

Re-calibrating planning

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Planning still features large in HM Treasury thinking (*see Budget vox-pop from page 26*). Most interesting was the Chancellor's call for a three-tier system of development control: "The Government will review the General Permitted Development Order with a 'refreshed approach' introduced based on a three-tier system to decide the appropriate level of permission. Small-scale changes would be decided through Permitted Development rights, while Prior Notification would be used for development where specific issues need to be considered, and planning permission for large-scale development." Dismissed as nothing new by the Government's chief planning officer, it is new both as a perception and in practice.

Permitted Development rights are now a wide-ranging and complex muddle – partly the result of simplifications and relaxations. They have recently gone beyond householder extensions to include commercial and badly need fresh, clear reconsideration on the basis of their impacts.

New is the prior notification process, until just now a minor control for telephone masts, it has come in with a vengeance. It is used to consider very limited criteria in connection with new relaxations in changes of use, mainly from B1 to housing but with more to come. Some London boroughs have had to set up special teams – encouraged by the discipline of the "use it or lose it" deadlines necessarily imposed on them.

So what is now mooted by the Chancellor is three categories of development, though there is a fourth category, the NSIPs (Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects) which should be extended to include new settlements (*see our New Towns feature from page 39*).

Re-calibrating planning in this way has the prospect of removing some of the over-detailed dross and re-focusing skills on all sides on proactive, visionary plan- and place- making as called for by the Farrell Review.

The Farrell Review fails to recognise the benefits of our uniquely pragmatic approach to development

Three tiers for the design of place

Terry Farrell's just published review correctly laments our lack of proactive, positive planning and its predominantly reactive processes. Rightly he suggests we should learn more from how other countries do it but he fails to recognise the benefits of our uniquely pragmatic approach to development. Rather he suggests that rigid land use zoning can take many variables and issues 'off the table', reducing the consideration of an application to just a few key aspects – including the design of 'place'. He points out that the Shard has never featured in any plan – though it's there and, he admits, he likes it!

Despite the effective nationalisation of development rights over private land established by the 1947 Act, development control still allows creative and imaginative possibilities beyond the constraints of the often obsolete development plan. Our places – and our economy – would lament the loss of this pragmatism: no more Shards and no Toyota factory in Burnaston either. A better adjustment would, I believe, be achieved by the move to the three-tier approach signalled by the Chancellor in his budget and discussed above.

An expansion of Permitted Development, if combined with more of the technical, specialist evaluation being carried out by approved consultants (as being newly introduced for listed building applications) will release authorities to focus on preparing visionary and up to date local plans.

The one bright note in the support for 'new towns' is that the airport might become one

Make Heathrow an urban garden city

For those who believe that Heathrow Airport is to aviation what the Royal Docks were to freight shipping, the one bright note in the otherwise meaningless cacophony of support for 'new towns' is the notion that the airport might become one. The 'London Borough of Heathrow' could be the capital's new town and overspill town rolled into one, built out to proper urban densities, and the site for the evolution of civic governance in the 21st century. Slightly larger than the Royal borough of Kensington & Chelsea, there is no reason why (assuming the airport shifts to the estuary) the development of such a new town should not be >>>

undertaken on the basis of RBKC densities, that is to say some of the highest densities in London.

As the Royal Borough demonstrates, it is not necessary to sacrifice open green space, or to litter the borough with absent-minded tall buildings, to achieve such densities. From that point of view, it might be possible to engage with the principles of the Town & Country Planning Association in respect of civilized urban development, provided that body is prepared to acknowledge that a new London borough should not be conceived as an offshoot of Ebenezer Howard.

Just assuming that the idea is worth considering, the question is how to take it forward. This is not about 'visionary' planning or revolutionary Corbusian propositions. We know how to do this stuff from a design point of view, but how might we procure it? That is a question worth examining since it involved structure, finance and above all skilled individuals who know how to get good things done. They may be in short supply, but they are needed more than ever, for projects in and beyond the capital itself. Perhaps Heathrow could act as a breeding ground for people who can think about delivery, re-use, regeneration and a future based on the rational use of land and resources.

Just say 'no' to garden cities

If we increased density in London's 33 boroughs to match that of Islington, we'd have a city that could house more than 20 million people

New 'garden cities' will never be the answer to London's severe housing shortage, which is a much bigger problem than that of shortage in the south-east generally. National politicians are chasing a regional sprat when they should be after the London mackerel. The Henley Business Centre's recent report made clear how serious a threat to London's continuing success the lack of affordable housing is.

Why do politicians persist in chasing the utopian ideal of garden cities, when they are clearly not the answer, nor are they needed? While it is undoubtedly a good thing to build 15,000 new homes at Ebbsfleet, it is not a garden city and nor will make the tiniest dent in London's housing need – which realistically is something like 60,000 new homes a year before it even begins to touch the sides of the 1m plus backlog of unsatisfied demand, never mind future population growth.

Lack of housing affordability is eroding London's competitiveness. The sound of 20 and 30-somethings complaining is getting much louder and political tension is rising. The LSE's Tony Travers has made the solution quite clear. If we increased density in London's 33 boroughs to match that of Islington, we'd have a city that could house more than 20 million people. Islington is one of the most desirable places to live in the world, if its prices are to be believed.

And this is after all precisely what the Victorians did when faced with growth, they densified, and they spread out. Simplistic ideas, however, like adding a storey to all two-storey streets, are very rare in planning – but they can work. There are also vast areas, like the Lea Valley for example, or Old Oak Common, or Croydon town centre, where really huge amounts of new housing could be accommodated. On the fringes of London, the sacred Green Belt can also accommodate a lot more housing and make much better use of bits of neglected green than is made at the moment.

In short, all the sturm und drang around building on the countryside, or destroying the Green Belt is political hokum because all the housing we need can be easily accommodated in London without chasing dreams of new garden cities – a smoke screen to avoid the hard-core arguments about precisely where to build new homes in London.

But this would involve a bit of local unrest and that's what politicians and planners fear most. It is why it takes Boris ages to pinpoint sites for new housing – he fears a political fracas.

One other big problem isn't helping. There is a lack of design resources in local authorities to propose how densification might be achieved. Development management, the only half of the "planning system" that effectively exists, is not the right tool for managing and encouraging growth. That requires good old propositional planning.

The private sector would probably be delighted to pay for it if it provided the certainty that affordable housing policies have destroyed...while failing to deliver what they promise. ■