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Spatial Economics Research Centre

Tuesday, 7 April 2009

Manchester: top of the league?

I was in Manchester yesterday for the launch of the [Manchester Independent Economic Review](#) (MIER).

The review argues that Manchester is the city in the North most likely to be able to raise its growth rate and, by doing so, drive growth in the North. To achieve this, it needs to make difficult policy decisions (some of which are not devolved at the moment)

I agree that there's a case for thinking that a few [resurgent cities](#) might help achieve regional growth objectives. The work on [productivity differences](#) that we did for the MIER is certainly consistent with Manchester being one of those cities (although, note, not THE city - but that's cautious academics for you).

So, to those hard policy decisions. The review identifies skills as a priority. I'm sure that's true but it is difficult to know what role local authorities might play. I think those in Manchester assume devolution here would mean control over the existing skills budget. I don't have a strong position on this (as yet), although at a minimum they could take some local expenditure which is wasted (e.g. on too many shiny new buildings) and spend *more* of it on skills.

Talk of shiny new buildings brings us to land use planning (for housing, commercial and transport). On housing, in particular, the local authorities have decision making power but need to come up with some credible method of collaborating. They then, within reason, need to build the kind of houses people want to live in, in the places where people want to live. (Ditto for office space). This means less brownfield and more building in South Manchester. This will be politically difficult (and also raises questions about the extent to which national planning guidelines would prevent this anyhow

On transport, they need some strong political leadership on congestion charging. I also think that they, probably, want to convince the government that their £2.5bn of TIF projects represent much better value for money than £25bn on high speed rail (more on this in the near future). Again, both political difficult decisions.

Do they, as the report suggests, need increased powers at city region level to achieve this? I'm not sure that the MIER makes the case for this one way or the other. Collaborative agreements, the new regional plans, and less binding national guidelines might be enough on many of the policy areas. Others would strongly disagree. I am increasingly convinced that the available evidence does not answer this question either way so expect to hear lot of people claiming the opposite.

Overall, the MIER highlights the ambitions of (some) in the city. I understand there will now be some kind of response as well as a strategic plan to take things forward. It will be interesting to see how things develop from here.

Posted by [Prof Henry G. Overman](#) on [Tuesday, April 07, 2009](#)

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