

Opportunity knocks

Leading figures discuss the prospects for regeneration following LGR plans

Cardiff's regeneration goals

The city council is focused on delivering key projects with the Euros imminent

Overcoming opposition to deliver

Working with communities can lessen the fear of upgrading infrastructure

Rebinding the Green Book

There is still a view that the Green Book is blocking proposals that could be seen as good value for money, says **JP Spencer**. He sets out three issues that must be addressed to improve upon previous reform efforts

While appearing on a recent podcast, the interviewer described me as a 'Green Book wizard' – such is the mystique that surrounds this government guidance. No other piece of bureaucratic text seems to ignite as much passion and confusion in policy circles, particularly when it comes to regional disparities.

The Green Book serves as HM Treasury's official guide for appraising policies, projects and programmes. Its methodologies are designed to ensure public funds are allocated in a way that achieves good value for money for society. However, critics argue it favours already prosperous regions and its methodology is biased against proposals in other regions.

It is important to understand both what the Green Book is for and why it was created. It is a tension between these two points which drives criticism of the system.

The origins of the Green Book lie in the nationalised industries of the post-war era. Those industries – as well as the Treasury – needed an accurate way to assess the costs and benefits of different capital investment proposals in areas like water or electricity networks. This put cost-benefit analysis at the heart of the original Green Book.

However, the remit of the Green Book has since been extended. It now applies to all policy areas and takes a more holistic 'five case' approach to creating business cases. This is meant to look not just at cost-benefit analysis but also the strategic, economic, commercial, financial and management merits of proposals.

It has also become more complicated. Supplementary and departmental guidance documents now run to thousands of pages, forming part of a 'Green Book ecosystem' supported by an industry of consultants tasked with the development of business cases.

Despite this broadening of scope, plethora of guidance and the 'five case' approach, cost-benefit analysis remains the historic and



cultural heart of the Green Book ecosystem. Particularly as it is most amenable to modelling by consultant economists. It is seemingly often much easier to think that decision making can be boiled down to one metric than to grapple with the strategic context and objectives of different proposals.

But the Green Book is only about advice from officials to elected decision makers. The principle that 'civil servants advise while ministers decide' is essential to the functioning of our democracy. So many of the criticisms of decisions would be more accurately laid at the door of previous government ministers. But there are also some elements of the above usage of the Green Book which must change, given the importance it has for the system of advice given to ministers.

Some reading this might be feeling a sense of *deja vu*. That is because in March 2020, the then government announced a Green Book Review claiming that 'The Government would expect future investments to be better aligned with its ambitions to level up the country.'

But despite the previous review, there is still a view the Green Book is blocking proposals that could be regarded as good value for money.

I recently authored a new report, *Nation Rebalanced* for Labour Together, which sets out how we can put the country on a path

towards more broadly based prosperity, including how we need to reform the Green Book. I think the latest Green Book Review must address the following three issues if it is to improve upon previous efforts at reform.

Firstly, the Green Book system of guidance and approvals has become too long and complex. The Green Book is a single document, but also an ecosystem of further guidance and a culture that has built up around it. This leaves far too much room for interpretation or inconsistency. The 2024 review of R&D business cases found that business cases were averaging around 250 pages and taking nine months to go through approval processes. A less complex system with more streamlined approvals would save time and effort with shorter business cases designed to answer a simple question: how do we achieve good value for money?

Secondly, Green Book best practice could be updated to ensure project funding is primarily based on strategic objectives. This would mean an end to arbitrary cost-benefit ratio thresholds based on modelling, which by itself can never tell the whole story. A myth persists that a proposal must have a benefit-cost ratio of one or even two to be considered value for money. This is false. One only has to look at the successes of the Elizabeth Line or the Northumberland Line, both achieving passenger numbers way

beyond those that were forecast, to realise that projects aligned to wider strategy are inherently difficult to model and sometimes can never capture the full costs and benefits.

Thus, economic modelling must be treated with caution rather than reverence. Used appropriately, it is a powerful aid to decision making. Taken too far, it can indeed be a blocker to good policy.

Thirdly, we need greater transparency and evidence building. This should include published business cases and judgments on why decision makers believe a project to be value for money given the available information. This would be underpinned by better evaluation following projects to improve assumptions for future projects and certainty for supply chains over planned delivery to improve cost modelling. Devolution, which puts local communities in charge of where the marginal pound should go, would also help improve value for money.

Reforming the Green Book is not just about guidance, but about changing how the Government functions and how our democracy makes decisions. By reforming the culture and practice of investment appraisal processes, we can pave the way for a more equitable and prosperous nation. ■

JP Spencer is director of devolution policy at Labour Together

Devolution to drive growth

Devolution has the potential to streamline the core elements of economic growth and create an investor-friendly environment, says **Nick Walkley**. But local authorities will need to engage with private sector partners?

How do you deliver reform and results at the same time? That's the question now facing local government – and the private sector partners they'll need to make it happen. With the next phase of devolution already underway, the challenge is no longer theoretical.

The launch of the Devolution Priority Programme in February marked more than just a policy update – it signalled that the ideas set out in the December 2024 White Paper are moving from aspiration to action. Watching from 'the other side of the fence' the scale and pace of change is significant and a far cry from the stereotypes of a glacial public sector. This could be the most significant shake-up of local governance in a generation. The only question now is: who's ready?

These changes will happen while we operate in a time of profound political and economic uncertainty. However, a few weeks ago at the MIPIM event in Cannes, there was an air of cautious optimism surrounding investment in UK cities. With devolution's potential to streamline decision-making and shape planning, infrastructure and investment around regional strengths, the UK could become a more agile, investor-friendly market.

For that to happen, devolution has to be more than a shift in the governance deck chairs. It should be an opportunity to rethink how place enables growth, attracts investment and works collaboratively with the private sector.

For investors, the question now is not if devolution will unlock potential, but where the capability and capacity

exists to turn that potential into delivery – particularly as local structures evolve. Regions that can demonstrate clarity of vision, strong leadership and a readiness to act will be best positioned to attract capital and drive meaningful, place-based development.

Local authorities that actively engage with investors and understand the regional market dynamics will be better equipped to position themselves for success in a devolved framework

Looking to the regions that have already seen success, there are clear lessons to be learned. Early devolution trailblazers like Greater Manchester and Liverpool have created models that newer strategic

authorities can follow. For example, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's (GMCA) £630m funding settlement demonstrates the opportunities that await areas that embrace devolution.

GMCA's consistent growth – averaging more than 3% annually – illustrates how

strategic devolution can drive long-term economic development. Likewise, Liverpool has capitalised on devolution's opportunities, progressing longstanding projects such as Liverpool Waters, set

to become one of Europe's largest urban regeneration projects, adding thousands of homes and creating thousands of jobs.

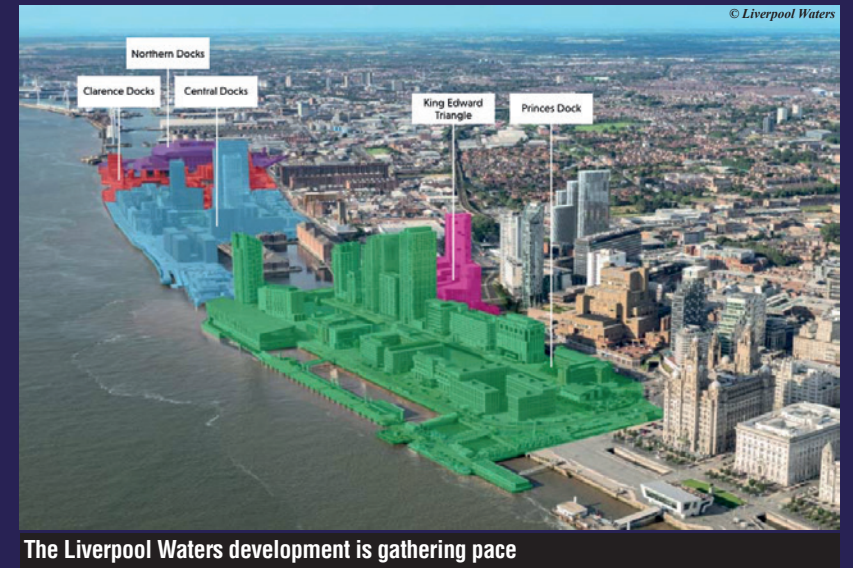
A view from MIPIM was that some of those in the Devolution Priority Programme are already well positioned with strong leadership in place to drive both devolution and growth. Southampton is a prime example of a city with a clear vision that's gaining momentum. As part of the Hampshire and Solent area, Southampton has been fast-tracked for devolution – accelerating investment opportunities like Southampton Renaissance, a multi-site, waterfront urban regeneration project set to transform the city.

With new regions entering the devolution process, local authorities must now consider a critical question: who are the key decision makers in the devolution process, and

whose voices need to be heard? The private sector has shown a clear desire to engage and align with places on growth initiatives, but this requires clear communication and a coordinated effort to identify where the private sector's input is most valuable. Local authorities that actively engage with investors and understand the regional market dynamics will be better equipped to position themselves for success in a devolved framework.

For private sector investors this is an equally new world. There will continue to be a focus on London and prime investment in the centre, but the growing investor interest in cities like Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and the North East shows that capital is actively seeking new opportunities across the UK.

While there may not be an immediate



The Liverpool Waters development is gathering pace

shift to a substantial regional presence, regional cities that offer access to growing markets and ready propositions will be attractive. As strategic authorities establish their own structures, they should also ensure they are building those propositions and investor relationships. Opportunities won't land in your lap – they will go to places that have already built relationships, have clear leadership,

strategic priorities and investable propositions.

Building commercial capacity and investment relationships may not be an obvious task on the to-do list, but if strategic authorities are to deliver on their potential, they will be crucial to future success. ■

Nick Walkley is principal and UK president of Avison Young

Opportunity knocks

David Blackman talks to leading figures about the prospects for regeneration following the proposed fundamental reorganisation of local government, and how this will affect the abilities of councils in the long run

Regeneration projects have become a hallmark of England's current wave of devolution that kicked off just over a decade ago. Two of the highest profile metro mayors, Andy Burnham and Ben Houchen, have both set up mayoral development corporations (MDCs) in their Greater Manchester and Teesside patches respectively.

Jonathan Werran, chief executive of think-tank Localis, believes it is no accident how some of the combined authority mayors have seized on regeneration.

'Essentially, the mayors have the remit for economic renewal and growth and transport. They're not running adult social care or day-to-day neighbourhood services so it's in their interest to have visible, successful regeneration, which can point to the impact they're making in dispersing government grants and getting in private investment for the benefit of their mayoral regions.'

Millie Mitchell, devolution researcher at the Institute for Government think-tank, says the inherently place-based nature of urban regeneration plays well to combined authority mayors' suite of responsibilities.

So what impact is the much more fundamental reorganisation of local government, which is now being proposed by Labour, likely to have on councils' ability to breathe fresh life into their new local communities?

The Government's local government reorganisation (LGR) programme now plans to sweep away the entire lower tier of district councils and replace them with a smaller number of bigger unitary authorities.

There is no reason why a district cannot undertake 'visionary' regeneration projects, like Stockton-on-Tees BC's replacement of a failing town centre shopping mall

with a new park, says Jackie Sadek, chair of the UK Innovation Corridor, which covers authorities and life science companies between Cambridge and London.

However it is 'always harder' working with districts on regeneration projects because they tend to be under-resourced and have less scope to think strategically, she says: 'Trying to do something with an impoverished district in terms of urban regeneration was always a tough gig.'

Catriona Riddell, strategic planning specialist at the Planning Officers' Society, agrees that larger unitary councils will be better placed to employ the wide-ranging sets of skills often required to regenerate complex brownfield sites.

'Being able to have bigger teams and access more skills internally is going to be a huge benefit,' she says.

And the greater career progression opportunities likely to be on offer in unitaries, means they will have a greater chance to recruit and retain regeneration officers by 'fending off overtures' from the private sector, says Werran.

Another advantage of reorganisation is that it brings more of the departments with an important role to play in the regeneration process, like highways, into the same councils, says Riddell: 'Having everything under one roof should facilitate a much more coordinated approach to things like regeneration.'

Sadek agrees. 'They (unitaries) have got a few more tools in the box.'

And last December's devolution White Paper has offered the prospect of new powers for mayors to establish strategic infrastructure tariffs, like that used in London to help finance the Elizabeth Line, which could help 'unlock' the 'more challenging brownfield sites requiring regeneration', says Riddell.



The Elizabeth Line is an example of how new powers mooted in the devolution White Paper can help finance wider regeneration projects

And the very process of LGR will create regeneration opportunities by freeing up council buildings and land that will become surplus to requirements as the authorities they used to belong to disappear, she says: 'There's going to be a lot of land and assets liquidated as part of this process.'

Anthony Breach, associate director of the think-tank Centre for Cities, expects the biggest impact on regeneration from LGR will be in two tier areas that contain urban district councils.

He says: 'In places like Oxford or Exeter, the scale of what

urban local government can do is limited by the district council. The shift from districts to essentially unitary government will involve a change in scale. All else being equal, we should expect that to increase the capacity and appetite of those councils to participate in urban regeneration.'

The degree of this appetite will be influenced though by the geographical footprint of the new unitary authorities, Breach adds.

A 'donut' style authority, centred on a major town or city, is more likely to see the importance of regenerating that urban area, he says: 'The final shape of the authorities we get will determine of the appetite for urban regeneration among the new structures.'

A potential flashpoint for regeneration emerging from the latest wave of LGR could be between urban focused unitary authorities and mayors with predominantly rural support, who will have less interest in growing the towns and cities within their combined authorities, says Breach.

'You're going to have rural/urban squabbling over how the pie is cut rather than thinking about how you grow the pie for the local economy as a whole,' he says, adding that such potential tensions enhance the case for the single tier reorganisation matching local economic geographies previously championed by his centre.

Any reorganisation will bring teething troubles though, says David Bainbridge, a partner at property consultancy Savills: 'There will inevitably be a transitional period where you're integrating. Whether it's IT systems, HR, processes and policies or just the culture of different organisations, in the short term there might be pain.'

And the fledgeling unitaries will need to gear themselves up to seize the potential regeneration opportunities that reorganisation offers, says Riddell: 'One of my concerns is those local authorities that are going through the LGR process are not using it as a way of resetting how they do things.'

'This is a really big opportunity to stop and think about what a good planning department would look like and what are the skills that they would need to have.'

But the relatively fast track nature of the proposed LGR timetable should offer encouragement to the private sector, Sadek says: 'If developers are smart, they'd be sitting on their hands, waiting for these new unitaries to pop up and then submit their applications.'

Riddell agrees that the prospects for regeneration following LGR are good. 'It will take time to bed down but there's huge potential.'

How local authorities can lead a high-rise revolution

Paul Young looks at how local authorities and housing associations can lead the way in developing competence and compliance in building safety

The connotations surrounding the term building safety can be tricky. In a post-Grenfell world, there is sadness and caution but since the introduction of the Building Safety Act 2022, which came into existence as a direct response to the tragedy, it is also marred with uncertainty for social landlords.

The act now holds High Risk Building (HRB) owners responsible for the safety of their buildings, with an Accountable Person maintaining its safety throughout its life. A stringent three-stage gateway process was also introduced, and local authorities and housing associations are expected to always be competent and compliant with an Act which holds a magnitude of importance for their resident's safety.

Additional uncertainties then arise when councils are continuously under scrutiny and pressure to decarbonise their housing stock, and the plethora of work required to bring buildings up to safe and sustainable standards can feel overwhelming.

But this just presents a unique window of opportunity to address two issues simultaneously.

We firmly believe bringing buildings up to the best safety standards should only be the start of your high-rise revolution.

If you are committed to deploying the best building safety standards then doing so in conjunction with decarbonisation measures makes the most practical, financial and long-term sense. This ensures your properties and tenants are only subject to inconvenience once and there is funding available to support these efforts which will keep costs down.

We have mapped out our own three stage gateway at Equans to unlocking warmer, safer, more affordable and sustainable homes.

Compliance

In response to the Building Safety Act, Equans partnered with Build UK members to develop an Awareness Course for built environment professionals. We saw a unique opportunity to develop something that was bigger than just keeping 'in-house' and centred on sharing best practices across the industry.

This was officially launched through the CIOB (Chartered Institute of Building) in November 2023 and offers a BSA Awareness eLearning course via the CIOB Academy.

The 90-minute online course is structured around four key areas, including an introduction to the Building Safety Act 2022, Building Safety Act legislation, roles and scope, and the 'golden thread'.

From replacing fire doors and installing



sprinklers, to a full tower block transformation, our accredited expert teams will create a bespoke safety solution that is not only fully compliant with the Building Safety Act but will integrate with your wider asset management and retrofit plans.

Funding

Many of the country's high-rise buildings are inefficient and need deep retrofit measures to support the UK's net zero agenda.

Schemes like the Warm Homes: Social Housing Fund exist to support these efforts and companies like Equans can develop net zero roadmaps, pulling together and submitting relevant funding applications, so plans can progress for improving building safety, while making homes warmer and more affordable.

Decarbonisation

Once the building safety plans are finalised and the sustainability funding is received, you can then drive forward with not only implementing vital building safety work but incorporating key retrofit measures, such as air source heat

pumps, solar PV installation, new windows and doors or loft and cavity wall insulation, which will support with your wider decarbonisation and net zero plans.

By tackling two of the greatest challenges head on and committing to developing competence and compliance in building safety, local authorities and housing associations can

lead by example. Tenants will not only feel safer and more comfortable in their own homes, but they will be more affordable to heat, combatting fuel poverty and all the while driving down carbon emissions. ■

Paul Young is head of operational excellence at Equans UK & Ireland

COMMENT

Neil Cox
Interim Head of Commercial – Asset Management at Birmingham City Council

Approximately 100 colleagues at Birmingham City Council undertook Equans' CIOB course and were really pleased with the how the course helped to develop their knowledge and understanding of the Building Safety Act.

Key to this was the course providing increased awareness as to how the Building Safety Act would influence and change activities the council carries out to keep its residents well informed and safe in their home.

Thank you to Equans and the CIOB for their collaboration and relentless pursuit of safety excellence across the Maintenance and Construction sectors.

For further information on the Building Safety Act and Equans CIOB bespoke course, visit <https://www.ciobacademy.org/product/building-safety-act-awareness/>



The Principality Stadium in Cardiff, set to see Euros action in 2028

Cardiff's regeneration goals

As Cardiff prepares to host games at football's 2028 Euros, the city council is focused on delivering key projects to welcome guests to the city. Leader Huw Thomas tells Heather Jameson about the plans

For Cardiff, 2028 is set to be a big year as the city is set to host matches at the finals of the 2028 UEFA European Championships. 'We expect the eyes of the world to be on here,' council leader Huw Thomas explains.

The capital of Wales is already home to the Principality Stadium, and the council is working on a series of other regeneration projects that are set to go live before the visitors flood in.

Even without the event, Cardiff is already booming, with a rapidly growing population and a GVA to match. But the leader is clear: 'What's important to me is that growth is grounded for a purpose.'

The council ethos is, he says, rooted in the principles of becoming a 'stronger, fairer, greener' city, creating growth that works for residents as well as the economy. For him, it is about providing a good education with better access to jobs, that is conscious of the climate emergency, and that creates a place where people want to live and spend their leisure time.

'It's not just growth for growth's sake,' he explains. 'It's inclusive.'

In terms of regeneration projects, Thomas says the council has a track record of delivery, with the first phase of work around Cardiff Central station already complete. Now a

£140m redevelopment of the south station opens further opportunities. The next phase is underway to create a mixed-use innovation district, with residential, commercial and leisure facilities, with a pedestrian footbridge to connect with the Grangetown area, linking it back to the city centre.

Work is also underway on a Cardiff Crossrail project, funded by £50m levelling up fund money – the biggest levelling up fund award in the UK – match funded by the Welsh Government.

The leader explains: 'That was always the intent, going back 30 years to the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation (CBDC), to link your city centre with your Cardiff Bay.'

But the CBDC wound up early and it never happened, until now. 'Through a number of council-led initiatives, we are making that connection.'

'It opens up those opportunities then for some of the disadvantages suburbs... making connections down to the bay.'

There are also plans for a new arena, on the cusp of a financial deal as *The MJ* visits, in what was a car park for the council's County Hall headquarters. It is, the leader says, 'a 16,500 capacity arena that will bring £100m extra into the economy annually, and a million-plus visitors'.

Thomas explains: 'Cardiff makes headlines in terms of its major events at the Principality Stadium. This smooths the visitor levels coming into the city and fills a missing gap in the event hosting jigsaw. We expect there to be a further cycle of private led investment in hospitality and hotels as the arena gets built.'

'[The arena is] a fully local government-led initiative, some of our own money going into it but borrowing secured against a 45-year lease. The operators will generate a surplus to the council. You're talking about, in effect, a quarter of a billion-pound private sector investment into the city.'

One of the key lessons of the Cardiff Bay development of 20-30 years ago, Thomas says, is not to exclude the local community. 'There were expectations made about how the old Bute Town, as it was, would benefit from Cardiff Bay redevelopment. That's not been achieved, but the council aims to make the arena somewhere residents of Bute Town can go to, but also work in and around.'

'In the construction phases, there's opportunities for young people... There's social value conditions.'

The council is working with local employers and schools to bring apprenticeships in front of disadvantaged children. Since his party took control of the council in 2012, Thomas says the level of young people who are not in education, employment, or training has dropped from 10% to about 1.5%.

Cardiff has also worked on its housing supply to meet the rising demand and suspended its right to buy programme in 2017, giving the council certainty of rental incomes when it was borrowing to build, and building on greenfield sites.

Thomas says: 'We had to rebuild capacity within the council to rebuild council housing.'

A housing partnership with Wates delivered social housing and properties or market sale, with profits reinvested. 'We are now pushing 1,500 council houses built over the course of that programme and... we are in the final stage of completing the procurement of the second housing partnership, which will be 4,000 homes, the majority of which will be for social rent.'

'It's transforming communities which hadn't had much investment in them over the years'

As visitors head to Cardiff during the 2028 European Championships, there will be a lot of new infrastructure on show. But it will be the residents of the communities in need that will remain the focus of the council leader. ■

Transforming lives through interconnected regeneration

Local government regeneration can be a catalyst for local authorities to revitalise their communities, as Alun Parfitt explains

In an increasingly interconnected world, the role of local government in driving regeneration has never been more critical. The challenges faced by public sector service providers are vast, ranging from financial constraints to evolving public expectations. However, these challenges also present unique opportunities for innovation and collaboration. By leveraging the interconnected nature of the public sector, local authorities can create resilient, sustainable, and thriving communities.

Local government regeneration (LGR) is not just about improving infrastructure or services; it's about transforming communities and enhancing the quality of life for residents. The interconnectedness of today's world means that the actions of local authorities have far-reaching impacts, influencing economic stability, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. By focusing on and joining up place-based strategies, local authorities can create powerful partnerships that address unique local priorities, foster collaboration, and drive long-term positive regeneration.

The importance of the right, long-term approach to regeneration is underscored by the pressing need to adapt to changing demographics, economic conditions, and environmental challenges. As populations grow and urbanise, the demand for efficient public services, growth corridors, sustainable infrastructure, and inclusive community spaces increase. Local authorities are at the forefront of addressing these demands, making strategic decisions that shape the future of their communities.

In this context, LGR is a multifaceted endeavour that requires a holistic approach. It involves not only physical infrastructure improvements but also social, economic, and environmental initiatives that collectively enhance the wellbeing of communities. By leveraging data, technology, and partnerships, local authorities can create integrated solutions that address complex challenges and unlock new opportunities for growth and development.

Key challenges in LGR

Local authorities face significant financial pressures, with rising operational costs and the need for longer-term funding to achieve the aspiration of delivering exceptional public services. But the reality is that there is a constant challenge to just deliver existing service levels. Many public sector estates suffer from underinvestment, leading to deteriorating buildings and infrastructure. Ensuring safety, compliance, and sustainability in aging facilities is a daunting task.

Achieving ambitious net zero targets requires substantial investment and strategic planning. The built environment contributes significantly to emissions, making it imperative for local governments to adopt sustainable practices. The public sector is grappling with a shortage of skilled professionals, impacting the ability to deliver high-quality services and manage complex regeneration projects.



Shaping places, together

Effective regeneration requires collaboration across different sectors and organisations. However, varying priorities, cultures, and commitment levels can hinder seamless cooperation.

Practical recommendations for interconnected regeneration

By adopting a collaborative and forward-thinking approach, local governments can drive meaningful change and create vibrant, sustainable communities that thrive in the face of adversity.

- Here are some practical recommendations:
 - *Recognising the identity of your place.* Understanding the unique qualities and local needs of each locality is crucial. Engaging with residents, businesses, and stakeholders can provide valuable insights for informed decision-making and foster a shared vision for the community. This interconnected approach ensures that regeneration efforts are tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of the community.
 - *Utilising data-driven insights and AI*

Leveraging data-driven insights and innovative technologies can significantly enhance estate management, improve service delivery, and drive sustainability. For example, smart buildings can reduce energy costs and improve operational efficiency by using real-time monitoring and environmental controls. Additionally, integrating AI and data analytics into estate management can help identify priorities for changes and improvements, ensuring that resources are used effectively.

- *Building strong partnerships* Building strong partnerships with public and private sector organisations can unlock new funding sources, share expertise, and drive collective action towards common goals such as net zero. Collaborative efforts can lead to innovative solutions that address complex challenges and create new opportunities for growth and development. For instance, partnerships can facilitate the repurposing of underutilised assets into strategic investments that benefit the community.

Addressing skills shortages

Addressing skills and capacity shortages requires a strategic approach to workforce development. Investing in training and development programs can equip public sector employees and nurture future leaders with the necessary skills to manage regeneration projects effectively. Additionally, flexible workforce solutions can help manage workload surges and address critical skills shortages, ensuring seamless operations.

Making the most of devolution

There is little doubt that devolution will continue to gather momentum, leading to decentralised decision-making and regional autonomy. The additional powers and funding will help to unlock new strategic partnership opportunities and will provide renewed impetus for collaborative initiatives.

Strategic estate management

Effective estate transformation goes beyond cost-cutting and resource optimisation. It requires a fundamental rethink of how assets can better serve diverse communities, support public services, and enhance economic resilience. By repurposing underused or outdated properties, the public sector can create vibrant, high-performing spaces that drive better service delivery, environmental sustainability, and financial stability.

Achieving net zero

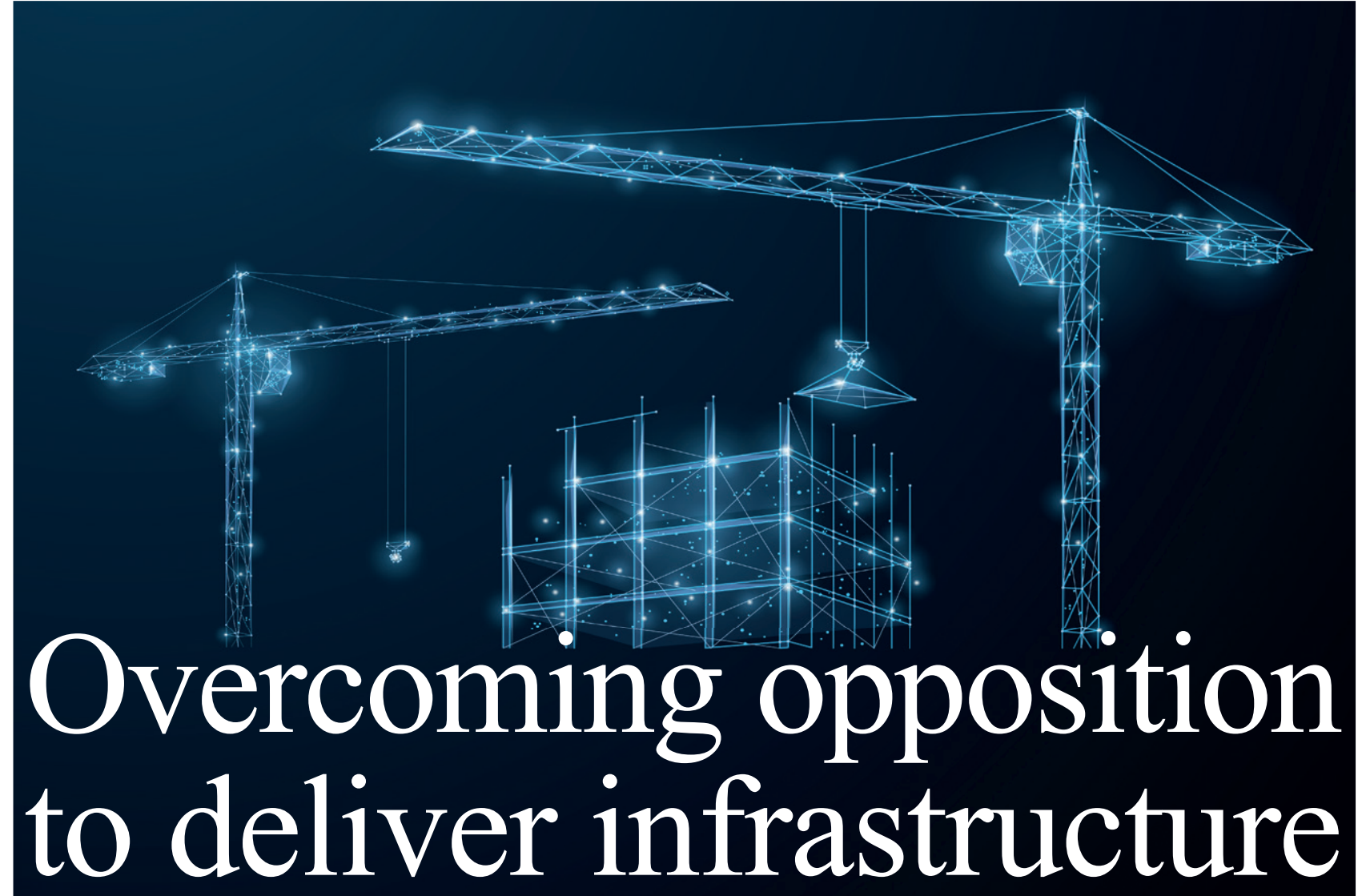
Achieving ambitious net zero targets requires substantial investment and strategic planning. Local authorities play a pivotal role in this effort, especially with large, aging estates that often fall short in their energy efficiency ratings. Implementing comprehensive decarbonisation plans and retrofitting buildings to enhance energy efficiency can significantly reduce carbon emissions and contribute to long-term sustainability.

In summary

By addressing the key challenges and implementing practical recommendations, local authorities can transform their communities into resilient, sustainable, and thriving places. The interconnectedness of today's world means that the actions of local authorities have far-reaching impacts, influencing economic stability, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. By focusing on place-based strategies and fostering collaboration, local authorities can drive long-term positive regeneration and enhance the quality of life for residents. ■



Alun Parfitt is Strategy Director of Local Government and Place at Capita



Upgrading infrastructure may be a government policy but it can face huge local opposition. Tom Osborne says working with communities cuts the fear and generates consensus

The Labour Government has prioritised renewing the country's ageing infrastructure and overcoming opposition to development, or what ministers call Nimby Britain. While the focus has largely fallen on housing, it is often infrastructure projects that are the most controversial. From pylons and railways to bridges and low-traffic neighbourhoods, infrastructure projects can spark passionate opposition in local communities.

Yet infrastructure is a vital catalyst to economic growth as well as a key enabler to new homes which support health and thriving communities. So how can we win community support for infrastructure projects?

The Government has set out plans in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to speed up decision-making around housing and infrastructure projects, including bypassing planning committees for projects that comply with a local plan. But there is a risk that these reforms are seen as running roughshod over local democracy – and if that's the case, they may have the unintended consequence of inflaming further local opposition to development.

Ministers are also hoping to overcome nimbyism through incentives, such as discounts off energy bills for those living close to new energy infrastructure projects. But for many, the incentive – a discount of up to £250 off energy bills – is simply not enough to outweigh the perceived impact of the infrastructure on their local area.

But is there another way? Can we move beyond a carrot-or-stick approach and deliver housing and infrastructure

projects that are welcomed by communities? I think there is, and it is achieved through implementing good design at the very earliest stages of a project, along with the early involvement of the local community in the design and planning process.

Creative design concepts, well-presented and clearly communicated by experts, can lead to improved stakeholder engagement. In turn, this reduces fear of the unknown and generates consensus and support, smoothing the progress towards planning approval.

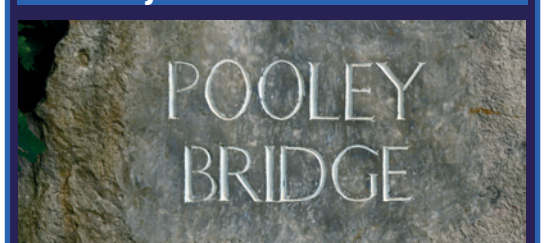
Part of the problem is that in the UK we have often asked too little of infrastructure, seeing it largely in terms of its economic benefits rather than its wider social, cultural, and environmental impact. This narrow focus on function often comes at the expense of good design and ingenuity and often treats enabling infrastructure as an afterthought. It can also place an emphasis on standardisation and the repetition of what has already been done – independent of the unique context of each site – with the aim of (theoretically) de-risking processes and reducing costs.

But this is a false economy. In fact, good design can cut costs and the earlier that quality design takes place, the better. Good design thinking at the earliest stages can also generate broader benefits – social, environmental, and economic – such as ensuring genuine carbon reduction, connecting communities, and realising a project that can contribute to a sense of place. We call this 'infrastructure that over delivers'.

Ultimately, if the Government really wants to turn nimbys into yimbys, then it must also consider softer approaches that seek to win support for development through better design, engagement, and communication, rather than forcing it upon communities. In this way, we can deliver not only the new homes and infrastructure the country desperately needs, but the infrastructure that it wants. ■

Tom Osborne is a director at Knight Architects

Case study



The village of Pooley Bridge in Cumbria lost its historic stone arch bridge across the River Eamont in the floods of 2015. The bridge, which had stood for 250 years, provided the village with a vital connection. But its loss meant much more than physical severance alone, which was relatively quickly resolved with the installation of a temporary Bailey bridge. What mattered more to the community was the sense of identity that was associated with the historic structure and how it contributed to Pooley Bridge's sense of place.

When a permanent replacement was being designed for the 18th-century bridge, it was vital the new design resonated with local people's aspirations and enhanced the community's sense of identity. In other words, its function was not only to connect but to contribute to placemaking.

We engaged with the community from the outset to understand what they had lost. Their response focused on belonging, locale, and what would make the new bridge their own, helping to restore their sense of place.

Informed by this understanding, we were able to design a unique and innovative bridge that resonated with the community's vision, helping restore their civic pride and providing extraordinary added value for the investment.

Dotting the investments and crossing the Tees...

Michelle Hambleton explains Tees Valley Securing Investment (TVSI), a programme funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and delivered on behalf of the Tees Valley mayor and combined authority

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute some of the most dynamic firms in Tees Valley, making up 99.5% of the Tees Valley business base (17,840 companies). Although small businesses play a vital role in driving our local economy forward, they often face economic and institutional barriers to growth – principal among these is the inability to access sources of finance.

We know it can be difficult for people running their own firm to get the right help to support their expansion. This is why programmes such as Tees Valley Securing Investment (TVSI) are so important. Achieving £501,000 inward investment to the Tees Valley region, we look back at how we achieved this and what lies ahead for regional investment.

20 businesses supported to date – 37 of which are led by women

The Tees Valley area has faced significant local barriers due to deindustrialisation, including job losses and a decline in manufacturing. Once heavily reliant on industries like steel and chemicals, the region bore the brunt of shifts in the global economy that led to the decline of these sectors. The area also faces government policy issues when it comes to accessing finance for SMEs including a lack of financial education through national and regional programmes.

With a low business density in comparison to many of its peers, access to suitable finance is key to uplifting the creation and growth of SMEs across the region and the resultant increase in outputs to jobs, new products to market and increased productivity.

We recognise that the finance gaps identified above create barriers for individual businesses, as well as limiting the ability to deliver regional ambitions for economic growth. TVSI has helped to address these gaps, using resources available locally, to supply businesses in our region with appropriate access to finance.

20 companies accessed public and/or private sector finance through the TVSI programme

Since launching in 2024, TVSI – open to businesses and socially trading enterprises in Darlington, Hartlepool, Redcar and

Cleveland, Middlesbrough and Stockton – has been our strategic framework for attracting private and public sector investment to the area, helping to address the long-standing barriers faced by the region's businesses in accessing money by connecting enterprises with investors and funds.

Since its inception, more than 225 businesses, including 37 led by women, have received mentoring support, with most scaling up because of improved processes, new contracts, and the introduction of new products or services.

£501,000 funding has been secured (grant funding)

Behind every statistic is a business owner who has seized an opportunity and scaled as a result.

Mentorship and networking have proven critical to the long-term success of SMEs. Studies show that businesses with mentors are 70% more likely to survive beyond five years, double the rate of non-mentored entrepreneurs. Through TVSI, our experts worked with business owners to identify areas of improvement and opportunities to set them on a pathway to securing the right funding or investment for their business.

For many of the business owners our experts have worked with, developing a clear investment strategy has been crucial. Participants have gained a stronger understanding of when and where to seek funding, as well as clarity on the types of investment best suited to each stage of their growth.

£3.1m in progress (private sector funding)

Others have highlighted how the programme helped refine their pitch decks and widen their investor networks, while also offering valuable one-to-one support. The practical guidance has not only improved their investment readiness but also boosted their personal confidence when approaching investors. This kind of support has laid a solid foundation for real, sustainable business growth across the region.

TVSI has helped SMEs navigate the complex funding landscape so that they can identify and access the relevant support. This is something SMEs often lack – the



capacity and capability to do in-house, and therefore access to finance should be aligned to wider offers of business support that are in place, both locally and nationally.

Empowering SMEs is essential to fostering long-term economic growth and local authorities must prioritise support for SMEs by streamlining funding access

and promoting skills development. By taking proactive steps, councils can drive regional economic development, ensuring that SMEs continue to innovate, grow, and create jobs. ■

Michelle Hambleton is programme manager at business support provider UMi