IPPR CENTRE FOR CITIES / BIRMINGHAM FUTURE

THE FUTURE OF CITY CENTRE LIVING IN BIRMINGHAM
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About this note

On 10 July, ippr's Centre for Cities and Birmingham Future hosted a private seminar on the future of city centre living in Birmingham. This note summarises the main findings from the presentations and discussion.

QUESTION 1
What kind of communities are we creating in Birmingham city centre? How can we attract more families and older residents?

The key points were:

- ***Birmingham's experience reflects the national picture.*** Like other big cities – Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool – Birmingham's city centre population grew rapidly during the 1990s. The city centre population is now at least 19,000 people. Unlike some other big cities, Birmingham had some historic inner urban housing – generally removed in the 1950s and 1960s. So the city centre phenomenon is as much a 'return to the city' as a new departure.

- ***Birmingham needs to attract and keep families and older residents – but probably not in the city centre.*** Birmingham needs to develop a better housing and place 'offer' around the city edge and inner suburbs. First, inner ring areas like Eastside have more space, and more potential for designing from scratch. It is harder to reconfigure developed areas like the Jewellery Quarter. Second, city edge neighbourhoods already have many of the facilities families are looking for. Developments like Park Central at Attwood Green are providing family housing units with an affordable component (the Optima RSL is a partner).

- ***There may already be families living in city centre flats – they need bigger houses.*** There are some families in the city centre. Anecdotally, many may be living in flats, and sending their children to schools further out. These households need proper community infrastructure – Birmingham needs to learn the lessons of previous planned development, e.g. 60s highrises.

  Affordability is an issue. Most social housing is provided through Section 106 agreements – and thus, RSLs have limited opportunity to shape provision of larger, family-size dwellings.

- ***There are some empty-nesters in the city centre, but it's hard to tell how many.*** There is anecdotal evidence from residents and from estate agents. But they are not showing up in the numbers yet. Many may be divorcees.

- ***Birmingham city centre may need 'unaffordable housing', as well affordable properties.*** Manchester has a reputation for high-profile city centre residents, such as architect Ian Simpson and Premiership footballers. Would Birmingham benefit from a Brum Belgravia with a similar profile?
- ***City centre 'communities' aren't like traditional communities. This may not be a bad thing.*** City centre residents are mainly young and single, and aren't looking to put down roots. They often have networks of friends, rather than close links to a local area. City centres help support these larger, looser social networks.

- ***The market finds it hard to create new housing offers. Developers and the city council need to work together.*** The market is starting to see the limits of building yet more small flats. Niche developers are keen to try something different, e.g. family housing – but currently, bigger flats do not sell easily. The city council has a key strategic role to play here, helping create, shape and subsidise new markets. Birmingham city council owns around 60% of the land in the city centre – this is a hugely powerful lever. By developing now, the city can also benefit from increased land values in the future.

  The city wants to pursue 'transformational change, not patch and mend'. Birmingham is about to begin a major 're-visioning' and masterplanning of the City Centre, creating a 10-year plan for the future. This will provide the template for future strategy.

QUESTION 2
How is city centre living contributing to the regeneration of Birmingham, to the city's image and wider economic performance?

The key points were:

- ***Is city centre living helping Birmingham grow? Absolutely.*** City centre residents have helped grow the retail offer – Tesco Express and Sainsbury's Local weren't here ten years ago. Birmingham has around 60,000 students – many of whom stay in the city and live in city centre flats. Professional services firms recruit a lot of graduates, many of whom are city centre residents – 50% of staff in one firm are city centre residents.

- ***City centre living is part of a package.*** It's not just about housing, it's about the whole offer – housing, retail, leisure, public space, proximity, buzz.

- ***The city centre 'package' helps reposition the city, and make a strong pitch to public and private investors – or does it?*** Public and private investors are attracted by the University base, proximity to London, the airport – and the city centre offer. Birmingham has recently pulled in the Gambling Commission and the National Lottery Heritage fund – over 750 jobs. The Lyons Relocation Review may pull in more jobs in the future.

- ***The city centre offer helps keep graduates, but there are worries about long term retention.*** Forthcoming work suggests over 40% of young professional services workers may not be in the city in 10 years' time. This reflects debt, property prices and working practices – it may also reflect dissatisfaction with the housing / neighbourhoods offer.

- ***There are still skills gaps in some key sectors, like financial services and technology.*** Birmingham can do more to connect local unemployed people to these opportunities.

- ***Birmingham needs to develop a clearer long term economic vision.*** It needs to tie changes in the city centre to an overall vision of where the city is going. The City Council's 're-visioning' and masterplanning process will help here. The city's Broad Street BID is an important tool for engaging businesses in the regeneration of Birmingham.

QUESTION 3
What are the next steps, and how can we learn from the city centre experience to plan the recovery of 'inner ring' neighbourhoods?

The key points were:

- ***The city centre is probably not the place for families and older residents. Birmingham needs to attract these groups into inner ring neighbourhoods.*** Key sites include Eastside, Wholesale Markets, the Irish Quarter – and the Urban Living Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder, which runs North-West out of the city centre. Some areas directly abut the city centre, e.g. East Aston and Winson Green.

- ***There's a core 'offer' which Birmingham needs to provide around the city edge.*** This offer includes security, open / green space, public and private services (schools, healthcare, convenience shopping, post offices, recycling etc). Good schools are particularly important – they attract middle-class families. Birmingham is unusual – it has a number of good schools in the city centre, but these are fee-paying and selective.

- ***Design matters.*** Birmingham needs to ensure there are well-designed, well-built houses and flats around the city edge. Good design will help persuade households with choice into new / regenerating neighbourhoods.

- ***We also need space for business.*** Birmingham needs to ensure there's affordable retail and commercial space in city edge neighbourhoods.

- ***It is far harder than it should be to deliver the offer.*** For example, the new health centre in the Jewellery Quarter took a long time to plan and secure. PCTs, LEAs, the police and other agencies need to be more proactive in helping Birmingham deliver good places to live.

- ***Funding for new communities is an emerging problem.*** Many schemes in e.g. Eastside involve very large S106 agreements, which can fund some of the community / social infrastructure required. But is this enough? Again, Birmingham City's huge land holdings give it leverage over developers, allow it to subsidise new development, and will help it deliver attractive residential and commercial packages – in other words, delivering sustainable communities.