

AN EXPERT'S REFLECTION ON THE CHANGES WITHIN THE PLANNING INDUSTRY IN 2020/21

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I started this post at the end of 2020, with the intension of highlighting some of the key planning changes during the year, that many will never forget. Truth is, like many of us, 2020 took a lot out of me – and with such a busy rush towards the Christmas close down, I simply ran out of steam.

Now, as we enter 2021 with a hope that things will begin to return to normal (at some point this year), and in terms of planning, there is a lot to keep us busy and indeed to look forward to.

Following consultation on reform of the current planning system, we may see an increase in the affordable housing threshold for new developments in the coming months.

"The Government has shown it is keen to boost house building and particularly the SME market."

Raising the threshold from 10 to 25 at least would provide some incentive. How the government choose to deliver this will affect its success with previous attempts resisted by some local councils. The market will however be able to deliver more affordable products for first time buyers, which can only be considered a positive if realised.

Like 2020, permitted development is likely to explode further, and remains a key policy tool for the Government to meet housing targets. In August and September, the long-awaited upwards extensions were

introduced. Following the amendments to the Use Classes Order, the Government are also consulting on changes of use to residential.

A complete deregulation of controls on the high street is mooted through permitted changes from Class E to residential. The consultation refers to prior approval considerations for such changes which may give Councils the armoury to resist the changes thrust upon them. We have seen this in initial research on Part 20 upwards extensions. Across London, only 12% of such applications have been approved to date.

In terms of London, we expect the New London Plan to be adopted. The Mayor issued the Publication London Plan on 21st December which addresses the directions of the Secretary of State Directions. The Secretary of State then has 6 weeks until 1st February to decide whether the Mayor can formally publish. The plan will give the direction for development in London but importantly will formally increase the target housing numbers for many London boroughs with significant consequences for their assessment of residential applications.

"Housing targets remain an important matter for the Government with their manifesto commitment to deliver 300,000 homes every year by mid 2020's."

Numerous calculations have been issued over the past few years which drive housing numbers for each council. Those consulted on in 2020 were met with significant rebuttal, and many backbench Conservative MPs got their way by challenging the potential for large house building in the South East. Numbers have been amended with the highest targets for urban areas in more northern locations. It has been highlighted that 20 of the top 21 are all Labour controlled. Some commentators believe that this sets up political blame if the targets are not met, but historically Labour local councillors are far more positive about housing developments.

It is not just housing targets that are subject to change. In 2020, on the back of Boris' 'Build, Build, Build' speech, the largest reform of the planning system (since the last one) was the subject of a 6-week consultation period. The failings of the current system, and a utopian ideal of quick plan making, better consultation and high-quality design were presented. (some will note my scepticism).

"Major reform of the planning system has been presented before by both major political parties. Each time, reforms get challenged and then watered down often resulting in more complexities and problems."

The Labour reform of the planning policy system was meant to deliver swift local plans (and we all know it didn't). The creation of CIL to provide certainty has not removed Section 106, and so we now have both systems, considerable expense and delay.

We do however expect some major changes to the system in the coming year. If properly funded (much like the existing) system it can deliver development in the right places.

The team at Planning Insight, like many, had a challenging 2020 but we have developed some fantastic relationships with existing and new clients. Much of 2021 looks exciting and forward-facing, and so we will be sure to keep busy for the foreseeable future.