

Caution! Council house-building in progress

The planning system will have to police councils' own ambitions. Will that work out?

A century of council house building was celebrated recently. David Lloyd George set out his vision "To make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in" on 23 November 1918, two weeks after the end of WW1 - although London County Council had built the Boundary Estate 20 years earlier in 1900.

The provision of subsidised homes has been one of the main achievements of British political ideology ever since, before virtually disappearing as a local authority activity in the mid-1980s. We all know why. It was the planning system's job, directed by housing departments' assessment of need, to approve the design, location and standards of all those homes, especially after the 1947 Act. Yet London boroughs on average remain around 20 years behind their own house building targets if they are collectively to hit the homes required by Government targets by 2026.

But, wait, the cap on borrowing against housing stock is off, thanks to Theresa May's one memorable policy announced last October, likely to be her greatest legacy. And possibly the most appropriate political response to great need we've seen in recent decades. Even if, as is depressingly usual, it is a belated attempt to shut a stable door banging in a hurricane decades after the horse bolted to the knackers.

The Mayor of London reckons London's total "affordable housing stock" is around 812,000 homes. He still thinks we need a modest 66,000 homes a year. The population has been increasing at the rate of 120,000 a year. There is a massive backlog. Take what figure you like from the many proffered, but even if we built a million new homes in London, that would barely touch the sides, or dampen prices. And rather like the building of a new motorway, or Crossrail perhaps, such perspicacity will be rewarded with expanding demand.

So why bother? Why not keep that public money safe in the Treasury's coffers. Let's not perturb London's planners and socially-minded architects with a tsunami of new council housing, because it will only encourage more people to move here.

We need to bother for so many reasons. First is that increasing inequality and perceived or real diminishing opportunity stifled by housing unavailability, is a political fire in the hold. Then there are the enormous sums wasted annually by councils fulfilling statutory obligations to London's homeless lining the pockets of canny rentier investors.

There is also an enormous potential for new homes to be found from London's real Great Estates. That is the multi-billion-pound residential property portfolios of London's Councils. This is one of the world's largest, most neglected, investment assets, targeted at social good, now opening up, thanks to Theresa's munificence. But some think councils lack the skills and talent to deliver quality homes economically.

The planning system, also operated by councils, will have to police its own ambitions. Will that work out? It has worked well in some places (*SEE our next feature*), and it most definitely has not worked in others, which still need fixing. This needs some thought, not least because of the umbilical link between who you might vote for, and who provides your subsidised home. ■ >>>

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

Grading Metropolitan Open Land

Not all MOL sites are equal, and the sooner that is recognized, the better.

Planning in London recently argued in these columns that Metropolitan Open Land, London's version of Green Belt, needs a review. Our suggestion was that a grading system be introduced, rather like that for listed buildings, where Grade I would more or less be untouchable, Grade II generally difficult to build on, but Grade III would allow for construction provided the outcome would be in the general public interest.

That view is reinforced following a successful appeal against refusal of planning in respect of an MOL site next to Lower Sydenham railway station in the London Borough of Bromley. The inaccessible site was formerly used as a football pitch associated with the former Dylon factory which closed in the 1970s.

Two residential developments were granted permission on appeal next to the MOL site; an earlier appeal failed in respect of what is known as the Dylon 2 site. A revised development, taking into account the inspector's comments, was submitted to Bromley but refused permission. The appeal focused on whether the 'very special circumstances' required to allow development on an MOL site had been met. Much of the argument centred on the borough's failure to ensure adequate five-year land supply for an appropriate housing programme.

However, another issue was the quality of the design, by Ian Ritchie Architects. The council's QC tried to argue that the quality of design was indivisible from the planning context – and that since we were dealing with MOL, the design could not have taken that into account. This was a silly argument since it implied that creative architectural design could not, or should not, happen in such a context. The inspector was in fact full of praise for the architect's work.

Happily, the appeal was granted a mere two weeks after the 10-day inquiry closed – and would probably have been granted even earlier but for a fruitless attempt on the council's part to seek costs from the appellant. This was the inspectorate at its best: hearing the evidence, coming to a clear conclusion and relaying the result at the earliest opportunity. (In this, it contrasts with the year-long wait – still waiting – for the result of the 'Chiswick Curve' appeal in respect of a residential tower at the start of the elevated M4 motorway.) What the Mayor of London and other policy-makers should consider is that while excellent design may not by itself represent the 'very special circumstances' which could justify MOL development, without that quality, other factors would probably not be enough on their own. But the more general message is that not all MOL sites are equal, and the sooner that is recognized, the better. ■

Building Beautiful Commission seeks views

As we go to press, the bizarrely named 'Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission' is issuing its interim report into how we could create beautiful mixed-use places, which would attract community support because of their 'beauty' and would therefore result in faster planning and, who knows, a significant contribution to addressing our housing shortage.

Comments are invited, which PiL readers will no doubt react to, and which will result in coverage in our next issue. The first question, of course, is how do you assess beauty? Opinion poll? Royal Academicians? Planning committees? This one will run and run.. ■