Notes from the Key Cities City Centre Event

Brighton, 24th October 2014

As part of gaining a better understanding on the role that city centres play in city economies and what policy should do to improve their performance, the Key Cities brought together a panel of experts from different backgrounds to discuss what they see as the challenges of planning, designing, investing and building successful city centres. They were:

- Kerry Hunter, Aberdeen Asset Management
- Barry David, JLL
- Tim Stoner, Space Syntax
- Paul Sergeant, Queensbury
- Gavin Chait, Whythawk
- Rob Hamlin, City Fibre

Below is a summary of the event, split into five categories to reflect the key themes covered during the event.

1. The role of cities

The key purpose of cities is the interaction of people, for social and economic purposes, which makes them the crucibles of innovation in the arts as well as the sciences. The problem with planning in the 20th century was that it did not aim to facilitate this. This was because it treated each 'asset', such as a road, an open space or a building, as serving one purpose only. One result of this was roads that acted as barriers, cutting through city centres, for example. This thinking needs to change.

2. Working with investors

- Strong occupier demand is the biggest indicator of whether or not to invest in a city centre. If rents and yields don't justify investment, creating a funding gap, then the public sector will need to provide gap funding if a development is to go ahead.
- Write downs in values could well be required to get a development to go. Councils could look at rates holidays on units too.
- Big capital investments involve big risks. A developer needs to be confident that demand is sufficient, and they need the support of local authorities.
- To attract investors, cities need:
  - a well-researched masterplan and vision
  - a stable planning regime
  - an understanding of the economy and key stakeholders, so that the local authority and stakeholders have the same shared objectives. Communication is important here too - it's not always clear what it is that either a local authority or developers want
3. Type of development

- City centre redevelopments should be seen as infrastructure projects, because of their value to the city economy, rather than individual developments. And something of this scale is always going to be a joint venture between the public and private sectors, so it needs to be conducted as such from the start.
- The focus of developments is now very much around mixed use.
- Residential developments have to be done in the wider context of the residential offer in the city. People are not going to live in apartments when they can get larger houses with gardens for the same price. This may mean that cities in this position focus more on getting students living in city centres.
- Need to ensure development in the UK is up to standard and up to date from the start. In new developments copper telephone wires are still installed as standard, for example, which struggle to achieve the broadband speeds that businesses want.
- Cities should think about re-purposing existing stock, old office stock might be more appropriate as residential than updated for businesses for example.

4. Design and public realm

- Bad design is much more expensive than good design because a badly designed building requires either greater maintenance costs and/or becomes obsolete more quickly. It’s better for cities to pay more upfront for good design.
- Public realm has to be designed principally with the people who will use it in mind. This isn’t always the case.
- Poor public realm has an impact on first impressions. When designing it a city needs to think about what impressions first time visitors form when they arrive.
- It’s most important to spend money on the stuff at street level, not on top of the building. Not enough thought is given to the street level public realm and yet this is the most important part.
- Don’t do public realm for the sake of it. If it isn’t designed right, then what’s the point

5. The use of data

- Local authorities sit on a huge asset in terms of the data that they hold. But they do not use this knowledge anywhere near as effectively as they could do, either to inform their strategy and masterplanning or in terms of presenting investors with a picture of what is going on in their economies.
- Local authorities don’t share data easily within councils. This makes it difficult for experts to give LAs insight as they don’t know what the LAs know, and the LAs often don’t know themselves!
This means that their hand is significantly weaker when talking to consultants and developers than it could be.

- Better use of data could help put a value on the people walking around a city, which developers will want to know when deciding whether or not to invest.