



Future Urban Living:

Empowering Cities and Citizens

In 2013 the University of Birmingham launched a policy commission on Future Urban Living to investigate the most appropriate means for accommodating changing populations and their needs in the cities of the future.

Our key messages

The Commission's view is that cities (and citizens) can and should be empowered to move the UK towards a more equitable, sustainable and resource secure future.

The process we followed

The Commission took evidence from a wide range of leading thinkers on cities from the UK and elsewhere, drawing from it ideas that might inform the way that we live, work and play in the cities of the future. It then tested these ideas with a similarly diverse set of leaders in the various fields of urban activities.

The Commission advocates the following six recommendations for change:

1. Citizens should be empowered to combine with those who govern and other city stakeholders to create a City Narrative that describes their city's history, its present context and its visions for the (far) future, via a transparently democratic process that delivers consensus across all sections of the community.
2. Citizens should be empowered to be instrumental in delivering this City Narrative, and be entrusted to do so.
3. There is a need for a system that creates inspirational local leadership, and this would best be achieved via either mayors or leadership groups elected on the basis of an ability to deliver the City Narrative.
4. Local government leaders in turn need to be empowered by the triple devices of a balanced degree of devolution of power from national government, an ability to raise finances locally and structures that enable effective cooperation with organisations beyond the city's boundaries (regional, national and global).
5. Cities need financial and business models that allow them to experiment, enable them to invest for the long-term, and facilitate the capture of economic, social and environmental returns on investment.
6. There should be a radical upgrade in the role of planners to promote creative, long-term, thinking on urban sustainability and resilience, and to enable more organic growth within that strategic framework. In this role planners should act as integrators of urban practitioners and other urban stakeholders.

Policy implications



Policy guidance needs to focus on a combination of what we collectively want of our cities and what needs to happen in our cities for them to deliver societal and environmental wellbeing – to make them ‘liveable’ both now and far into the future.

We should be explicit about the intended benefits of policies (ie, the desired policy outcomes) and establish the local and national conditions required for these benefits to be realised in that particular urban context, one essential contextual feature being the citizens that live, work and play there.

Active participation in the conception, planning, designing and operating (or use) of a city is vital if the city is to be a success. Is our current system of local democracy a help or a hindrance in this regard? Evidence to the Commission suggests a better alternative: that citizens, and those governing them, develop collectively, a ‘City Narrative’ for their place in its own unique context. Election of a leader or leadership group should be on the basis of who is best able to deliver this Narrative in collaboration with the citizens and other urban stakeholders – a move that would effectively turn the current process upside down. This initiative would take the form of a collection of city

partnerships – or forums – bringing together community, academic and business interests, facilitated by city officers acting independently of political parties, thus leading to greater stability and a situation more attractive to investors. This recast vision of democracy lies in all citizens being able to contribute to, and vote on elements of, the Narrative.

A strong City Narrative provides evidence of a city’s current place in the world, welcomes alternative analyses of how the city came to be where it is, and anticipates how the potential embedded in the city can deliver health, wealth, and happiness to its citizens in the future, while ensuring broad alignment with the effective functioning of the UK’s system of cities. Narratives, therefore, should be sufficiently flexible to allow for modification with time and changing circumstances, and should be place-based in terms of policy, governance and participation. Planners should play a central role in synthesising this local, context-aware (bottom-up) thinking

with national and regional (top-down) ‘masterplanning’ guidance, legislation and regulation.

Planners need to act as integrators drawing in community involvement as well as the full range of urban practitioners to collaborate in creating the City Narrative. To do this effectively, city planning departments will need improved skills, processes and capacity, and the multi-disciplinary creative talent once prevalent in city planning departments will need to be attracted back.

Giving the community ownership and responsibility, in partnership with city leaders, is the basis of the concept of a ‘self-made city’. Crucially, trust needs to be built up between the community, politicians and local administrations if this is to happen.

Governance implications

Exceptional leadership, either by an individual or by a group of individuals, is required to drive change within a city or urban area.

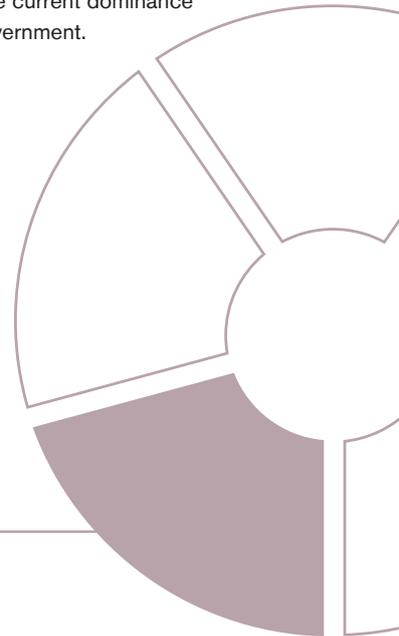
Leadership should not be expected to reside solely in local government or, indeed, solely in local business. It should be local, rather than national, since cities are closer to people and exist at a more human scale than central government. Models of governance that aggregate upwards, rather than disaggregate downwards, in terms of agenda setting and ownership of visions, are considered to be more resilient and effective.

Central government has a role to play in capacity- and confidence-building in communities. **The State's role should be not just about regulation or spending, but increasingly about empowerment and support** within a (renegotiated) structure of national legislation, regulation and guidance.

Devolution of powers from central government is a necessary element of this future change; there needs to be a renewed trust and vision for the role that the new city leaders will have. Meaningful local democracy and leadership requires political will at all levels, overcoming strongly vested institutional and political interests, addressing gaps in skills and capacity, and bringing about cultural and attitudinal shifts.

Cities need more autonomy and the ability to raise finance within sensible and financially prudent structures. They need to create an organisational capability to think longer-term and regain 'trusted adviser' status, with local politicians reversing the trend of the past few decades in which UK local government has seen reductions in its power and a greater dependence on national power.

However, whilst a significant degree of devolution is seen as desirable, there is the need to retain city-to-region connectedness and national connectedness. The greatest benefits lie in achieving greater autonomy, not absolute autonomy – a rebalancing away from the current dominance of central government.



Financial implications

Cities need to be allowed to retain more of the taxes they are instrumental in raising, so that they are able to respond positively to projected demographic changes, while ensuring that equity amongst their citizens is prioritised.

There is no single approach to the financial and business model aspects of future urban living that can be applied uniformly across the UK's cities: cities need to be developed on a bespoke basis, taking account of the local conditions and local priorities specific to each one. Cities have to be able to plan for the future with certainty, which requires budget certainty over a number of years rather than the current annual budget setting. Moreover there is no incentive for cities to work with the financial institutions and large private organisations which should be doing more to invest in cities, and this needs to be addressed.

There are currently limited opportunities to experiment with new financing and business models, and there is still less tolerance of unsuccessful initiatives using public money. This constraint needs to be eased to **allow greater innovation, a strong theme emerging from the evidence being the need to allow 'beta testing' of new models and new ideas.** New financial and business models should also support an ethos of 'communities in control', where the public is central to the choices, there is collective responsibility, and non-linear approaches are embraced. This requires those in power to trust communities to make these choices, and for communities to trust



each other. New measures of success for financial models are required – colloquially 'something lying between GDP and Gross National Happiness' – which value long-term benefits and promote social equity.

Planning implications



The influence of a city extends beyond its immediate boundaries, and so a stronger role for strategic planning is needed.

Planners should increasingly be considered as part of the city management team, proactively seeking to improve the public realm and not just be engaged in a regulatory process. Moreover governance occurs at multiple levels and multiple scales – from the neighbourhood to the national – and planners need to synthesise the processes at all levels and scales.

Planning that embraces experimentation and feedback from city users has proved successful. Nimble and responsive planning structures facilitate organic development, or development from the bottom-up. Over-regulation must be avoided in order not to stifle such an approach and there has to be trust and an acceptance that mistakes may be made (and lessons learnt in fixing such mistakes) in taking this forward.

If citizens were involved in the building, master-planning and zoning processes, it would be possible to create neighbourhoods which in turn would change the quality of the city itself. This reinforces our finding that integration of the various positive approaches to addressing social, economic and environmental concerns from the neighbourhood to the city scale (and all the scales above) is needed to properly embed sustainability. Going beyond community involvement in planning and design to an active involvement also in the management and maintenance of these neighbourhoods would provide good examples of experimentation, or 'beta testing', and foster the development of trust between a city's leaders and its citizens.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
Edgbaston, Birmingham,
B15 2TT, United Kingdom
www.birmingham.ac.uk

For further information please contact:
Professor Chris Rogers:
c.d.f.rogers@bham.ac.uk;
Joanne Leach: j.leach@bham.ac.uk