

Playgrounds at Hannover Kronsberg give the new urban extension a sense of identity



on this to suggest that localism is simply another word for nimbysism. There is an expectation from many that the new localism will cause the planning system to close down altogether and that the dribble of new housing, arising from a combination of the centralised system and the credit crunch, will dry up altogether.

A more considered argument regarding delivery of housing numbers is that localism will allow local areas to diverge. Where the centralised system sought to force every local area to participate in housing delivery, regardless of how much those in that area wished to, localism will allow those that believe in growth to grow and those that don't to maintain their status quo. At least in the short-term the likely outcome of this is that urban areas, which have become most accustomed to building new housing, will continue to do so: possibly even increasing the rate of delivery. In contrast, other areas, which so desperately sought to not to grow under the old regime, will take the opportunity to prevent anything new from being built. It can be quite expected that housing numbers in the new localist context will therefore be focused on built up areas, or those that in recent years have been growing fastest.

Longer-term, and assuming the pendulum is swinging towards improved mechanisms for local control, when and if local areas do take control of their own destiny, they will discover that there is a delicate balance to be achieved on an on-going basis between growth (new housing and increased economic activity) and place health (investing in the quality and infrastructure of an area). The need to seek some type of balance is something that our leading housing associations have begun to realise through trial-and-error over the past 20 years. What these more successful associations have found is that it is detrimental to grow too fast and equally detrimental to stop growing at all. What works best is a strategy of slow, planned growth where the proceeds of that growth can be astutely ploughed back into improving the existing stock.

A very visible example of this balanced strategy at a local level is the activity of estate regeneration. Many larger estates inherited from the 1960s and 1970s are very costly to maintain and have undergone a spiral of decay. There is no money to renovate; they represent a draining cost on the housing associations and wider society. The solution has been to masterplan intensification of the estate and use the

proceeds of new development to replace or properly renew the existing stock to a design and level of quality, that is more cost effective to manage. This only works, however, when the proceeds of growth can be properly re-invested locally to turn a vicious cycle of decay into a virtuous cycle of improvement.

As housing associations have been compelled to iterate towards successful strategies, with several falling by the wayside *en route*, we cannot allow local authorities to fail. For the localism agenda to work, it will be essential to bring into effect an effective process of common and shared that enables local authorities to gain from each other's best practice and encourage everyone else to benefit from this national exploration into local control.

Several developers, for example Countryside, have significantly changed their business models towards being development contractors, acting as expert delivery agents for housing associations and local authorities. Will more housebuilders be forced down this route too, and if so, where will safeguards of design quality be found?

In the meantime, the intellectual challenge faced by the central policy makers is how to define communities under the new regime. In many urban contexts, the community of geography quickly becomes blurred. In cities, communities are more focused around interests (members of a church, members of a gym or drama school, work colleagues). So, when a new development is proposed in a city setting, which has an impact on local facilities, who should be considered to be the relevant community? Perhaps the trick will be not to attempt to define this too closely in legislation, but through some other, more flexible means.

Under the new localism agenda, there is a real opportunity to convert placemaking rhetoric into real delivery and improvement. But we should not be too impatient. It will take time to achieve the structural and cultural changes required to put us all on a path together where local communities can influence the destiny of, and take real pride in, the places they live.

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