

A better plan for planning

Less development control, more vision is what is needed.

The coalition has set a firm if somewhat confused direction for planning – both product and process.

A constructive localism is taking root and needs continuing political support. But as Sir Terry Farrell once remarked: "I believe in bottom-up planning, but the problem is that when you are at the bottom you don't know which way is up."

The regrettable demolition of strategic plans - mercifully not touching London - is now being repaired with city-regional plans, but Whitehall still rules on housing, infrastructure and process.

This three way split of decision-making needs continuity, clarification and simplification.

On process, the coalition has responded more firmly to the long-running Treasury antipathy to development control than previous administrations. It sees planning in a Houdini-esque light, a tight mesh of regulations to be escaped from through measures such as development corporations, housing zones, development orders and permitted development rights.

Short of a total rewrite of the planning Acts (heaven forbid!), this is a promising direction of travel but it is compromised by concessions, exclusions and an overwhelming complexity. A gift for consultants and lawyers but it misses Houdini's achievement of escape.

The very recent consolidation of the GPDO was a good move but clearly demonstrates the lack of the promised simplicity in the status quo.

So, more consolidation yes, but a clearer vision of simplicity is needed too. Less kowtowing to narrow, control-freak interest groups and more trust in Parliament for the big stuff and in the people with more constructive localism.

Regarding product, the consolidation of housing standards along with guidance and the move towards transferring technical matters from planning to building control are all overdue and should be pushed further. This together with the rapid expansion of Permitted Development Rights (supported by Prior Notifications) should greatly reduce the workload of planning departments and address the resource issue.

One area which badly needs change is the need to find new creative ways of allocating more resource to design in the planning process as a tool for identifying areas where new/different growth could take place, and to acknowledge the technical, professional and cultural differences between 'development management' and 'planning'. Less development control, more vision is what is needed.

The next government needs to be vigilant however in ensuring that prior notifications do not stray into policy judgement areas thereby compromising the whole notion of permitted development and the certainty that goes with it.

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

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Peace in our parks

Tax the view to pay for the park

Over three years ago in *PiL 79* we published a leader headed Peace in the parks. It read as follows: "London is blessed with a range of open spaces which contrast with intensely used urban areas. They should provide peace and tranquillity for residents and visitors alike.

Management of the Royal Parks has been subject to change in recent years and there has been discussion about handing them from DCMS' control into the care of the Mayor of London. Now managed by The Royal Parks, an executive agency of DCMS, it seems they no longer can be relied upon to give us the peace and tranquillity for which they were once renowned. With increasing regularity they are monopolised for fun-fairs, concerts marathons and good causes.

It is not just 'Proms in the Park' or Christmas extravaganzas in Hyde Park, but closures of Richmond Park which not only deprive thousands of users of peaceful (or energetic even) leisure but cause traffic chaos for hours on end on a Sunday.

Of course it was not always like this. The Green Park was once upon a time reserved for the establishment classes as a pleasure garden with whirligigs, music and all, but following the burning down of those installations, space was given over to the ordinary populace for simple recreation.

The invasion of the Royal Parks for narrow if populist purposes is becoming too much of a good thing. A sort of municipal commercialisation which needs to be more tightly rationed in the interests of the wider population, and the increasing need we all share for an escape into peaceful nature, however artificial. The issue is that the Royal Parks offer uncluttered green space and that the Agency has been forced into crowding it with cheap money-raising events because the parks have been terribly underfunded. The importance of the open tranquil space is that it makes London an excellent place to live and attracts major financial and real estate values to the capital which should be acknowledged in government funding. The kind of sums raised by events is effectively just pocket money and risks undermining the essential worth of the parks and the wider value that they generate.

We have to sympathise with the Agency which has been struggling between the rock of the Treasury and a hard place of public expectation. London enjoys the brilliant juxtaposition of open landscape and urban intensity but this is in danger of being lost when the spaces are deprived of their peacefulness. Even more so when we find their gates closed at the weekend."

The editor of FT house and home, Jane Owen, wrote a strong opinion piece in March headed: "Green spaces in the city are for contemplation not rock and roll - The Royal Parks are under threat from tawdry commercial ventures and we should protest.

Jane Owen makes the interesting suggestion that the parks budget could be supplemented by charging surrounding owners an annual amenity tax of, say, 1%, of the value of their property which would go straight to the coffers of the Royal Parks. There is a simple precedent for this idea, pursuant to the London Squares Act which allows for neighbouring owners of the garden squares, mainly in Kensington, to be levied as a supplement to their council tax, a charge which goes towards their maintenance. True some would argue that this payment gives exclusive access in many cases, but nevertheless the mechanism and the principal could hold good and allow a modest supplement to council tax to be charged for the view and proximate amenity of public open space, not simply limited to the Royal Parks.

Planning in London is sensitive to the increased pressure on long-term residents in the centre of London; the loss of the tranquillity of the major parks could be the last straw, forcing many of them to abandon central London.

After much fuss and to the surprise of many, RBK&C Council threw out an application for a major horse show in Kensington Gardens a couple of years ago in defence of the park and of Kensington High Street. This determination should be emulated but balanced with a new income stream for the Royal Parks. All mayoral candidates should put this high on their manifesto. ■