

It's big picture time

Lord Adonis calls for a new vision for local authorities

Housing as you might expect provided a huge focus for both Labour and Tory party conferences. Very interesting to hear what Lord Adonis had to say at both events.

In his own backyard at the Labour conference Adonis was not keen on garden cities as a sensible solution, despite his leader pledging to deliver 200,000 homes a year by the end of a first term - provided of course Ed remembers to fit this into the budget. They will indeed be a very "tough and a tall order", as Adonis put it, and we've argued here there is no need for them if London exploits all of its potential supply. Nevertheless, we may as well pursue them because we're going to need all the housing we can create in the south east. Urban extensions are a much better and more feasible idea, if either party can persuade any urban places to accept them. Perhaps some sort of government "dowry" would encourage less nimbysism.

Lord Adonis went on to say "We need a new vision for local authorities. They have been largely disabled in terms of their vision for their own communities. We now need a new planning and master planning mentality." Popping up at a Tory fringe session, he then delivered a broadside to London local authorities, pointing out that they are by far the largest landowners: "43 per cent of Southwark is owned by Southwark Council...this isn't brownfield or expensive to treat land, the predominant use is existing council housing estates."

He also said that authorities "don't have for the most part good planners. They have become development control authorities, rather than planning authorities." He called for more good masterplanners to help realise that potential with central government "creating a resource that can be shared more widely".

Amen to that. Nor is there any reason to sacrifice employment land to housing. Modern industry and workspace can be mixed with housing. That would free up even more potential. The Tories have not got it quite right in this respect by simply removing red tape allowing greater permitted development. There is huge resistance to this. More carrot is required to get more proactive planning producing solutions.

London local authorities should get to it and not devote all their planning resource to unimportant detailed development control. It's big picture time.

The value of up-to-date local plans

Here is the perfect opportunity to speed up the Local Plan-making process

The need to get Local Plans on top of the job is underlined by the implications of the government's summer 'Technical consultation on planning' on further planning changes.

The new 'threat' of making permanent the permitted development relaxations from offices to residential from 2016 and to remove the exemptions – though there has not been enough evidence to assess their consequences – presents another challenge for local planning authorities. It is hard to see what has changed to invalidate the cases for exemptions for the very small proportion of authorities which were allowed them. The Minister has only said that the government will be listening to responses to the consultation, which has just ended.

Of wider effect is the proposal to add another criterion to prior notification approvals for these changes of use. The process proposed by the mayor, NPF, POS and London first (*see page 22*), makes complete sense and is a proper planning response. However it would be even better if it could simply be part of the local plan process. The evidence base and consultation called for are similar, the difference is in the timing – the need to put forward plans in a timely manner. Hundreds of local planning authorities were able submit a case for exemption from the offices to residential relaxation of the use classes order in a fortnight, demonstrating what they can achieve when motivated.

The real challenge is to amend the local plans process so that plans can readily be kept up-to-date as a matter of course. This would give authorities' the ability to update plans to steer market forces and to keep abreast of ministerial and legislative changes, rather than being always behind the curve and appearing to resist change rather than to lead and stimulate it.

To the extent that the process needs changing to achieve this, here is the perfect opportunity.

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“Prior notification is permitted development and not a form of planning application light”

One day we will arrive at the more satisfactory Swedish model where homes are just homes, ‘tenure-blind’

Three cheers for ‘three tiers’

The Chancellor in his last budget speech talked of a “three tier planning system”. He was referring to Permitted Development, Prior Notification and full planning applications.

Initially dismissed as ‘no change’, it is clear now that the expansion of permitted development rights using the prior notification route is in fact a radical way of reducing the scope of planning controls and targeting resources more effectively on the difficult cases.

Steve Quartermain, the government’s chief planning officer, at a recent National Planning Forum, emphasised that prior notification *is* permitted development and not a form of ‘planning application light’.

It would be sad if this conceptual clarity were to be lost (*see Jacqueline Backhaus page 17*) by the introduction of subjective or policy-influenced criteria into the prior notification decision-making process.

More homes, affordable homes

More housing supply need not lead to reduced standards as opponents of the relaxation from offices to residential claim. A widespread concern in local authorities – even though many predicted that there would be few such prior notification applications in their patch – is that poor homes will result partly because they avoid any “affordable housing” obligation (though they are still liable for CIL).

As announced in the Summer, the imposition of national space standards for housing is to be enforced through the Building Regulations, so generally controls of standards will be assured although local differences are being removed. Given the wide take-up of the new relaxations (*see page 24*), the real source of the problem is starting to be tackled – the lack of supply.

Inevitably the increase in supply will be reflected in lower house prices though, given the current imbalance in many parts of the country, London in particular, this will take time to materialise. These changes and the spreading net of CIL will squeeze the rather eccentric idea that it is the bricks rather than the families which qualify for subsidy.

One day we will arrive at the more satisfactory Swedish model where homes are just homes, ‘tenure-blind’, and it is a private matter for the occupiers whether or not they are in receipt of state subsidy for their rent or purchase. This would seem to be a healthier system than having private owners required to pay more to subsidise ‘affordable homes’ which are built as a part of the same development. ■

Next meeting of the London Planning & Development Forum

● on Thursday 11th December 2014 at 2.30pm at the British Property Federation, 5th Floor, St Albans House, 57-59 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4QX

Our host is Ghislaine Trehearne

● Discussion topics: London growth and the 2050 Mayoral Infrastructure plan
Led by Duncan Bowie; Jeremy Skinner and Corinne Swain (invited)

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Visitors are welcome. Please notify the Hon Secretary Drummond Robson at robplan@btconnect.com

