

A mountain to climb

Affordable housing underlies all economic success and social stability

The topic of affordable housing bubbled away at the recent Forum Planning Update event with the Cambridge University Land Society, in partnership with Planning in London and host legal firm Dentons. That's because like the crucial infrastructure it is, affordable housing underlies all economic success and social stability.

The view was expressed, as it frequently is, that it is impossible to achieve the quantum needed without state subsidy, so no need to blame the planning system for the hold up. Which isn't really news, but a handy statement of the obvious. Or is it? An even more obvious statement might be that for the 25 years of planning policies which require the private sector to deliver 'affordable' housing have failed to do so. For this there is at least evidence. Like 100 year waiting lists for 'affordable' 'social' family housing in some London boroughs.

People wonder why student housing seems to be the only thing getting built at the moment. Or hotels. That's because they remain viable. There are people with money willing to buy or use these property types, which means developers can find funding to build them and demonstrate some sort of a viable exit plan for investors and some profit for themselves. Not so clear with offices, or large-scale housing developments and definitely not clear with smaller developments.

And even, as was also suggested, the planning system allows developers to build taller, to make more space to sell, it is often the case that the development appraisal starts to turn negative at a certain point – because it is expensive to build taller, and the efficiency of the lower parts of the plan reduces as the structure gets more complex (not to mention providing that secondary means of escape)

There are basic fixes needed to policies that have killed the smaller developer's interest in building housing. Raise the threshold at which affordable policies bite for one. Nine units is infeasibly low. Nor will any housing association take on a small number of units. Ask any developer what's happened to housing association 'demand' for lower numbers of affordable units. The market for offloading affordable homes is at a low ebb, for a variety of reasons. Some to do with that Liz Truss mini-budget, some to do with registered providers' dire finances, some stemming from their own adventures in development.

Much more sensible to take smaller developments, say anything below 50 homes, out of affordable housing policy requirements altogether, and instead simply collect a commuted non-negotiable S106 levy for social/affordable housing, or indeed any other civic gain, and apply it to another more efficient site elsewhere. At this stage of the game in London, to produce the fastest results, it could be anywhere in the capital that could offer efficient housing development.

Then there is the newfound lust for Build to Rent. Land Securities, a developer investor with roots deep in the last century, announced recently it was making a major adjustment to its portfolio, switching the emphasis from offices (around 60%) to residential by selling the former assets to reduce its office holdings to around one third, while increasing its residential holdings to take up the slack.

That is a signal to all local authorities, particularly in London, that the vast estates they hold in council housing that are ageing, low density and in dire need of estate renewal, simply to meet new building regulation carbon targets never mind any other ambitions, could be a more than suitable repository for some of that investment ambition given the right conditions. Just don't tax the life out of the deals.

The only thing getting in the way of supplying more 'affordable' housing is the vast mountain of shibboleths erected without planning permission in the public sector's mindset.

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Ungumming planning



Hellman cover from P1L131

Planning is about the acceptable use of land

You may have read this sentiment here before but it seems to be gathering momentum. Paul Finch makes the case on page 13 that the government seems remarkably coy about seizing opportunities which can make things happen quickly. The notion of unblocking planning to boost economic growth has been well rehearsed but the initiatives to date, including the revised NPPF, seem to take only a middle- to long-term view.

Mike Kiely, chairman of the Planning Officers Society says [page 45] "Too much is loaded on planning decisions in the form of conditions required to ensure compliance with other legislation or regulations. Informatives about the need to comply with those requirements are as far as planning decision letters should go. It is then for other council services or organisations to ensure compliance with their legislation or regulations".

Lord Moylan at the recent Planning Forum [page 40 et seq] said: "All I'm saying is that there are things that planning is going to do about sticking stuff in the right place. And there's a load of other regulation of other stuff, which other bits of government do. But if we choose not to regulate through other means, and make the planning regime do it, then we're all stuffed".

And Robert Oates, founder and chief executive of London-based Arbttech, writing in *The Times* says: "Right now, local planning authorities are simply firefighting. If their officers had more time and head space they could focus more on strategic functions, such as the production of high-quality planning guidance, community engagement work and up-to-date, detailed local plans". He, like the Association of Consultant Architects, supports the idea of bringing in private consultants to do some of the processing of the bulk of straightforward planning applications.

We must hope that the eagerly awaited new update of planning guidance from government dissolves some of the glue which holds back the efficiency and predictability of the planning process. ■

A bridge too few

Eliminating the private motorist from London

News that the strengthened and re-opened Hammersmith Bridge will nevertheless not carry cars will be no surprise to observers of Mayor Sadiq Khan's quiet war on Londoners who live on the south side of the Thames. True, the new Silvertown road tunnel will do something to help transpontine movement, but that is as much about traffic coming from outside London as it is about the capital itself.

Meanwhile, central London continues to feel the pinch of hostility towards movement from south to north. Central London's bridges are narrowed (Wandsworth, Waterloo, Blackfriars); incapable of taking you north because you hit a T-junction (Southwark); barred to ordinary motorists (London Bridge); or just plain slow (Tower Bridge).

One might imagine this is the systematic working out of former Transport for London boss Sir Peter Hendy's pledge: to eliminate the private motorist from London (instead filling up roads with his beloved but alas mostly empty buses). If so, why grant innumerable licenses to Uber drivers, most of whom hate the Mayor, even if they come from his community? And who but a peculiar person reduces the capacity of a system when demand is increasing because of population growth and the rise and rise of home delivery vehicles? And buses for that matter.

Along with the perverse imposition of near-universal 20mph speed limits – needless to say these do not apply to cyclists who continue to roam London without insurance or registration discs – all this is bound to slow London traffic, which indeed it is doing, thereby increasing fuel emissions because journey times are increasing.

How old do you have to be to remember the last time central London built a new bridge capable of taking car traffic? Answers on a postcard, preferably sent to the Mayor's difficult-to-reach parlour. ■