



White Paper

# How do we build healthier, happier places?

Expert insights on successful urban regeneration



# Why we do this

“Successful urban regeneration will improve not just the area but the outcomes for those living in it.”

London School of Economics

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# Introduction

Urban regeneration is not about big, shiny buildings. It's about creating spaces that have a positive effect on the wellbeing of the people who live in the communities where regeneration takes place. It's about building liveable towns and cities that are green, climate resilient and inclusive. It's about developing places that make people happier and healthier.

In this white paper, we gather the insights of people from across the regeneration stakeholder spectrum and explore how the physical regeneration of a space can lead to the personal and community regeneration that creates happier, healthier and more resilient towns and cities. Views were gathered at the 2024 UK Real Estate Investment & Infrastructure Forum (UKREiIF) in Leeds, at a panel event which included:



**Angela Barnicle**  
Chief Officer, Asset Management & Regeneration, Leeds City Council



**Amy Butterworth**  
CEO, Make it Happen



**Phil Marsden**  
Managing Director, Muse Places North West



**Cathy Palmer**  
Director of Regeneration Delivery, Walker Sime



**Paul Richards**  
Director of Development & Regeneration, Stockport Council



# What are healthy places and why do they matter?

“The lower one’s social and economic status, the poorer one’s health is likely to be.”

The Marmot Review

Urban regeneration has a patchy record in the UK. It’s not hard to identify the successes: London’s Docklands, Salford Quays, Manchester City Centre in the aftermath of the IRA bomb. Yet these are the high watermarks. Often, regeneration has failed to deliver the outcomes expected of it.

The Single Regeneration Budget, for example, was an initiative which ran from 1994 to 2002 and spanned two very different governments—of John Major and Tony Blair. Its aims, as described by this LSE article<sup>1</sup>, were to “tackle unemployment, crime, and poor health and education outcomes in some of Britain’s most deprived areas.”

The LSE’s Professor Henry Overman studied the outcomes of the initiative and found that success was questionable at best. Some jobs were created, but there was no indication that the jobs went to locals in the areas where regeneration took place. Nor was it certain that the opportunities created were not simply displaced from elsewhere.

Professor Overman found the problem lay not only in the execution of the plan, but in its ambitions. He suggested regeneration should aim for a very different outcome:

**“Instead of viewing these projects as engines for economic growth, physical regeneration of public spaces and buildings, and new cultural assets, we could look at their potential to yield valuable quality of life improvements for residents.”**



Credit: Ion Developments/Infinite 3D



# Fair society, healthy lives

Professor Overman's view was reflected in 2010's Marmot Review<sup>2</sup>. Led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Director of the UCL Institute of Health Equity, the study made some notable connections between life expectancy, quality of life and living conditions.

The review found that people in the poorest neighbourhoods in England could expect to die seven years earlier than those in the wealthiest neighbourhoods and spend more of their lives living with disabilities.

As the report put it: "The lower one's social and economic status, the poorer one's health is likely to be."

The review suggested a framework for action built on two policy goals...

To create an enabling society that maximizes individual and community potential

To ensure social justice, health and sustainability are at the heart of all policies

The goals were supported by six policy objectives which included "giving every child the best start in life" and "enabling [everyone] to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives."

There was widespread acceptance of the report's findings. Yet a follow up review in 2020<sup>3</sup> found that the situation had worsened, with poorer life expectancy in the most deprived areas, an increase in child poverty, a rise in homelessness, and mortality rates increasing for 40-49 year olds.



“A healthy place is one that is designed, developed or improved in ways that promote physical, mental and social health and wellbeing in an equitable way.

This includes access to green space, walking and cycling, public transport, affordable quality housing, secure quality employment, community infrastructure and opportunities for social interaction.”

Quality of Life Foundation + PRIOR PRNRS, 2024  
Creating Health and Wellbeing (qolf.org)

Credit: Plainit ie/Peel L&P



# Placing a value on regeneration

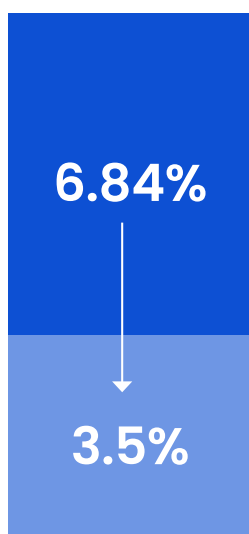
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Urban regeneration can make a difference. According to the World Economic Forum<sup>4</sup>, it can create social value across a variety of indicators and metrics.

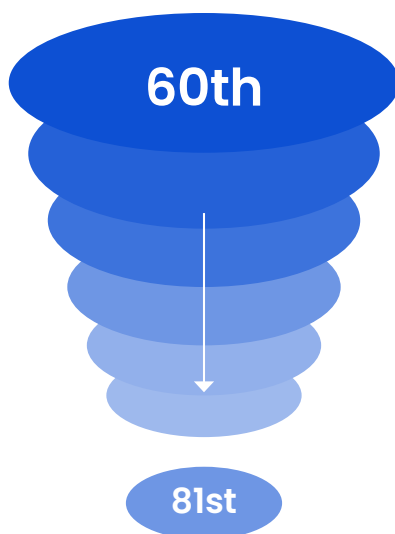
A study<sup>5</sup> by Cambridge Economic Associates and others for the UK Government estimated a cautious but “entirely plausible” cost benefit ratio of 2.3 against £9.6bn of annual public sector expenditure across homes, communities, worklessness, skills and more.

And in 2013, Coventry became the first ‘Marmot City’<sup>6</sup>, using the findings of the Marmot Review to inform its approach to fighting inequality in the city.

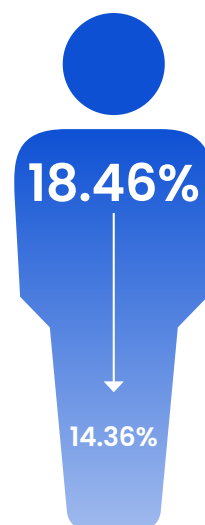
As the Guardian<sup>7</sup> noted in an article from early 2024, Coventry’s health outcomes have improved. Inequalities have reduced. In addition:



The number of young people not in employment, education or training has reduced from 6.84% to 3.5%, compared with a national drop of less than one percentage point.



In 2015, Coventry was ranked the 60th most deprived local authority, and this dropped to 81st in 2019.



The proportion of people considered the most deprived in the local authority reduced from 18.46% in 2015 to 14.36% in 2019, with this drop in percentage points being higher than the trend seen elsewhere across the country.



# Developing places that make people happier and healthier

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Urban regeneration is not about big, shiny buildings. It's about creating spaces that have a positive effect on the wellbeing of the people who live in the communities where regeneration takes place. It's about building liveable towns and cities that are green, climate resilient and inclusive. It's about developing places that make people happier and healthier.

For that to happen, and as the WEF notes and the Coventry case demonstrates, there needs to be clear understanding of the perspectives of all stakeholders. So in mid-2024, Walker Sime brought together stakeholders from local authorities, developers, construction consultancies and communities for a panel event at UKREiiF in Leeds.

Together, the stakeholders explored their perspectives on what makes a regeneration project deliver on its objectives. These were the key observations from the event.



# Perspectives from UKREiiF: How to deliver practical, successful regeneration

## 1 Creating sustainable cities has a direct impact on household budgets

Between the Leeds ward with the highest life expectancy and that with the least there's an enormous 12-year difference. Lots of elements play into this grim statistic, but housing quality is a major factor.

Anyone earning the average wage in Leeds can only access two forms of tenure for housing: social rent or shared ownership. That's one of the reasons Leeds is aiming to become a sustainable city where residents don't need a car, and where genuinely sustainable housing cuts energy bills to below £100 pm.

Because when the cost burdens of energy and car ownership are removed (or dramatically reduced), rent and everything else becomes more affordable.

## 2 Legacy housing can be brought up to standard

**Angela Barnicle, Chief Officer, Asset Management & Regeneration, Leeds City Council**

Leeds is (in)famous for its back-to-backs, terraced housing where properties adjoin on three sides. They were built during the Industrial Revolution as quickly and cheaply as possible.

Construction was often substandard even for the time which explains why, when Leeds CC checked the internal wall temperature of one particular home, they found it was just 8°C. Even though it was a small house, the family living in it couldn't afford to heat it because so much was lost. Leeds CC retrofitted some of its back-to-backs with wraparound insulation, a move which helped raise the internal wall temperatures to 18°C.

**"It's made every area of the home habitable again and meant the family wasn't sat around a single kitchen table where everybody ate, slept, and did homework."**



# Perspectives from UKREiiF: How to deliver practical, successful regeneration

## Holistic social regeneration becomes viable through enabling development

Paul Richards, Director of Development & Regeneration, Stockport Council

“We’ve spent around 12 years on regenerating our town centre and understanding how what we do links into happy and healthy towns, improves people’s life expectancy and delivers better jobs.

“The challenge of course, is that we all know what needs doing, but the viability of doing it, particularly in the communities that need it most, is often wafer thin even at the best of times. No one would disagree with retrofitting old housing stock to create better, cheaper, more sustainable living places, but how do you do that? Where’s the flexibility in funding streams to allow us to do that? And it’s not just housing stock that’s creaking; it’s a whole range of social infrastructure. How do you do it all?

“In Stockport, we’re building 4,000 (soon to be 8,000) new homes, in the town centre. We’re using that development premium as a rising tide that lifts all boats and stitches a new community into the existing community. That’s the only way you can address some of the social infrastructure issues. It’s similar to how you might bring a heritage building back to life. You need some enabling development to allow it to happen.”



# Perspectives from UKREiiF: How to deliver practical, successful regeneration

## Offering a range of ways for a community to engage is crucial

Cathy Palmer, Director of Regeneration Delivery, Walker Sime

“Birkenhead’s Dock Branch Park regeneration is a plan to convert a disused railway line into a public space that the community can use and build a neighbourhood around it. It’s a fantastic opportunity to create a catalytic project for Birkenhead.

“Key to its success is working with the local communities. In my previous role at Wirral Council, we set up the Dock Branch Community Panel. The idea was to produce a masterplan for Birkenhead that worked for the people who lived there, something that could help bring the community with us on the journey.

“We had people living locally come in and critique the masterplan as it was evolving... and the community could be quite critical! But it was all for a positive outcome.

“Amy’s work<sup>8</sup> was pivotal in that and to helping us understand the public health issues in the area. She works with people who often struggle to access services. When we create a place like Dock Branch, it’s really important that people can engage in a range of different ways. That’s how you develop community collaboration and partnership. And that’s when you have an opportunity to really start to change outcomes.”



# Perspectives from UKREiiF: How to deliver practical, successful regeneration

## Early engagement avoids the need to 'convince' stakeholders

Phil Marsden, Managing Director, Muse Places North West

"I don't think we should ever really be trying to convince a community of something. If we've got to a place where we're having to convince, then we've got it wrong.

"We should be making sure that we're listening early enough, that we're taking everyone on the journey with us and that we're building in what the community needs.

"We'll engage with the community before we've even won a project. We've done that recently on a project we're bidding for and it completely changed our view and approach. It also showed us the really simple, practical things that we could deliver almost immediately, like security."

## Involving the community should mean being in the community

Phil Marsden, Managing Director, Muse Places North West

"Something else we're looking at doing is setting up a base in the places where we're working. So when we hold our design team meetings, we don't do it in our offices. It's an open door, but it's open in a place where the community can actually access it so everyone feels welcome.

"For that to make a difference, though, we need people within the community to engage with it. Because often, even when you offer these initiatives, not everyone wants to get involved or they think, 'They won't listen to me if I go and speak'. Having people within the community who can encourage those around them to engage is so, so powerful."



# Perspectives from UKREiiF: How to deliver practical, successful regeneration

## Leverage the power of 'community translators'

Amy Butterworth, CEO, Make it Happen

"Over the past five years we've had 400 people a week come through our doors. These are people with a raft of health conditions, primarily around social isolation and trauma. Lots of them are lonely. Lots have poor mental health. They've gone through the system but they're now out of options. Our doors are always open for them.

"We're there to be a listener for them. But we're also very good at advocating for them and making sure they have a voice in things. Regeneration is one of those things. It matters to them, but they aren't the sort of people who are likely to get involved in the conversation. So we 'translate' for them.

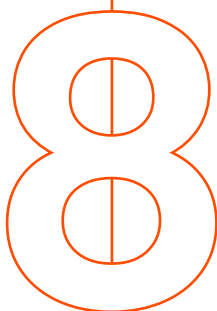
"Every Friday we hold a cookery session at our premises. At the same time, our team will have conversations with them and articulate some of the strategic conversations about regeneration.

"We're able to say, 'this is what's happening, what do you think?' And then we can take their thoughts back to the developers. So even though it may not be them who sits in front of the regeneration team, we're the trusted anchor organisation that can be their voice. It means the regeneration team gets to engage more widely. And it means the socially isolated have a voice in their regeneration."



# Perspectives from UKREiiF:

## How to deliver practical, successful regeneration



### Take a Marmot City approach

Angela Barnicle, Chief Officer, Asset Management & Regeneration, Leeds City Council

“For us, a Marmot City approach is about embedding a public health approach in everything we do – regeneration, transport, child services, everything – not just in public health.

“There are three strategies that we live and breathe by in Leeds to help embed that. The first is our inclusive growth strategy, which tells us how we’re going to make sure that our economy is going to work for all our people.

“The second is our health and wellbeing strategy – how do we make sure that everybody grows and ages well in the city?

“Ten years ago during austerity, for example, we made a really big commitment not to close our Sure Start centres. The fact we’ve kept them has meant we’ve been able to use them to deliver programmes directly in our communities. Through The Henry Programme, for example, we’ve been the only city in Europe (apart from Amsterdam) to turn the curve on childhood obesity. That’s a direct result of delivering health education to new parents through our Sure Start centres.

“The third element of our Marmot City strategy is to improve climate resilience and adaptability through our interventions.

“Right now, we’re building a new city centre park and, whilst it’s a place for people to play in and is great for physical and mental wellbeing, it’s also about creating blue and green infrastructure, which really helps with drainage.

“So the Marmot approach is about not thinking of public health in a silo. Public health runs through everything we do. And when you explain it like this, everybody says, ‘Oh, I get it. That makes sense.’”



# Perspectives from UKREiiF: How to deliver practical, successful regeneration

## Choose the right development partner

Paul Richards, Director of Development & Regeneration, Stockport Council

“We set out our vision in our briefs and define that further in our strategic documents. You then want to understand how a partner will play into that. You want to see them going above and beyond, suggesting what more we can do, and that they understand the community voice.

“My one tip would be, really drill down into what comes back in the submissions – what will your partner deliver in practice and how are they going to deliver it?”



# Why we do this

To stand proudly in front of more than our fair share of remarkable construction and infrastructure projects, and quietly think, “I was part of the team that helped make this a big success,” is a feeling that never gets old.

It’s a testament to the dedication, skill, and teamwork that define Walker Sime. We’re excited to continue this journey, creating lasting impacts and building a better future together.

## Contact

To explore regeneration opportunities with Walker Sime...

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# References

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