



begun to change, but there was certainly a time when during our select committee discussions they did seem to be opposed to almost any development outside of brownfield or the North."

While the UDG's named topics emphasise private investment, Betts clearly sees governance issues as key to the group's brief. "This does tap in very much to the whole concept of city regions as drivers for growth; how city governance can have the necessary powers to work with the private sector and deliver major schemes," he says. Yet he's a pragmatist: "If you draw a line on a map and say: 'This is the city region. Here's the election for it', then [smaller councils] will say: 'We're going to be taken over'," he argues. "But if you talk about how they can contribute to wider decision-making processes, they're happy to sit down and do it." The answer is "formal collaboration between local authorities; we may have to find some kind of voting mechanism".

The development of city regions, says Betts, is crucial to the Northern Way economic growth strategy – as, he adds, is serious investment in transport infrastructure, "but there's virtually nothing for the North in the Department for Transport's ten-year infrastructure plan." He also believes that the regional development agencies will have to give ground as city regions gain strength. "There are big question marks," he says. "You have to give the city regions powers over transport, economic and skills planning. Then what do the RDAs actually do? Do you have a regional tier second-guessing the decisions of the city regions?"

"The regions are little more than a governmental administrative convenience, which people are trying to attach economic relevance to. In city regions, you are trying to build a governmental structure onto a clear local economy. And I think that's the right way to go."

Communities secretary Ruth Kelly, Betts believes, holds similar views: "I have talked to Ruth about city regions and, as an economist herself, she's clear that a model which works from an economic footprint and develops governmental structures to fit is a logical way of doing things," he says. "I hope that initially the Government isn't too prescriptive in what it requires of city regions before giving them the additional powers which will enable them to do their job. If it is, that could kill the idea stone dead. And that would be really really, desperately sad, because this is an idea whose time has come."

Matt Ross

A seller of cities

● **Clive Betts MP**, chair, All Party Urban Development Group

This autumn, a new parliamentary group will begin studying regeneration. Its chair hopes to help private investors buy into urban redevelopments – and get Whitehall moving on city regions

Soon, the wrecking balls will crash through Clive Betts's office wall, bringing down the shabby council block in which he enjoys subsidised rent and free power. But rather than lying in front of the bulldozers, Betts will be cheering the demolition teams clearing the way for Sheffield's new retail quarter.

Sheffield's city centre retailers have had a hard time in recent years, and Betts takes some of the blame; as council leader in the early 1990s, he backed construction of the vast Meadowhall shopping centre out near the M1. "It was the right decision and I've never had second thoughts – except maybe when we had a depression, and Meadowhall was being built at the same time!" he says. "It did affect the city centre to begin with, although it's now recovered."

Since those days, Betts has gained a national perspective on urban development: an MP since 1992, he's a long-standing member of the housing, planning and local government select committee and the urban affairs sub-committee. His latest role is as chair of the new All Party Urban Development Group (UDG), a non-partisan MPs' forum investigating regeneration issues. The new forum might well have been

CV HIGHLIGHTS

- 1950** Born in Sheffield.
- 1976** Elected as a councillor in Sheffield.
- 1987** Leader of Sheffield City Council.
- 1992** Elected MP for Sheffield Attercliffe.
- 1998** Government whip (until 2001).
- 2002** Joins select committee on housing, planning and local government.
- 2006** Chosen as chair of the APUDG.

named the All Party Parliamentary Regeneration Group, but one already exists: a less formal discussion group, chaired by Stoke-on-Trent MP Joan Walley and dedicated to "promoting community-led regeneration" (*R&R*, 3 October 2003, p17). The UDG, as Betts explains, will be a different beast. "We'll look at the redevelopment of cities: how public and private sectors can work together, and governmental arrangements can best be shaped to enable the private sector to do its job. We want to have mini-inquiries; not quite as formal as a select committee, but along those lines."

The difference between the groups' backers is revealing: environmental

volunteering charity Groundwork supports Walley's forum, but Betts's researchers and secretaries will arrive courtesy of an unlikely alliance between left-leaning think-tank the Institute for Public Policy Research's Centre for Cities and commercial developers' group the British Property Foundation (BPF). "It's a good balance," says Betts. "There may be occasions when we get different advice from them, and then we'll have to make our own judgment."

The BPF has clearly played an important role in deciding the UDG's topics, all of which address the role of the private sector in regeneration: "how to streamline the structures, planning barriers and bureaucracy that hold back regeneration", for example, and "how to ensure growth plans are economically viable to avoid creating vast housing dormitories". Indeed, the question of "how to encourage institutional investment in affordable housing" could almost be an attempt to put flesh on the bones of the Conservatives' housing policy – though when I point this out, Betts can't resist taking a swing. "You've actually got to build some housing to get affordable homes, and I'm not sure the Conservatives are quite committed to that," he says. "They've