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A framework for regeneration: more questions than answers

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A recent consultation report from the Department of Communities and Local Government which goes by the rhetorical title of, *Transforming places; changing lives A framework for regeneration*, goes some way to laying the groundwork for proposals first set out in the Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration (SNR). The framework proclaims to set out 'an ambitious package of proposals – for consultation – that aim to shape the way that regeneration is carried out in future in England'. Yet upon reading the report's 159 pages one is left with a strange feeling of déjà vu. This is followed by a suspicion that much of what Government are suggesting is already a done deal; with many economic development officers and policy-makers already busy working on the package of proposals. I shall briefly summarise the key measures of the framework before questioning the timing of this consultation in light of the determination of regional funding allocations.

Transforming places consults on a regeneration framework which outlines how people, organisations and information can be marshalled more effectively to tackle deprivation and improve social justice by tackling the underlying economic challenges which are holding places back from reaching their potential. Measures set out in the framework; including Economic Assessments and Regional Regeneration Priorities Maps, aim to:

- improve the coordination and prioritisation of regeneration investment
- devolve power to more local levels so that programmes fit places through local and regional regeneration alignment, and
- tackle underlying economic challenges including worklessness by boosting enterprise.

Driven by the intent to achieve better value-for-money from regeneration investment, the framework sketches-out a clear emphasis on helping people to help themselves; which the report suggests will enable people to reach their full potential and prevent places from being held back economically, socially and environmentally. Referring to ‘decades of de-industrialisation and economic restructuring’ in the past tense, suggests an extremely detached understanding of the economic challenges facing many urban and rural localities the length and breadth of England. Also, the regeneration framework rather bluntly suggests that ‘regeneration is a sub-set of economic development’ in order to build a case that acute areas of deprivation can be tackled by focussing investment in areas of opportunity, including ‘employment hubs’ and other choice places.

The case is made that direct investment in deprived neighbourhoods can often be very expensive compared to the economic uplift it generates, whereas reinforcing economic opportunities in central locations provides better value and greater success. It should be applauded that Government now appears to recognise that the spatial manifestation of complex socio-economic circumstances, commonly referred to as deprived communities, cannot be resolved by parachuting in narrowly targeted area-based programmes without any cognisance of wider district, sub-regional, city-regional and regional strategies and economic trajectories. However, in recognition that there has been a narrow focus on *places of need*, Government may have turned full circle by proposing that economic regeneration focuses on *places of opportunity*.

While the report should be commended for outlining a framework that seeks ‘to extend opportunity and raise aspirations in some communities’ a crude rebranding of the trickle-down theory will not suffice. There is ample evidence available which cogently demonstrates that people in deprived neighbourhoods often suffer from a range of accessibility problems not to mention a mind-set where jobs beyond their immediate spatial terrain are not considered. Sadly lacking in the proposed framework for regeneration is any consideration of how places of need can be more adeptly connected with places of opportunity. Without a direct connection being made between places of need and opportunity, whereby connections would include a mixture of physical, social, cultural and economic relations, Government recognition that some places ‘have been slower to bring about a significant reduction in the

number of people without work, and deprivation is still intense in some areas' is unlikely to find a suitable remedy.

As briefly touched upon earlier, *Transforming places* proposes that each region should develop a Regional Regeneration Priorities Map which would identify priority locations for regeneration investment. It is proposed these will be prepared by RDAs and regional assemblies in association with regional partners and could inform a second Regional Funding Allocation (RFA) exercise which is due for completion by the end of February 2009. The publishing of *Transforming places* for consultation in July 2008 presents regions with only a small window of opportunity to formulate proposals, consult on, and secure agreement on a Regional Regeneration Priorities Map. Adding to this challenge is the fact that the Government's response to stakeholder comments on *Transforming places* are unlikely to be published before the RFA exercise deadline. Guidance on what the form and content of Regional Regeneration Priorities Maps is limited to four criteria – deprivation; strength of the sub-regional economy; economic and social characteristics of the area, and; dynamics of the area – with no demonstrable example of what a map could or should look like. It therefore appears that local, sub-regional, city-regional and regional economic development officers, policy-makers and politicians involved in formulating RFA propositions are being used as the guinea pigs. When one considers that this exercise determines indicative Government spending across each English region up to 2018, it appears an oddity to test the merit of regeneration maps before all stakeholder comments have been considered and issues ironed out. Only time will tell if and how Regional Regeneration Priorities Maps influence Government priorities and perhaps feed into a national regeneration framework.