

# BUILD BETTER, NOT JUST MORE!

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It has been quite a few weeks in the world of planning. We have had various statements, including the potentially contentious “build, build, build” speech from the Prime Minister.

New permitted development rights have been introduced and the Business and Planning Bill is motoring through Parliament.

As the PM vowed to change the planning system first principles, I found myself thinking about what planning is for? – its purpose and its future. For me, planning has always been about balanced development. Yes, we need growth, but it has to be sustainable.

***‘The very idea of sustainability is about a balance between society, environment, culture and economy.’***

It is perhaps not surprising that as a Chartered Town Planner I am advocating that we don’t completely abandon the system. (*I need a job after all*). However, planning is more than that to me, it is about positive change, future-gazing, dreaming of better places – reimagining what the world could, and indeed should look like. Personally, it is my professional mission to promote high quality developments in the right places.

Our built environment faces a number of challenges, but also some wonderful opportunities for change, such as on our high streets. Thanks largely to online retailing, high streets are no longer the shopping destinations they once were. Planning has contributed to this through a rigid application of inflexible planning policies. The complete rethink on town centre use classes is necessary, and a welcome announcement from the PM.

***'Planning could, and should, play its part in balancing the needs of communities.'***

With greater flexibility, planners can help shape town centres to be active hubs for communities including; schools, medical centres, independent shops, cafes and homes. We cannot afford to lose our centres forever to unplanned and deserted spaces, and so planning has to be at the heart of this.

Housebuilding is a major problem too with house builders regularly blaming the system. While planning decisions take too long, approval rates of 82% for major residential developments for the last reported quarter are as high as they have been in the past 20 years- while it is recognised that most developers are generally not land banking.

Can the problem therefore be capacity, both in terms of planning authorities to deliver a service and of house builders to bring forward schemes and construct dwellings. Large house builders often blame planning, but they do not have the capacity to deliver the much hyped 300,000 homes a year. Investment in the planning system would see quality and performance improve.

The system for the provision of affordable housing may also need a rethink. Developers can, and should provide affordable homes, but perhaps the majority should be delivered by the state who can utilise their huge land holdings and an ability to borrow at low rates. The threshold for affordable housing at 10 units entices many developers to deliberately deliver 9 units, when many sites could deliver more. The reality is most small schemes will not deliver on-site affordable even if technically viable. Inflexible application of policies is therefore driving down the number of new homes. Perhaps a rethink of the on-site affordable threshold is necessary which could deliver faster decisions and more homes from SME developers.

As well as high streets and housing, we need to plan for other uses such as schools, community facilities and public transport. With such variety of needs we require arbitrators to make balanced judgements on behalf of communities.

***'Ripping the heart out of planning is not the answer, as who is going to make those difficult but so important judgements.'***

Is it right that this is left to central government, the market or even the courts? Surely empowering local communities through the planning system has an important part to play, or we risk planning becoming an increasing thing that is *done* to people. We therefore need to invest in planning, not abandon it!

Presently we do not plan at a national level, and barely at a Regional level - except for a few unitary authorities, conurbations, and London. Local Planning is important but in isolation is not the answer, as has been proven repeatedly through the local plan making process where challenges and delays are the norm rather than the exception.

***'If we operate at the strategic level, then the case for larger infrastructure projects become clearer.'***

Planning used to be about encouraging and promoting development - not the now short term, bureaucratic

and rigid system it has become. The New Towns Act and Garden Cities Movement we're all born out of a dream to think big, to solve some of our nation's problems. Permitted development has delivered around 60,000 homes, whereas the new towns built since 1948 are now home to 2.5 million people. Although not perfect, they certainly had a much bigger impact on our lives.

Patrick Abercrombie is one of the best-known town planners and responsible for the Greater London Plan of 1944, latterly known as the Abercrombie Plan. Crucially, Abercrombie recognised the need for regional planning and was responsible for a number of ambitious plans for various cities in the UK. His devotion and integrity of understanding the many interrelated factors that needed to be considered by planners such as; geology, landscape, architecture, industry and transport planning – saw him become the central figure to rebuilding post-war London.

Taking inspiration from Abercrombie, it is my belief that rather than abandoning the entire principle of planning – or adding a few bits of permitted development here or there – we should be thinking about the bigger picture of what do we want from our places, shaping the system to deliver those places, and more importantly invest properly in that system rather than starve it of resources.

Let us dream big again, repurpose planning for what it was meant for – to deliver development in the right places, to shape our places and communities, whilst doing so in a sustainable way.

References:

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