

# Achievement to be celebrated

Thames Tideway is arguably the most significant piece of infrastructure for London since the water Ring Main

As news media waxed furious about sewage discharges into the Thames coinciding with the Oxford/Cambridge Boat Race, few bothered to celebrate the completion of the Thames Tideway Tunnel, which is now being tested and will come into full action next year, eliminating 95 per cent of 'incidents' where heavy rain results in overloading of Joseph Bazalgette's extraordinary Victorian sewerage system.

Thames Tideway is arguably the most significant piece of infrastructure for London since the water Ring Main, though one should forget neither the Jubilee Line nor the Elizabeth Line in a list of great achievements which suggest our metropolis can still feel like a world-class city.

In the case of TT, the fact that it is largely invisible means that it lacks the glamour required for a ritzy celebration. For ideologues who believe that private sector investment inevitably results in the public being ripped off (and in the case of Thames Water they have a point), TT is an unhelpful example of capitalism put to good use. (Needless to say this project was opposed on planning grounds by the usual collection of hopeless luvvies incapable of understanding the infrastructure needs of a 21st century city.)

Completion of the project raises a question which our politicians should give more consideration to – which is why we cannot treat the provision of mass housing as an infrastructure exercise, rather than a series of one-off developments all over London.

This is especially so, given that the idea that we are so short of money that we cannot build our way out of the housing shortage is evidently not the case. The ability of private investors to raise all the capital they needed for TT suggests otherwise.

The short answer to the above question is that we do not appear to have an organisation that has the necessary commitment to delivering what we need on the housing front, at least in London.

Where is the equivalent of Homes England in the capital? We desperately need an overarching body that has funding, planning powers (and CPO powers too) which can address severe shortages in the way that the TT folk addressed a pressing environmental need.

The current mayoral election campaign shows little sign that anyone is taking the subject with the necessary vision or commitment.

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

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# Let's not go back to the future

Everyone seems to agree we should build more council houses to solve the housing crisis, for which the planning system is taking flak

Here, for argument's sake, are some reasons why we shouldn't rush back to the future - or blame planning.

1 – Architects are very keen on it. It comes with a warm sense of social fulfilment. Like being a doctor, proof of socially useful status. And you might be able to design something that actually looks like decent residential architecture. But architects' record isn't fantastic. And neither is local authorities' management record. A road paved with good intentions, but less happy destinations, unless carefully conceived and managed by a dynamic and sensitive owner.

2 – Councils would love to. It earns them money and cements them in public life. Who wouldn't vote for a local authority that provided one with a less expensive place to rent with affordable service charges and a secure tenancy? But what about the large amounts of economic value trapped in the vast residential property portfolio of UK local authorities? Taxpayers fund this service and we hear little about the condition and effective management of this asset.

3 – Taxpayers would like it. They are fuming about the amounts of rent they have to pay in the private sector and because it is pretty much impossible to get a council flat and the cost of what they want to buy are utterly out of reach in London. You want kids? Leave London. But would Councils deliver for taxpayers? Unlikely as they don't seem very interested in anything but social housing. Nor are they much good at extracting full value from their property holdings.

4 – Councils will become much better developers and managers than they have been. Some councils do good works. But even so, there isn't much public information made available about their performance as developers and managers, such as you might expect of private housing providers. A quick dip into the condition and development potential of many public property portfolios reveals missed opportunities that might not go unpunished in a private company. Housing associations are not famed for their management abilities either. There's an opaque accountability deficit. And Croydon's experience is a salutary reminder that development is risky and can rapidly turn toxic.

5 – There is no better way of delivering the housing we need at scale. There is. The assumption that subsidised housing should be provided by the public sector alone doesn't stand up. There are tens of billions of pounds trying to get into the UK's undersupplied rented sector. Could the private sector working with the public sector do it quicker and better?

Maybe a more productive role for the public sector would be to closely police and manage a joint public/private housing delivery system for affordable housing to circumnavigate the worst of all worlds that prevails where affordable housing planning policies fail to deliver and local authorities are too constrained in what they can do. ■