
A sense of place

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Christopher Stanwell, Head of Planning at international law firm DAC Beachcroft, considers how the demands for space in the city centre can be managed.

We have recently supported a report from think tank *Centre for Cities*, "The Race For Space" that explores the competing demands for space in our city centres and puts forward some policy recommendations. The report also serves to highlight the importance of having an up to date local plan. Generally setting out the blueprint for future growth and land use; local plans specifically acknowledge the very different requirements of individual locations. Based on an understanding of the geography of the economy, they are a crucial tool in ensuring a balanced approach for the whole community, giving space a value that goes beyond its commercial worth.

Our regional city centres have experienced a significant renaissance. Young people in particular are attracted by the jobs and the urban lifestyle on offer. Space so far hasn't been the issue it is in London, but successful cities like Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham may soon have to address some difficult planning decisions. Land use is an increasingly urgent, politically charged question.

Permitted development rights (PDR) have been part of the solution to limited space and a small way of addressing our housing shortage. It's suitability though is more appropriate for locations than others. For some it has meant useful conversion of disused accommodation; for others wider application could cause problems for those struggling to facilitate business growth.

The city centre performs three main functions; a place of production, of consumption and a place to live. It is the role of policy to find a balance for all three. PDR though means that planners lose control of how space is used.

The report is not anti PDR, but argues for a nuanced approach that allows the different dynamics of different places to be recognised. It calls for the PDR exemptions already in place, to be offered to all of the country's largest cities.

The report also brings the green belt debate to the forefront. The protection of the green belt is an important principle, but not all green belt is of similar quality. The report calls for selected changes, for strategic release especially where the boundary is a real barrier to economic growth. It is another instance of one size not fitting all and of adaptation needing to be informed by local knowledge. And a local plan is of great benefit for controlled access and protecting against further incursion.

Devolved responsibility recognises that local communities appreciate what works best for them. Successful devolution requires sophisticated collaboration, with all authorities within an urban area deliberately planning to share the demands for residential and commercial space efficiently between them, for the benefit of all. It is local knowledge that understands a sense of place.

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