

Centre stage for the pioneers of local government regeneration

The sector needs to be bold and forward-thinking in its approach to delivering successful regeneration and development programmes, as Philip Emms and Tim Hills explain

Regeneration has always represented both a challenge and an opportunity for local government. The shape and focus of that challenge has changed over the years, such that local authorities now have a broad and extensive remit, ranging from promoting economic prosperity and creating business parks and growth hubs to physical regeneration, place-shaping and housing development.

With its delivery-centric focus, regeneration has emerged as one of the key collaborative areas within local government relying upon multiple stakeholders and partners, including private developers, housing associations, employers, residents, transport authorities, government agencies and departments.

Where local authorities play a leading role is in creating the narrative of a place – not just the look or feel, but its role within the community, its history and how it will benefit residents, businesses and users in the future. This responsibility increasingly extends beyond the technical infrastructure of place to grapple with the equally challenging, but arguably more rewarding, emotional engagement of all users invested in the space.

Getting this collaboration right can be the catalyst for more comprehensive, inclusive change. Perhaps the best recent example of this is King's Cross, now a destination of choice, where a new community and increased prosperity has emerged from an area in serious decline.

As they assume this lead responsibility, many authorities are reassessing their role, acting in some cases as master developer and creating their own delivery vehicles, including wholly-owned subsidiary companies and joint ventures. This extension to the local authority remit has major implications for leadership and staff capability, posing the question of whether a new type of officer is required.

Given the commercial nature of these new delivery models, an obvious initial question we are asked is whether private sector experience is necessary. However, a better starting point is to agree the level of transformational skills required. For leaders setting up joint



ventures and development companies, the need to think differently, pioneer new ways of working and challenge more traditional methods will be essential. Whether these are found within the commercial sector can then be a more informed secondary decision.

Candidates seeking senior regeneration and development roles must be able to evidence flexibility and adaptability as well as a range of more technical skills. Understanding investment finance will be high on the list; for instance, whether an authority is

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acting as lender, borrowing against the HRA or from the PWLB, is disposing of assets to fund development or delivering mixed tenure schemes, an officer needs to be conversant in all these areas. In Bolton, the council has led the way in developing a relationship with private investors that will see significant investment in delivering the

town centre regeneration master plan including new retail and leisure spaces and housing.

Partnership working is key; regeneration and development cannot be delivered alone but must be done in conjunction with multiple stakeholders, each of which will have their own objectives, restrictions, governance and finance regimes. Candidates need to demonstrate they understand the challenges each partner/stakeholder faces so that they can help them find ways to deliver their side of the partnership.

The most effective regeneration candidates will be able to turn responsibilities into opportunities – to do this, they need to understand the planning process and appreciate the value of planning as an enabler, rather than just procedure that must be followed. Planners can play a leading role in shaping a place through design and layout but also utilising S106 agreements or community infrastructure levy.

On the other hand, candidates must demonstrate they understand commercial imperatives should not distract from the needs of communities. Residents need to be central to any

regeneration scheme, partly because they will suffer the most disruption during development, but it is also they who will form the new community once the cranes have gone.

Likewise, the narrative of regeneration needs to embrace and engage with other services across the council. The impact on children and young people is crucial – these are potential adult residents of the future. The impact on older people must be considered, such as whether development caters for the

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changing needs of an aging population. Candidates need to show they have a broad appreciation of the services delivered across the whole council and how the actions taken within regeneration can impact upon the lives of residents more widely.

In order to reflect this need for additional skills and a different mindset, authorities may need to tap into a broader candidate pool than they

previously would have done. From a recruitment perspective, this can only be achieved if the necessary steps are taken to attract the right candidates.

In a competitive market where the best talent is in very high demand, local authorities must pitch their own organisations to prospective candidates and build their own narrative. Tackling some of the more negative perceptions around public sector, whether they reflect reality or not – slow-paced, obstructive, too traditional – is the starting point. These preconceptions can be combated with bold self-promotion, effective advertising borne out of a strong candidate proposition and engaging, interactive prospectuses. But there must also be substance behind this; evidence to support the council's leading role in transforming communities and a united, supported vision that runs through the whole organisation.

Bear in mind, however that all of the above is still only part of the story. In this highly competitive market, salaries need to reflect the scale of the opportunity and the council's ambition. The role of the senior regeneration officer also needs to carry the same significance as other roles, such as those carrying statutory responsibilities – with a seat at the corporate table.

Local government, with its legacy of experience and forward thinking approach to building better communities is well-placed to deliver innovative, world leading programmes of regeneration and development. As ever, it will be the pioneering leaders, who can assemble change makers around them, that will succeed fastest and best. Councils should be brave enough to look for a different approach to building inspired teams. ■

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