



Delivering affordable workspace: Perspectives of developers and workspace providers in London

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Abstract

The provision of subsidised workspace for small enterprises has been a public sector concern in many developed economies since the 1960s. In recent years, the focus of economic development initiatives has shifted away from supply side initiatives, such as fiscal incentives and the direct provision of premises, towards a consideration of the collective provision of infrastructure and services, in order to meet demands of businesses and workers in cities where there is already strong demand and growth. As well as this shift from supply- to demand-side initiatives, there has been a change in the political ideological approach to land and property development, away from public sector direct provision and funding, to place greater onus on the private sector to deliver development, infrastructure and services. The introduction of ‘affordable workspace’ planning policies by local authorities in London from the early 2000s is part of this shift – building on more established key worker and affordable housing policies.

This paper evaluates the success of affordable workspace planning policies in thirteen mixed use schemes in London, from the perspectives of developers and workspace providers, who are responsible for delivering and managing the affordable workspace. First, it finds that the perspective of the developer, in particular whether it sees affordable workspace policy as (a) an opportunity, (b) a ‘tool’ to secure planning permission or (c) a burden, is mostly influenced by the way in which the affordable workspace emerged within the proposal. Developers’ perspectives and the success of their partnerships with workspace providers are critical to the successful delivery of affordable workspace within the scheme. Second, the findings show that ‘affordable workspace’ is difficult to define and deliver, with different interpretations used by delivery partners and the ability of workspace providers to deliver affordability depends critically on their organisational model. Finally, the research shows that although there are clear benefits of the policy for artists and small, creative industry businesses, it is not benefiting low-value manufacturers or small family-run retail and service businesses, nor is it generally benefiting start-ups. The implications of policy outcomes for economic development are considered; overall the beneficial impacts are limited. The research concludes that the predominant model of affordable workspace policy being promoted in London will fail to meet the aspirations of policy makers, with the limited success of policy further compounded by the global recession of the late-2000s. Alternative or complementary strategies are discussed.

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