

Better planning needs political will

Stuart Lipton launched the Smith Institute's book of essays 'Planning for the Future' at the Cabinet Office last month. Here's what he said.



Sir Stuart Lipton is deputy chairman of Chelsfield PLC, former chairman of CABE and of Stanhope which developed Broadgate and Stockley Park.

Here in Whitehall, surrounded by the great civic buildings of 19th century Britain, we see terrific architecture yet it was all built without planning permission!

But we've had 60 years of planning since World War II, where are the benefits? Every brick upon brick approved yet poor quality and a system which is hard to define.

Since 1947, Drivers Jonas calculated, the total number of planning documents issued to the industry by Government is a whopping 944.

Kate Barker of the Treasury in her recommendations suggests that the 800 pages of policy should be reduced to no fewer than 200.

So what kind of nightmare is it that anyone can manage this kind of constant change and complexity?

Planning regulates the use of land in the public interest but people are contradictory - they want a growing economy as well as more jobs and housing but they have an increasing resistance to development.

Our planning system has become too cumbersome yet there is nothing fundamentally wrong with it and

with some refinements it can be made to work. The authors of policy have fallen victim to the temptation of control, to plan every eventuality, protect every interest and to reflect every social control.

Housing has been our greatest planning failure, both in its supply where we are hurting the poor and young of our nation and in its delivery where rows of awful tiny boxes are now a blot on our landscape.

The ingredients of planning are simple - placemaking, quality, density, mix of uses, infrastructure, civic values. Kate Barker's proposals show the possibilities for refreshing the system with sensible and intelligent opportunities but however defined planning requires clear leadership and vision to make it successful.

So how do we implement changes?

- Provide:
- A one stop shop pulling together the numerous Government agencies involved in major planning into one co-ordinated group with clear leadership and proactive debate on

proposals. Proactive as we have highly competent private sector professionals who should participate.

- Remove the 90% of applications which are for housing changes and small developments from planning committees and let these be dealt with by planning officers.
- Roll out planning delivery agreements for all major applications.
- Allow outline consents for major projects - trying to define the massing height and bulk and every detail of a major project with perhaps 30 or more buildings is impossible.
- Allow pre and post application conversation between developer and planners. When an application has been submitted and planners have the full facts at hand both sides know the most about the situation but the system prevents changes being made during the period.
- Allow developers to fund consultants for local authorities to speed up the assessment of applications.
- Require community comments to be at the start of the planning process rather than the end which causes incessant delays.
- Encourage a Planning Commission for major projects.
- Ensure more education for planners, developers and Councillors.
- Appoint planning directors independently so that they can act without political pressure and deliver holistically for the community.
- There are no legal checks and balances in the planning system so reform is needed of the increasingly litigious system which is driven as much by fear of judicial review as by safe guarding public interest.
- Ensure that planning proposals and infrastructure are linked.
- Stop premature applications which clog the system.
- Planning enquiries which are faster, more certain, with more written evidence and with less theatre and

Broadgate extended the City's business district over Broadgate and Liverpool Street stations



Planning for the Future
from www.smith-institute.org.uk



The Stockley business park located near Heathrow airport

emotion from both sides.

Social

Who is driving our social agenda? Is it the right of a few vociferous protestors to deny the majority housing? That's how the system is running, a reluctance to except higher density and better use of land. Give people equity in their home and enable them to have greater financial stability and less reliance on the State, and grow out of poverty.

As an aside it would be splendid if Government and the private sector could be inventive and produce a financial instrument that would facilitate more housing.

Economic - UK competitiveness

Planning is part of the UK's competitiveness. We are the laughing stock of the world when it comes to business planning. Occupiers want certainty of delivery and cost. This is not something which is socially evil

but an every day sensible need, yet it takes 3/5 years at a cost of £15/25 million to obtain planning for a major project.

In the last 50 years planning has been left behind. We missed the development of out of town shopping centres and office parks in the USA. Why did no one take any notice of the social and economic impact they brought. We have now gone full circle encouraging towns and cities to be our economic centres or perhaps today's planning White Paper will reverse that.

We are about to miss another round of economic change as our industries die out and things made in the factory are now designed in the office.

The Use Class Order defining how we can use land was conceived in 1944 and partly revised in the 1980s and is clearly out of date. We still insist on segregating industrial land rather than making it part of deregulating

the planning system by putting all uses in to one classification with appropriate safeguards.*

What is the purpose of planning? It is about constructing better buildings, better places and better lives and creating greater wealth for all. Transforming derelict spaces to vibrant spaces, forgotten cities to great places. Uplifting, inspiring, pleasurable, fun.

The way forward must be driven by clear economic and social goals so that we design a planning system that delivers outcomes that matter rather than being convenient.

Government and the private sector need to work much closer together ensuring that policy and legislation will be beneficial and workable. I have been fascinated in planning discussions of the close alignment of Local Government and the private sector. We've got the same goals - it's Government who is out of touch with the realities of the

planning system despite their good intentions.

Bring people out of poverty, give them more homes and jobs rather than get bogged down by a system that has delivered little for us.

I am delighted that Mr Brown has focused on the most important aspect of planning - it is the political will which will drive this subject to give the poor and the young their first steps on the housing ladder.

**Your editor contributed an essay suggesting abandonment of the UCO in the Smith Institute publication; it was reproduced in the last issue of Planning in London.*