

Get on with it, Mr Gove

Without enough homes people can afford, London cannot expect to prosper

New edition of *PiL*; new Secretary of State for housing – Or whatever Michael Gove has decided to call his department and himself. In his cabinet re-shuffle Boris has jacked housing and planning up the Tory 'to do' list and picked Mr Gove for some serious work in a political minefield. One which requires the use of explosives to yield substantial new housing.

The GLA has in the meantime allocated £3.4bn of strategic partnership deals with housing associations which they must make do with until 2026. The element of this story that was most surprising on its announcement in *Housing Today*, was that it revealed reductions in the proposed outputs of London giants, L&Q, Peabody and Notting Hill, for example. Yep, reductions. *Housing Today* reported that "the £3.46bn of deals are set to provide 29,456 homes...compared to almost 50,000...from just £1.7bn...in the previous programme."

That's pretty shocking. More money for fewer homes. And a fairly pitiful yield of just around 6,000 homes per year to 2026 from housing associations in London who, it is alleged, are also proving reluctant to cross-subsidise affordable homes.

"The list of... deals also appears to show the extent to which grant rates have soared as the GLA has re-focused its programme on homes for social rent, at the same time as housing associations have become less willing to cross-subsidise construction of affordable homes using receipts from for-sale housing."

Could it be that some of Britain's biggest housing associations are finding that over-taxation through planning gain is eroding their ability to do what they were set up for? Which is why many of them are increasingly becoming speculative developers of private homes. Welcome to the developers' world. (Should their meaningless title 'Registered Provider' be axed?)

Which begs the question, given the scale of need, even after the pandemic and Brexit exodus, are housing associations and local authorities the best vehicles for delivering the housing needed? There are huge assets sequestered within associations and local authorities' portfolios, matched only by the mountain of private capital waiting to get into the UK's under-developed private rented sector - estimated at something like £40bn.

Also, amounts of grant to boroughs are drips in the ocean of need. Barking & Dagenham, Enfield, Haringey and Southwark are to receive £171m, £167m, £127m and £126m, respectively. Totting this up and dividing by, say £400,000 cost per average home, that amounts to funding for a measly 1477 homes - over five years in four boroughs. Of course authorities will gear up on that to provide more. But you could build 15,000 new homes in each of those boroughs using brownfield land and densification of existing estates.

That is the scale of need in London. No-one can run London without enough homes people can afford and expect to see it prosper. National and local politicians must, after 40 years of ostrich-like behaviour, recreate the equivalent of Britain's pre- and post-second world war booms in housebuilding of all types of tenure. And not lose sight of what we've learnt about urban and building design. GET ON WITH IT, Mr Gove. ■

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Planning in London has been published and edited by Brian Waters, Lee Mallett and Paul Finch since 1992

Two key steps for sorting out the planning system

There are two critical areas for reform: it has too much to do and lacks the resources to do it

The consensus has it that the big ideas in the planning white paper will not see the light of day and whatever replaces that 'radicalism' (zoning et al) will be a little while coming under the new Secretary of State, who is respected for getting things done. This provides him with an opportunity.

The consensus also remains that something must be done about the planning system.

There are two critical areas for reform: it has too much to do and lacks the resources to do it. In particular the private sector of planning consultancy is draining people and skills from development management and plan making.

So what should Mr Gove do? First prune the workload and therefore the scope for planning in local authorities. There is no good reason why totally objective criteria for assessing development proposals need to go through the local democratic process. They are much better processed through building control. And this will apply to most of the new burdens which are being loaded onto the plan making and development management system, such as those currently dealing with energy, carbon emissions, and soon the new Environment Bill.

These issues can be dealt with by national standards and policies, as minimum space standards for housing have been, and only where special circumstances arise need local plans deal with them at all. Many criteria are technocratic, meaning that planning officers are rarely qualified to deal with them without calling on specialists, and in the majority of issues they need to be objectively measured and assessed so, by definition, should be dealt with under the Building Regulations. Conditions attaching to full planning permissions, where appropriate, need simply require compliance.

So what about resources?

Older readers will recall the bad old days before Building Control was opened up to private competition. Long delays and inefficient local authority inspectors meant that construction was often bogged down by the need to deal with a sclerotic building regulations department. The magic solution was amendment of legislation to allow Approved Inspectors, who were not necessarily part of the local authority, to handle and discharge construction applications. This introduced an element of competition and made local authorities improve while giving applicants the option of having their schemes dealt with by whichever agency they considered to be the most effective. It has also allowed local departments to operate nation-wide.

The Association of Consultant Architects (ACA) has long argued that a similar system could be applied to planning. In 2008 the ACA proposed that development applications could be assessed for validity and compliance with local policy by 'approved agents' who, as with building control, could be either local authority officers or suitably qualified and certified independent professionals. This proposal, built on Recommendation 13 of the *Killian Pretty Review* which suggested an 'accredited agent' scheme for householder and minor developments, would bring competition into the planning system. The actual decision would remain with the local authority. Approved agents could assess the impacts of proposals and write a report with a recommendation - just as planning officers (and appeal inspectors) do now - but the rejection or approval of the application would be made by a delegated officer of the local authority or, in controversial cases, by the planning committee or the SoS.

Variable application fees (long-argued for by the Planning Officers' Society and others) could be introduced. Ministers cannot allow this currently because planning control is a local monopoly, but competition would overcome this objection. The resourcing of planning departments could improve by raising application fees and by the part removal of case-loads to the consultancy sector. For the first time a performance and quality measure would accompany fee increases and applicants would have the choice of paying a higher (or lower) fee to their preferred agency.

A frustrating aspect of this proposal is that the government has already legislated to pilot the scheme. Section 161 of the *Housing and Planning Act 2016* sets out measures for "Processing of planning applications by alternate providers" and sections 162 - 164 deal with details such as fees and payments. So thought has gone into how such a system would work. Time to give it a go. ■