

# The failures of success

The most important lesson is that you cannot rely on one ideology to find solutions or create equality.



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

If you had to name one failure of Thatcherite policy that has dominated the UK's political consensus of the last 39 years since 1979, it would be the failure to create enough housing to meet everyone's needs.

In particular the combination of the impact of Right to Buy policies, fiscal rules around how receipts could not be reinvested by Councils, despite being forced sellers, and huge discounts offered to tenants – surely the biggest ever transference of wealth – and the imposition of a major hypothecated tax on developments and developers (S106), has ensured we do not have enough housing of the right types in the right places.

So the Dancing Queen's announcement of the removal of the cap on Council's Housing Revenue Accounts and the ability to borrow, prudentially, to invest more in housing, is a long overdue removal of a central plank of Thatcherism – even if you think a more appropriate Abba tune for Theresa to be 'dancing' to should be 'Waterloo'.

There already have been renewed calls to get rid of Right to Buy. Not so sure about that. It cleverly transferred a huge maintenance liability onto the new owners, but get rid of large discounts, maybe. And allow Councils to keep, spend or reinvest receipts? Yes.

Get rid of S106 planning policies? Probably not, because on larger schemes we want a proper social mix. Not us and them. But raise the threshold where it applies? Absolutely. Smaller schemes and builders have both become rare and less viable since S106 tax was applied to schemes of nine units and above. It should be 30 or 40 units and above.

S106 tax led not only to lack of viability but also disproportionately expensive negotiations and pre-planning consultancy – further eroding viability. And hands up who thought CiL was going to replace S106 payments? But no. Now developers have to pay both. Doh!

If Councils can invest, however, they will be able to gear up their own 'capital' with private finance. This is how regeneration is supposed to work. The state invests high-risk seed money and the market piggy backs. Horse before cart, not the other way round.

There remains the fear Councils will borrow too much, and reignite inflation – not to mention gerrymander the local vote by supplying people with cheap housing. But that's another issue. Frankly we just need the housing. We cannot see the Treasury dragon letting too much gold out into the market. The fundamental lesson of Monetarism seems to have been learnt - keep the bigger dragon of inflation under lock and key.

But the most important lesson from the last 39 years is that you cannot rely on one ideology to find solutions or create equality. That was Thatcherism's success - and its failure. And if more money is going to be invested in socially mixed housing-led developments, there is one more big lesson. You need flexible strategic urban visions, not legalistic 'local plans'. Visioning needs to happen quickly, carefully. You can turn it into policy later. We need to think harder about how to do this successfully, and invest in it. Or we'll end up with a series of opportunistic, cherry picking developments that don't make great places.

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# >>> The Elizabeth Line will be worth waiting for and should not delay Crossrail 2

Decisions delayed are almost inevitably made worse not better

It is disappointing that the line formerly known as Crossrail 1 will not now complete this year, but by the end of 2019. Understandably, Mayor Khan is reluctant to announce any specific time, no doubt partly because announcement of the delayed completion was shrouded in secrecy, as is often the British way when faced with a problem.

First, pretend it isn't happening; second, make a quick announcement and sweep the background under the carpet; and third, make sure it is difficult to blame anyone by shuffling personnel. In the case of Crossrail (a private company, let us remember, albeit answerable to Transport for London), the two key individuals at the top of the organization departed for exciting new jobs, rather than seeing through what they started. Not very edifying.

However, there is no point in dwelling for too long on the precise circumstances of why a project suddenly becomes a year late. You might say it is not a year late, but at least a decade. Why? Because in typical British fashion, we procrastinated endlessly about whether the project should proceed, just as we had previously procrastinated about the Jubilee Line.

What is it about the greatest city in the world that strategic decisions about its future seem to be taken by donkeys? It took so long for confirmation of the Crossrail project that every station except one saw a change of architect. There was huge uncertainty about routes, station details and what property would be blighted, which lasted far longer than was necessary. And of course costs significantly increased, the latest hike a £1 billion overspend as a result of the delayed final phase. At least the stations (with the exception of Bond Street) are completing on time.

The really worry thing about this story, from a broad London perspective, is the potential impact it will have on politicians thinking about Crossrail 2. You can hear the dreary litany of speeches coming down the yet-to-be-built track: 'Value for money . . . cost uncertainty at a time of restraint . . . too much investment in London . . . we should wait until HS2 is properly resolved' and so on.

The real lesson of Crossrail 1 is that decisions delayed are almost inevitably made worse not better; the outcomes are more expense not less; the opportunities lost are difficult to recover.

Remember the estuary airport at Maplin Sands, which had an extant planning permission but fell victim to mind-numbing political timidity? We are still waiting for something that should have completed before the end of the 20th century.

The message for TfL: keep on pushing. ■

# Crossrail 1 is on its way

Crossrail 1 AKA the Elizabeth line, despite the recent announcement of its delayed opening, is set to transform London. Whilst any immediate effect will be to relieve congestion on the underground, the Central line in particular, it will open up swathes of outer London to East and West in a way which will allow access to jobs in the centre to many people cannot afford to live there. As argued on the previous page, Crossrail 2 has the prospect of continuing this benign effect. They will do much to overcome the unaffordability of housing in London.

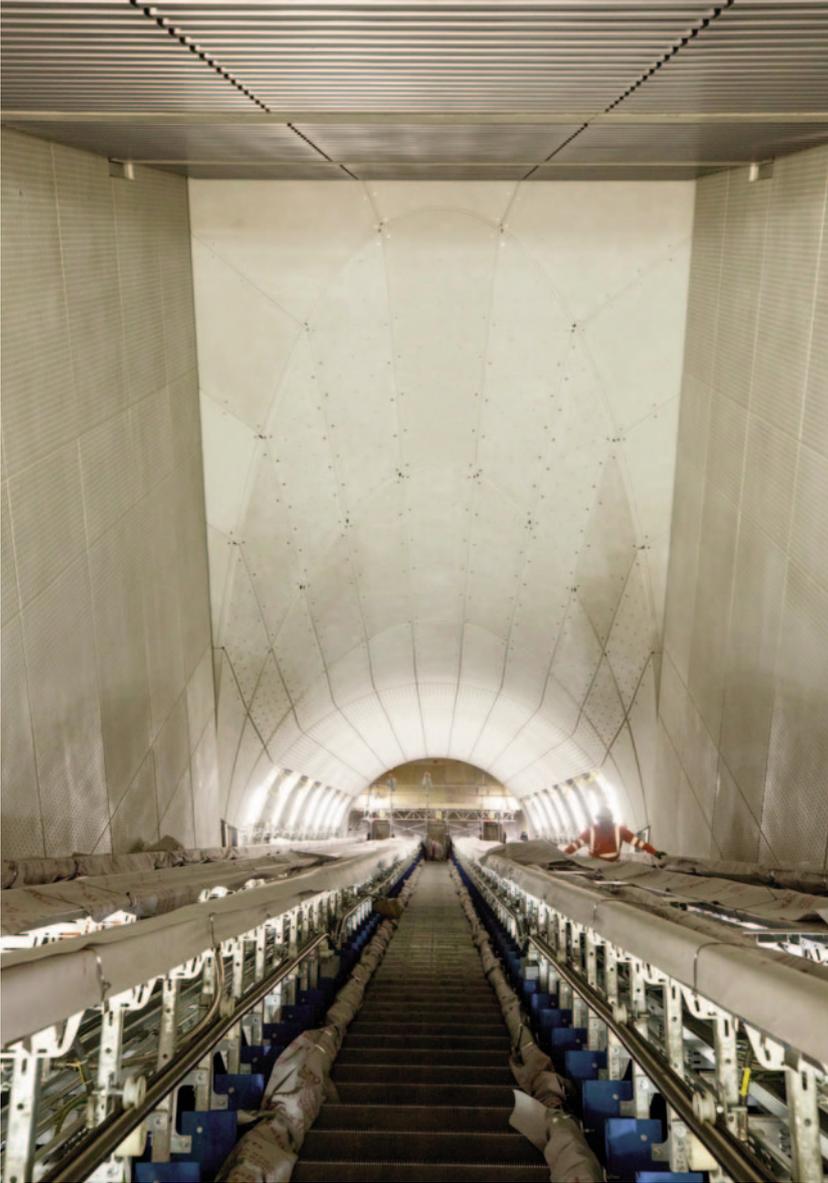
RIGHT:

The Class 345 train passing through the new Elizabeth Line station at Custom House

BELOW:

Elizabeth line test train at Paddington station  
*PHOTOS supplied by Crossrail Ltd*







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Whitechapel Station

Overhead power equipment and passenger walkway installed in tunnel

Bond Street station - tiling and platform screen doors complete

North Woolwich portal head house

