

City Space Race: Balancing the need for homes and offices in our cities

A report by



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Centre for Cities report “City Space Race: Balancing the need for homes and offices in our cities” captures the essence of competing dynamics in our city centres. Solutions lie in sophisticated, collaborative responses that recognise the different patterns of use in different cities, and an appreciation that not all green belt is equal. Variable situations require flexible approaches.

We are pleased to sponsor this report, which provides rich material for discussion between all parties involved in city centre development, to encourage both economic sustainability and the additional housing that the UK requires. There are difficult conversations to be had, that will challenge strongly held positions. Our countryside is a precious commodity and it is right to uphold the principle of protection that green belt offers. In reality though the quality of green belt is inconsistent and carefully selected areas could be given over to development.

Each city has its own particular set of challenges and the most effective solutions are likely to be devised by those who have the greatest knowledge of specific conditions. The repurposing of buildings, for example, with plenty of life left in them, is a highly sustainable response, especially in some towns and cities. Devolution is also an important part of the response, when local bodies can shape the local environment and the Metro Mayors can work across involved authorities. The route ahead requires engagement and collaboration to get an appropriately nuanced response. It also requires up to date, local plans that help inform long term decision.

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A summary of City Space Race

The report sheds light on why competition for space develops, which UK cities are currently affected and which will develop the problem soon. It investigates the role that policy has played in intensifying this competition and proposes how policy makers can tackle the issue.

Competition for space is becoming more acute as the economy clusters ever more in cities, and in particular city centres. High-skilled, knowledge-based jobs are increasingly located in successful city centre and this has sparked a revival in city-centre living, particularly for young professionals.

This creates a challenge of balancing the needs for both commercial and residential property in constricted spaces and will require choices and trade-offs to make sure that the city centre economy is still able to grow. London has had to address this for many years; it is something that Manchester and Birmingham city centres, for example, will increasingly have to deal with.

Centre for Cities recommends the following:

1. *Prioritise commercial space in city centres.* Building on the exemptions that the Government has already given to selected city centres, all city centres should be offered exemptions from commercial to residential conversions under Permitted Development Rights (PDR). While PDR plays an important role in converting disused business space into residential in suburban locations, it restricts the ability of city centres to provide sufficient commercial space crucial for their future economic growth. PDR works best when there is space to replace lost offices with new stock.

To ensure city centres are able to play their role as places of production, the exemptions which already apply in some areas, such as central London, should be extended to cover all city centres. The exact definition of each city centre, or equivalent commercial district, should be determined by the cities themselves. City planners will again have control over how land is allocated to each property use. Periodic reviews need to be built into the process to ensure continued relevance.

2. *Relax planning constraints that limit the development of new homes.* Instead of looking to address the housing crisis through the shortcut of the conversion of commercial space, more new homes should be built instead. The green belt restricts the ability of cities to expand outward while conservation areas, and protected views in London, constrain their ability to build up. Densification is not always viable and is limited in practice; as is development on brownfield land.

Regulations need to be relaxed if our most successful cities are to provide the homes they need, without squeezing out space needed for commercial property. For several cities this means being open to strategically releasing green belt land. Release around transport nodes in particular will ensure the most accessible land is used.

3. *Plan at the level of the wider city economy.* Each part of a city region has a distinct economic role to play. Some are better placed to provide housing, while others better suit commercial space. Local authorities within cities should work together and co-ordinate when managing the built environment. National government can enable cities to do this more easily by devolving strategic planning powers to the remaining metro mayors and continuing to support the establishment of new combined authorities.

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