

# Let's hear it for real planning!

We need smarter planning for more civilised cities, and the necessary personnel to bring this about

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

After years of criticism and endless reform, the government seems to have got the message that if you want a high-quality, proactive planning system, you need to pay for it. Whether the general public sees it this way, particularly if development is on the doorstep – as in the recent Chilterns bye-election – is another matter.

The recent announcement of a £500 million funding boost to help get the right staff in the right places was of course welcomed by the Royal Town Planning Institute, with reason. Under the latest planning thinking from government, local plans will need to show areas that broadly should be protected from significant development, areas where enhancement is welcome, and areas where development should be encouraged and located. That will involve a major effort, not least in respect of local consultations up and down the land. Intellectual firepower will be required, as well as professionals who are interested in the future, rather than simply operating development-control rules.

In London, you might argue that the proposed system is already being trialled. Extensive conservation areas in boroughs such as Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea constitute the 'protected' zones, while growth areas identified across the capital in the London Plan (where tall buildings are not regarded as urban pariahs) look like the development areas envisaged in the White Paper. Enhancement areas cover everything else. Why, then, are the government proposals getting such a kicking from some sources? What exactly is the problem?

Needless to say, the built environment professions in general criticize anything this government proposes, without offering much in the way of constructive suggestions about how we address the housing shortage or apply broad-brush environmental principles in practice. So whatever initiatives Whitehall unveil have to be shot down. Permitted development rights are anathema, even though they will now include requirements in respect of minimum space and light standards. Converting redundant offices into homes will 'rip the heart out of communities' (no it won't). VAT rules should be reversed so that virtue-signalling retrofits are zero-rated, while evil new development – particularly if it involves a scintilla of concrete – should attract a penal rate. And so on.

Happily, there are some cool and wise heads in place to balance our current problems and opportunities, not least the government's new-ish chief planner, Joanna Averley, who was a very effective director at the Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment (CABE), where she promoted regeneration at scale, and also produced a pretty timeless guide for clients on how to commission good buildings.

It will be interesting to see how she responds to criticisms of the planning White Paper from MPs on the housing select committee – and party members shaken by the recent bye-election defeat attributed in part to dislike of the allegedly reduced role of local people in planning decisions. The MPs are worried that proposals demonstrating 'beauty' will be fast-tracked through the system, not least because of the difficulty in defining 'beauty' in terms that make sense within the complex ecosystem of planning law. Also because prioritising aesthetics over everything else is asking for trouble. Why can't the fast track be used in respect of, say, 'demonstrably design quality'?

There must be a case for moving as many of the number-defined elements in planning applications to building control, ceasing the pretence that planners are educated or equipped to deal with many of the technical issues for which currently they have responsibility. Such an approach would chime with the general move towards a placemaking-based reappraisal of what planning is supposed to achieve – to propose and define rather than simply reacting to applications. This would increase certainty of outcome, reducing the biggest financial risk for planning supplicants, and therefore allow a greater focus on the quality of what is proposed – rather than simply whether it is in an appropriate place. This is what the new planning landscape is intended to achieve, and it should be supported.

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>>> However, the government needs to understand that if planning simply becomes a political weapon, where the well-off need never fear that their neighbourhood will be despoiled by new construction, while new density levels are imposed on already under-pressure communities, it will be a failure – you might say an example of 'spatial prejudice'.

Drawing up maps for development, enhancement and protection will revive zoning, but it needs to take place in 21st century context, where pockets of development could and should take place within generally protected areas, while protected pockets are identified within development zones.

In short, we need smarter planning for more civilised cities, and the necessary personnel to bring this about. No doubt consultants will have a big role, but there needs to be a real sense of direction, delivered by chief planning officers across the country. It may be bumpy, but the ride needs undertaking.

As for the Chilterns voters who have recently given the Conservatives a bloody nose, they appear to be more worried about the HS2 rail line running through their patch (without any benefit to them) than the fine details of the planning White Paper. The cynical and hypocritical Lib Dems, who nationally support the rail project, have made the most of local objections and have pretended that they too are opposed to it.

Mendacity is one of their very limited charms. ■

## Make no small plans

**London needs better, clearer plans that persuade people to stay**

David Cameron labelled planning officials the 'enemies of enterprise' at the Conservative party conference ten years ago. It wasn't true then and isn't now. But no one is happy either way, apart from those who make a good living from planning's byzantine complexities, which excludes the officials who Cameron picked on.

Though 800,000 people may have left London because of Brexit and Covid, we still have way too few homes for people on either lower or middle incomes that feel affordable - which the previous Census in the same year, 2011, starkly revealed in rising population statistics.

London has struggled to digest its growth, while the rest of the UK, which may unwind as a consequence, watched with envy and resentment. Feelings were made clear in the Cameroonian debacle of the 2016 referendum, possibly an equally substantial attack on enterprise. So here we are again trying to accommodate growth with fresh Conservative planning proposals, stirring up hornets' nests in Tory political heartlands, improving their MPs' chances of being defenestrated, forcing some U-turns and the dilution of proposals.

Sir Kier Starmer seems not yet to have spotted the political opportunity for more pro-active planning to create the homes and jobs people need and appears content to let the Tories stew. Far from being the enemy of enterprise, more pro-active planning, the study of a proposed growth area's potential and the packaging of planning risk in the form of more detailed, flexible development frameworks, is possibly the best tool for accommodating growth and delivering more social aims.

These need political and professional leadership to produce good plans that encourage public and private sectors to partner up in helping realise huge potential for growth, particularly in London. They are not cheap to produce. Within London's huge public sector housing estate controlled by local authorities and housing associations, for example, vast opportunity lies dormant in the form of wasted land, low densities, poor income streams, high maintenance costs, and big hits on social services budgets as a consequence.

Some boroughs are investing in 'real planning' to find out what is possible in their 'growth areas' - zones where growth is tolerated, planning is easy, and creativity encouraged. Hundreds of thousands of homes and jobs can be created. But boroughs, like developers, are tempted to pluck only the low-hanging fruit of easy sites while dodging the bigger picture. But how do you persuade voters to embrace growth without them?

Younger generations excluded from housing in London aren't happy with the vision thing being handed to the private sector, even as economic opportunity increases. They blame developers, but the real villain is a system that doesn't build skypools or homes for them. Rising economic opportunity is tarnished by the expense and unavailability of homes. Younger people are voting with their feet and leaving, which will probably be one of the headlines in the 2021 Census. This exodus, catalysed by Covid, may be a good thing, but not for London. London needs better, clearer plans that persuade people to stay. Good planning is the most persuasive political tool there is. ■