conditions as the whole social infrastructure was placed under intolerable stress. Additionally, as many of the immigrants were used to extreme poverty and were willing to work for a pittance this ensured they remained in poverty whilst the merchants became richer, further inflaming antagonism towards both new immigrants and the employers (Smithers,

1825). High birth rates amongst the immigrants plus potential emigrants to the Americas ensured that the population grew at a rate of over 20 per cent per decade (Lawton, 1986).

The problems associated with a large, economically poor population became compounded after the First World War due to the global restructuring of trade. The war had led to a scarcity of manufactures for export, which led to the importing countries initiating indigenous industries to replace the lack. After the war, these indigenous industries flourished and the need for imported manufactures radically decreased which led to less trade for the Port of Liverpool, massive recession and severe unemployment throughout the 1920s (although there was an improvement in the last few years of the decade) and catastrophic unemployment in the 1930s which lasted longer than elsewhere in the country (Poole, 1960).

The port's economy rallied during the Second World War as trade focused on the Atlantic in attempts to break the shipping embargoes in the Channel. However, this renaissance attracted the attention of Germany's bombers whose raids caused massive infrastructural damage around the docks, compounding the already severe housing shortages. For example, during 'May Week' in 1941, the city was bombed continuously for seven nights in succession destroying over 6,000 houses and damaging another 125,000 (Middleton, 1991). This led to the 1944 Merseyside Plan which was devised in an attempt to revitalise the area by moving both population and industry away from the city centre core - building on an exodus that had started several decades before (Lawton, 1982). This was achieved by slum clearance and then decanting large sectors of the population into poorly planned and poorly built municipal housing estates in the suburbs. This may have partly solved the housing problems, but it just meant that the existing social and economic problems of these people were removed from the city, and then exacerbated by physical and social isolation created by poor transport and the rupturing of family ties - problems that are prevalent in many of these estates today.

After the Second World War, the port continued its decline. The focus on port-based activities had meant that the provision of employment was dominated by large firms who generally employed casual, semi- and unskilled workers (Cornfoot, 1982; Lane, 1997). This meant that the region had not historically built up a base of skilled manufacturing workers who could readily switch into other areas of growth. In addition, those working outside port-based activities tended to be employed in distributive and food processing trades, which were attractive to national and multinational companies looking to expand their holdings. Once absorbed, these industries became particularly vulnerable to rationalisation and centralisation, which led to closures, and many job losses (Parkinson, 1990). This 'branch plant' economy extended also to the small manufacturing base of the region and was exacerbated by the growth of the car industry during the 1960s. This growth initially helped to ease the immediate problems but reinforced the dependence on external employers who were not accountable to local economic conditions, but to national and international markets (Lloyd, 1979). One of the major 'problems' with Merseyside, and Liverpool in particular, is that the manufacturing sector is dominated by non-locally controlled employers; for example, by the 1980s only one of the 20 largest employers in the region was locally controlled (Parkinson, 1985). These companies are subject to strategies that are formulated with international and national trends in mind, strategies that have no local affiliations or accountability, and it leaves these plants extremely vulnerable to rationalisation measures, which can disproportionately affect their suppliers. These are usually small locally based firms dependent on the larger companies for the majority of their business. For example, from 1979 to 1984, Liverpool lost 40,000 manufacturing jobs, almost half of those in the sector, in this manner (Parkinson, 1985).

The Eldonians

One area that felt the full brunt of all of these problems and changes within the city is Vauxhall. Vauxhall is in the north of the city and the community is well over one hundred and fifty years old. It was founded by Irish Catholic immigrants and the majority of the male population worked either on the nearby docks or in dock related industries which meant that the closure and continual rationalisation of factories in the area as well as the changes in cargo handling and the resultant job losses impacted heavily in the area. The high unemployment levels in the area were also matched by shoddy housing, which consisted of generally poor quality, high-density tenements that, in many cases, were in a bad state of repair. The social and economic conditions of the area were so poor that, until recently, the area had one of the highest infant mortality rates in Western Europe.

The Political Context

Politics in Liverpool are important and they are key to the case study area. Unlike the majority of large UK cities, the Labour party did not take power in Liverpool until the mid 1950s, and even then they had to share control of the city with the Conservative party until the mid 1970s (Parkinson, 1985). Historically, this was due to there being large numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, an absence of unions for skilled craft workers and religious tensions between the working class Protestants and Irish Catholics. These divisions combined with a tradition of electing right-wing Members of Parliament whilst the local constituencies were more left-wing meant that there was constant ideological conflict within the Labour party (Parkinson, 1985, 1990), which meant that its hold on the city was slight. This hold was broken in the 1973 elections by the Liberal party, who emerged unexpectedly by taking seats from Labour and the Conservatives. They managed to do this because Labour councillors were seen as being too old and out of touch with their constituents as well as presiding over the inner city clearance that had broken up communities and sent the population into high rise flats in peripheral estates (Parkinson, 1985, 1990). The Liberals made housing their platform in order to retain votes and the 1974 Housing Act gave them the funds to start on their programme. This was to prove to be an important development for the Vauxhall area.

From the middle of the 1960s Vauxhall had been subjected to continual upheaval because of the building of the Kingsway road tunnel and the Liverpool ring road and by 1979 the Liverpool City Council, which was still Liberal, had solidified this upheaval into a planned programme of tenement demolition. The decline of the docks, dock related activities and population meant that there was no need for high density housing in the inner city and so the plan was to demolish the tenements and move the people into peripheral municipal estates. However, although the council was uprooting long-standing communities, it made no attempt to retain those communities on the new estates. People were moved piecemeal, very often many miles away from family, friends and neighbours, which led to the collapse of many supportive social networks.

One group of Vauxhall residents who were centred around the *Our Lady of Eldon Street* church did not want to see the destruction of their community and also wanted to remain in the same area. This initially proved to be a problem as the City Council found it difficult to believe that people would rather stay in the tenement blocks than move to a three bedroomed house with a garden and so demanded proof that this was a community decision rather than the wishes of a few residents. In order to demonstrate this 'proof' a group of residents formed an action team that organised a survey

of their 'church' community of Portland Gardens, Eldon Street, Burlington Street and Lime Kiln Lane and they found that approximately 80% of the residents wanted to stay. Armed with this they persuaded the city council to allow them to take control of their own lives by forming a housing co-operative with the council agreeing to provide land, support and to seek funding for them.

The group identified the worst housing as being in Portland Gardens and came up with a plan whereby those residents that wanted to leave would be re-housed by the council elsewhere and then those residents in Portland Gardens would move into the vacant properties. Portland Gardens would then be demolished and replaced by new build housing that would be paid for by the council. When the houses were built they would then be bought from the council and managed by the Portland Gardens Housing Co-operative and the original residents would be moved back in. This rather complex financial process was decided upon because in doing it this way they would saving 15% of the cost of rebuilding as Value Added Tax was not levied on council housing. When the original residents moved back into Portland Gardens this would once again create vacancies, and people in the next identified area for renewal could move in to these and the same process would then start over on their old properties. This was planned as a rolling programme that would take many years until all the housing was eventually renewed and managed by the Housing Co-operative.

Around this time, the economic situation of the area worsened when Tate and Lyle closed their sugar refinery with the loss of 1,700 jobs. Many of those made redundant came from the Vauxhall area and they felt that the city council had not made a strong enough effort to keep the jobs. In addition to the economic problems, the political situation in Liverpool had also worsened. The first reason was that the Liberal Party had engineered artificially low public spending by spending the City Council's reserves rather than raise local taxes. This had an unexpected cost when the Conservative Party took over Central Government in 1979 and reformed the grant system. The new system allocated money on the basis of historical spending patterns - and Liverpool's were apparently low. This meant that the grant to Liverpool was cut, and continued to be cut each year. The unfairness of the grant system was compounded because Liverpool was also penalised for overspending Central Government's assessment of need figure. This was based on population figures and Liverpool's population had fallen dramatically and so the Government's assessment was that it would need to spend less and so reduced its grant accordingly. However, the Authority argued that the remaining population was socially vulnerable and so more expensive to provide for and additional to that, historical social commitments made for a large population cannot be suddenly terminated (Parkinson, 1985). What all of this meant was that by the time the Labour Party took over the city in May 1983 the city had lost £270 million pounds in grant aid (Parkinson, 1985) which had exacerbated already entrenched problems.

The second reason for the worsening political situation was that during the latter half of the 1970s and early 1980s the Labour Party in the city became increasingly left-wing. This was because the industrial restructuring that had impacted so heavily on the city had left workers frustrated and cynical (Meegan, 1989a) and more open to 'confrontational politics or at least to those that 'put the interests of Merseyside and Merseysiders first'' (Meegan, 1989b p93). This enabled the extreme left-wing, the so-called Militant Tendency, to come to the forefront of local politics. Although as a group it remained a minority within the council, it wielded enormous power as it not only had the broad support of the rest of the Labour party but also a large number of the council's employees including the Direct Labour Organisation who made repairs to the city's municipal housing (Parkinson, 1985, 1990).

When Labour came to power in the city in 1983 one of their first political statements was that they would build 1,000 municipal houses within 12 months. They fulfilled this goal within three months. In part this was achieved by retaining houses being built for co-operatives across the city including the Portland Gardens scheme. Although many of the communities who were losing their co-operative housing through this tactic opposed the City Council's plans they had little impact on events. Additionally, the community based around the *Our Lady of Eldon Street* church - now known as the Eldonians - were told that the rolling programme was ending, the tenements were to be demolished and their occupants dispersed.

The Eldonian community leaders refused to accept this proposal and they went to the ward Labour Party - the local representatives - to register their disapproval of the policy. They expected the ward Labour Party to be willing to present their views to the City Council. Instead they were allegedly intimidated and ignored in meetings by a ward Labour Party that was dominated by a number of activists who lived outside the area and who were dictating local policy. Their reaction was to rally the local community into deposing their local representatives and one night 120 members of the community went and joined the ward Labour party. At the next meeting these members were allowed to vote and they voted for the existing committee of activists to be disbanded and for a new committee that truly represented the community drawn from its members. This new committee then informed the City Council that the current housing policy was not supported in their ward and so should be reversed. The City Council retaliated by then refusing to acknowledge that they had a case until they had taken over the constituency that is a number of wards. Reluctantly the Eldonians agreed, however, they also started compiling a dossier on the activities of deputy leader and the policy leader of the City Council.

The City Council allegedly continued to use obstructionist tactics on the Eldonians in order to try and disband the co-operative. For example, in 1985, when the Eldonians, with the backing of English Estates, applied for planning permission to have the Tate and Lyle site changed from industrial usage to residential usage in order to build 70 homes, it was refused on the grounds that there were noxious smells from the nearby offal works. However, the Council's own plans for the site called for the building of 125 municipal dwellings. The eventual public enquiry found in the Eldonians favour.

Throughout this period, the city was attempting to gain extra funding from Central Government to replace the lost grant revenue and initially there was some sympathy within Whitehall to the city's plight. However, this was soon lost when Militant used the state of the city's finances to manipulate a series of confrontations with Central Government by setting an illegal budget and making housing a central issue.

The effect of all of this was that Central Government was predisposed to be very sympathetic to the Eldonians when they approached it. It saw a way of taking the housing war back to the Council by making grants available to the Eldonians, backing their redevelopment plan for the area, extending the boundary of the Merseyside Development Corporation - initiated to reclaim derelict industrial and dock land on both sides of the River Mersey - to include the community and so by-pass the need to apply to the council for planning permission for the redevelopment, and by allowing the resurrection of their housing association - which now manages around 500 properties.

The relationship between the Eldonians and Liverpool City Council is very different today to what it was in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is because the Militant Tendency became an outlawed organisation within the national Labour party as it was causing immense damage to the national electoral chances of the Labour party. In 1986 the national Labour leadership suspended

the Liverpool Labour party and then expelled those who were the leading lights of the Militant Tendency for their membership of the organisation. 1987 hammered another nail into the Militant Tendency's coffin when the House of Lords finally confirmed the view of the district auditor that the Labour councillors had not protected the fiscal interests of the city and disqualified 47 of them from office. The 47 councillors were replaced by other more moderate Labour councillors who attempted to maintain the Militant Tendency's policies whilst repairing relationships with the local citizens, the private and voluntary sectors and Central Government (Crick, 1986; Parkinson, 1990). Since then Liverpool has seen every conceivable hue of Labour administration - however, control never fell back into the hands of the extreme left-wing faction - and more recently (1998) a switch to the Liberal Democrats. The one thing that all of these varying councils acknowledged was that divisive and confrontational politics were not the way forward. Instead, partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors and the local communities has been held as the key to local social and economic regeneration.

Where is the sustainable urban development?

Well, the tempering process that the Eldonian residents had gone through in their battles with the City Council and their success in the redevelopment of their housing meant that they strongly identified with their community. This community is now called the Eldonian Village with strongly demarcated boundaries that separate it from the surrounding environs. As the community has long advocated the need to view housing, jobs and social welfare as 'part of the same package', they have extended beyond their initial brief to save their housing by forming the Community Based Housing Association into employment, training, project development and fund-raising activities through the formation of the Development Trust and social welfare, community events and activity groups via the formation of the Community Trust.

Community Based Economic Development

One of the strategies that the Development Trust has embraced is the concept of community based economic development or CBED. CBED is a non-government organisational (NGO) strategy that was originally adopted by local Labour authorities as an alternative to the free market policies advocated during the 1980s (Parkinson, 1989; and Nevin and Shiner, 1995a, 1995b). CBED usually takes the form of community businesses, which Hayton (1996, p4) defined as meaning a trading organisation with certain characteristics:

- it creates jobs for residents of a particular area usually having high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. The area of benefit is defined in the articles and memorandum of association of the business;
- these jobs are eventually to be self-financing (or sustainable) in so far as costs are covered by trading income;
- ownership and control of the business is vested in those living within the area of benefit; and
- trading profits are to be either reinvested or used in ways which benefit local residents.

The first Eldonian community business was the Eldonian Garden Market Centre. Unfortunately, although the capital was available to initiate the project and to take it through its first year, business

acumen was lacking and no thought had been given to future revenue. The people involved had assumed that if the community owned the business they would retain all of the profits to be used for the community's benefit. What they had failed to realise was that they also would have to accept all of the risks and the losses. Enthusiasm took the place of experience and within a very short space of time the business was in trouble. Fortuitously, a businessman who was looking for an outlet in Liverpool became interested and took over 75% of the business and retained the existing employees who were local. The Eldonians learned their lesson from this and since then every other business has been in partnership with other organisations in order to both spread the risks and to bring in outside experience in areas where they have little or none.

Their next scheme was a purpose built residential care home with 30 bed spaces for frail elderly people in the area that required some degree of nursing. This was undertaken in partnership with a larger association with experience in this field who also supplied a skilled manager. The home was planned in order to enable the residents to stay in the area close to family and friends. Although this scheme was established by and is run by the Community Trust this is a community business in the fullest sense. It was established for the benefit of local people, between 40 to 50 local people are employed by the home as auxiliary staff and it is also used as a training centre for local people who want to enter this form of employment.

Another scheme is the Eldon Woods Day Nursery, which was built in conjunction with the Littlewoods Pools Organisation, and the building is jointly owned. The Eldonians manage the building and provide all of the staff other than the manager. The nursery also offers training in childcare. Of the 50 childcare places, 20 are taken by employees of the Littlewoods Pools Organisation, 20 are taken by civil service staff and 10 are taken by local residents at a subsidised rate. Apparently the demand for childcare places is so high that plans are being considered to either extend the existing nursery or to build a second.

The only business that is completely owned by the community is the Village Hall, which acts as a focal point for the social activities of the Eldonian Village and is also run as a conference centre. This is proving to be a popular venue because it is very near to the canal and the Eldonians have capitalised on their heritage by ensuring that this particular canal reach is very attractive in the hope that it encourages people who are holidaying on barges to moor and use the local facilities.

In addition to the community businesses and the paid administrative employees, the Community Based Housing Association has other employees. These include two gardeners, who ensure that the Village flora is kept under control, and four security staff that monitor the condition of elderly residents, keep ebullient teenagers in check and who report suspicious incidents to the police. This has ensured that the Village has one of the lowest crime rates in the area. The Eldonians are continually looking for new opportunities to enhance their community and this combined with their proven track record makes it relatively easy for them to both raise funding and to find private sector partners - avenues that are not necessarily open to other communities.

Conclusions

The Eldonians are now considered by many - including Liverpool City Council - to be a 'best practice' model of successful sustainable urban development. They made their housing a 'people's problem' and used this as a springboard to foster the development of community businesses and social networks that exemplify the protective environmental objectives of Barton (2000).

Many of the Eldonian community are in paid employment or in training with one of the many community businesses or private enterprises that have been encouraged to set up in the area. This minimises both the need for travel and for private transportation as jobs are available locally and public transport into the city centre is reasonably frequent. Their development of the local environment has attempted to promote the distinctiveness of the local heritage and the security force has reduced the fear of violence within the community, especially the elderly residents – although this, and the many Housing Association rules has led to some observers likening the Village to a ‘mini-police state’, albeit one approved of by the residents. Nevertheless, regardless of this aspect it cannot be denied that the Eldonians’ control of their housing and businesses has increased the user and citizen control over key areas of their lives and this has in turn facilitated many social networks within the community. However, as Elliott (1994) noted in her assessment of successful sustainable urban development in Third World countries, this building and organisation of their community from one on the brink of destruction into one that is vibrant, forward looking and confident was not completely reliant on the talents of the residents - although their tenacity and their vision were the driving force. Not only did outsiders in the shape of the local council and Central Government and external funding have a significant role to play in this transformation, but this process was also a fairly lengthy one that included many setbacks as well as the triumphs. Within urban policy initiatives this time factor is often grossly underestimated as it is assumed that the ‘community’ already exists when in many cases it patently does not and it may, in fact, need careful nurturing over what can be a period of years to strengthen it to the point where it can not only manage its own affairs but also accept that if an initiative is not an immediate success it does not have to derail the whole process of sustainable urban development. After all, Rome, and the Eldonian Village, were not built in a day.

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