

# Don't ignore those who know how it is

The Government needs to work with planning officers to avoid confusion argues the president of the Planning Officers Society, David Hackforth



David Hackforth is President of the Planning Officers Society

**It is understandable** that a new government wants to make changes and to put its stamp on things early on – particularly when they have very publicly flagged up their intentions. It is also undeniable the planning system was not working as intended so some change is necessary. I believe it should be evolutionary –

particularly to simplify the LDF system – not scrapping it and starting again.

Councils are just getting to grips with the system introduced by the 2004 Act and have invested substantial resources in it. From a very slow start an increasing number of core strategies were being submitted and adopted. Introducing a new system, which would need primary legislation would create delay and uncertainty and undermine economic recovery.

We can see the consequences of ill-considered drastic change – the Eric Pickles letter announcing the end of regional planning in England (outside London) has caused immense confusion. Several councils have stopped work on their core strategies, unclear as to what (if any) strategic basis they should be working to. Others have pulled planning applications from committee agendas because it is no longer clear on what basis they could make a lawful decision.

This could and should have been avoided. There should have been a proper transition to a new strategic planning system based on sub-regions. It would not need to be the same in all parts of the

country: in some areas it could be based on city regions; elsewhere counties might be an appropriate basis while in other localities groupings of councils like the existing Milton Keynes and South Midlands sub-region could emerge.

Before the election the Conservatives showed an admirable willingness to discuss and “road test” their ideas for changing the planning system with practitioners and the development industry. I attended the first (and so far only) meeting of the “sounding board” announced by Caroline Spelman and took part in a useful preliminary discussion with Bob Neill and Grant Shapps – both now CLG Ministers. Ironically that meeting took place on 6 April – the day that Parliament was dissolved and so far there is no indication when or if there will be a second meeting.

The Planning Officers Society (POS) remains keen to engage with the new government and I have written to Eric Pickles to confirm this. Whatever the planning system is, it is POS members who will have to make it work. We are not seeking to stop the government making changes but we do want them to think about the implications of changes and make sure that we end up with a workable planning system. That is why we have recently published *Three Steps to Better Planning* setting out our ideas on how planning can be improved.

One of my ambitions as POS President was to increase cooperation with other organisations with an interest in planning. In response to the formation of the coalition government Ann Skippers (President of the RTPI) and I published a joint statement *The Future of Strategic Planning*. In that statement we called on the government to:

- Allow a brief, but realistic, period of time for

discussion prior to implementing its current plans to abolish the local government-based structures for regional planning;

- Work with us – and with the many other bodies representing the development, investment, economic development and environmental sectors – to devise a way ahead that will retain the strategic planning necessary to help to support and achieve the Government’s programme, help drive economic growth and make best use of the expertise and commitment that already exists;

- Maintain the funding of the current regional planning teams whilst these discussions are taking place.

For our part, we committed ourselves to:

- Make this an immediate priority and to work swiftly, positively and effectively with the Department for Communities and Local Government and other relevant Departments on this issue;

- Present a co-ordinated view from the two bodies to Government;

- To liaise with the range of other relevant bodies from all sectors to seek as much consensus as possible on the way ahead on this vital issue.

Sadly, our call fell on deaf ears and Eric Pickles sent his letter out a few days later.

There is an irony in writing this piece for Planning in London because few of the difficulties I have described apply in London. London retains effective, democratically accountable regional planning via The London Plan and this will continue to provide a clear strategic context for the Boroughs’ LDFs.

So my message to Eric Pickles is (apologies to Ralph McTell) “let me take you by the hand and lead you through the plans of London. I’ll show you something to make you change your mind”. ■

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# A frenzied approach to planning

CBRE's Stuart Robinson thinks the new Government's frenetic pace might cause some planning turbulence further down the line



CBRE's Stuart Robinson

**It might have taken a while to set up**, but once up and running the Coalition Government has been a whirlwind of frenetic activity. The 30 page Coalition Agreement filled the void left from not having a manifesto as the blue print for Government.

The Agreement provides a useful overview of the Government's key principles and priorities.

Planning was always an area where the parties were closely aligned; both steeped in the principle of localism, driving decisions to the lowest possible level. As a result there were no surprises with planning reform to be based on the Tories' Open Source Planning Green Paper. The one relief is that there was no explicit mention of third party appeals; although I fear the danger has not yet fully subsided.

As a matter of priority the Decentralisation and Localism Bill will remove Regional Spatial Strategies and with them housing targets imposed on local authorities. More 'radical' planning reform will take longer. The urgent need to provide more housing has not subsided with the change of government or recession. Falling house prices have not addressed the fundamental need to build more homes to meet the challenge of demographic change and population growth.

The last Government were right to make house-building a priority, but was too aggressive in its approach; forcing through high targets on unwilling authorities. The new Government's approach is the reverse; incentivising change using carrots rather than sticks.

In place of housing targets authorities will be incentivised to encourage development through Treasury match funding council tax receipts, and retention of business rates, for the first six years after development. Whilst this is laudable, I wonder whether this is enough to overcome entrenched opposition to change and voters' concern about its impacts on local services, infrastructure and house prices. I fear that the promised creation of a new

designation, similar to SSSIs, to protect 'green areas of particular importance to local communities' will be another tool in the NIMBY's toolkit.

The Bill will also abolish the Infrastructure Planning Commission and replace it with a fast-track, efficient and democratic system. As long as the system remains streamlined and is genuinely fast-tracked, the fact that the final decision maker is not an independent body should not make a significant difference. The key issue is sticking to a strict timetable for decision making, and making those decisions against the backdrop of clear national policy.

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The national planning framework which will cover all types of development and set out national economic, environmental and social priorities is a laudable but highly ambitious objective. I fear it could be swamped in years of debate and argument. It could also undermine localism if it strays into too much detail.

I am also concerned about the strong focus on the local plan. In an ideal world local authorities would have evidenced-based, up to date and deliverable plans. But we are in a world that is far from ideal. Authorities' struggle to get plans in place will not be helped by likely cuts in resourcing in planning departments. In such uncertain times plans need to be flexible and authorities dynamic; able to be opportunistic and responsive. Rigid adherence to local plans will stifle this.

The supposed presumption in favour of sustain-

able development becomes weaker when one considers it must be in line with the local plan as well as clearing other hurdles such as paying a tariff; undergoing appropriate consultation and not being subject to objections from the significant majority of immediate residential neighbourhoods.

Little has been said on the Community Infrastructure Levy, no doubt as Ministers weigh their options. In my view it is too complex and would result in a less development as costs rise. It is inevitable that CIL will just be an additional tax as measures to scale back S106 do no such thing. Let's hope that Ministers decide that in these challenging times it would be preferable to improve the section 106 process rather than go for wholesale change while the development industry is fragile and recovering from recession, and planning departments are under huge strain which is likely to increase as the cuts start.

Cuts to planning departments are a real concern; local government will be contributing £1.2 billion towards the overall £6.2 billion of savings this year through grant reductions. Planning departments are easy targets; few council tax payers will object to a loss of planning staff and probably wouldn't even notice. This means authorities must do more with less; training will be critical, as it should be for members of the planning committee, so they fully understand the decisions they are being asked to make.

These are as they say interesting times. The initial signs from the Coalition are fairly positive; they are prepared to be bold when they need to be, and hopefully will take their time when they don't. I hope that they will be bold when it comes to ensuring that we deliver the homes that are so desperately needed. ■

# The problem with students today...

Affordable housing requirements are stymieing much-needed student housing schemes vital to London's global appeal, argues Knight Frank's John Richards



John Richards BSc (Hons) MSc MRTPI is an Associate at Knight Frank LLP

**Ask the average person on the street** to describe what they most associate with "students" and you'll most likely go away with reinforced stereotypes involving daytime TV and copious amounts of alcohol consumption.

In London these populist images are being challenged by the increasing number of international students who are attracted to study in London due to its Sassen-inspired Global City status and aim of becoming a Global Knowledge Capital. The international appeal of London is reflected in the 40% increase in students from abroad enrolling at London-based universities since 2001 contributing to the 260,000 full-time university students that now study here.

The 2008 London Plan clearly recognises the strong social, cultural and emotional ties that form between a student and the city they study in. This relationship puts universities in a privileged position of playing a direct role in attracting and retaining those students - and future employees - with the skill sets necessary to ensure London remains a globally-competitive city. The planning system has an important role in ensuring universities are provided with flexible and proactive policies that allow them to continue to offer internationally competitive educational facilities.

There are a myriad of factors that cumulatively contribute to the attractiveness of a particular university to both domestic and international prospective students. The availability, quality and cost of student accommodation is one of the key factors that determines the competitiveness of a particular university - and university city - against its rivals.

A research paper published by Knight Frank and entitled *London Student Living* paints a challenging picture where London suffers from a chronic under-supply of student housing to the extent that only 20% of students can be offered university accommodation. In real terms this has resulted in 200,000

students in London being unable to access purpose-built accommodation. With the international university sector being so competitive, will London be in a position to compete with comparable cities such as New York and Sydney when attracting the highest quality academic students?

The 2008 London Plan - and whisper this - appears to take a fairly pragmatic and flexible approach to student housing delivery recognising not only that there is a severe accommodation shortfall which requires addressing with a supportive planning policy context but also that if this shortage of purpose-built student accommoda-

## THE LONDON PLAN MUST RECOGNISE THAT STUDENT HOUSING WILL CONTRIBUTE TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING

tion continues, it will place greater pressure on the private housing sector, with students increasing their occupancy of HMOs and private rental properties.

Given that there is little debate regarding the severe lack of affordable housing (in the broadest sense of the word) in London it follows that the planning system should be doing all it practically can to address the clear correlation between the lack of bespoke student housing and the occupation of HMOs and private rental properties by students.

The London Plan appears to recognise the link between student housing and the occupation of private rental properties by not requiring affordable housing in association with student housing schemes. The rationale is clear - student housing schemes do contribute to the availability of affordable housing by freeing up private rental properties previously occupied by students due to lack of available bespoke accommodation. On the surface, the 2009 consultation draft of the replacement London Plan appears to reiterate this approach with new student housing provision being seen as key to reducing pressure on other parts of the housing

stock currently occupied by students.

However, tucked away in the supporting text is the assumption that unless a proposal for student accommodation is secured through a legal agreement for occupation by members of specified educational institutions for a predominant part of the year, then the development will normally be subject to the requirements of affordable housing.

This requirement for affordable housing risks making any proposal for student accommodation that is not associated with a particular university unviable thus potentially further exacerbating the supply of student accommodation. What the replacement London Plan fails to recognise is that the shortage of student accommodation is most acute for international, postgraduate and research students who often study independently from the institution with which they are enrolled. The type of accommodation sought by such students is commonly not campus based or tied to a particular institution where rooms are provided cheek-by-jowl alongside more enthusiastic first year students, but is rather higher quality, independent living accommodation which prioritises the quality of the living and studying environment.

It is precisely this type of private, independent student accommodation that meets an identified need that may be discouraged from being brought forward on viability grounds due to the requirement for affordable housing. There is a real risk that this approach will exacerbate the lack of accommodation available to those students, who are internationally based or at an advanced stage of study, who are forced into the private rental sector.

The London Plan must recognise that independent student housing for which there is a clear demonstrable need - especially if brought forward on commercial sites - will contribute to affordable housing by reducing pressure on the private rented stock by those students who can not access bespoke student accommodation. The requirement for on-site affordable housing risks placing additional cost burdens on such schemes that cater for a type of housing need that, if left unaddressed, will continue to impact upon the availability of affordable housing. ■

# A regional vacuum

Righteous and extensive concern has been expressed about the new Government's desire to abandon regional strategies. Drummond Robson explores what lies behind this.



Drummond Robson is a planning consultant and Hon Secretary of the LP&DF

It is not a question of saving a tier of bureaucracy or offering more localism to a partially informed electorate but looking at what the strategies do and what would be lost without them.

The bedrock is demographics: population change. The objective and impartial Office for

National Statistics tells us how many births and deaths are likely and also based on trends what migration rates will be. This in turn shows what housing pressures there are – or are not - and where they are likely to be felt, then the employment and infrastructure and environmental implications.

These in turn have clear implications for our economy in a competitive world as well as our

quality of life and indeed happiness. The market is as interested in these matters as is the planning system or the local community and they cannot be manipulated for political ends without considerable pain to one or another sector of society.

The obvious example is that too few houses leads to unsatisfied sharing, scarcity value of property and possibly social unrest, certainly discontent and frustration – sound familiar? Employment, infrastructure etc. are equally vulnerable to instant manipulation and tinkered with at our peril. All weighty matters.

It is more important to see what genuine and legitimate flexibility there is in these fundamentals rather than spending endless time deciding what is the best political vehicle to deliver them – be it Regions Counties or Districts, since by the time that has happened the palatable choices will have gone.

In practice the room for manoeuvre is not great. The majority of the population will go on getting older, having children and dying at rates we have

little collective control over. Given the constraints on migration arising from European controls and the needs of a useful workforce the scope for playing with these is not as great as politicians would like to believe. We are unlikely to move to another planet any time soon so these are the only demographics we have.

There are limits to acceptable densities in urban areas and limits too to rural capacity, irrespective of some urge to protect some poorly understood concepts of compact cities or Green Belt (a term that is not an environmental but rather an administrative designation, incidentally).

These are the issues which led to the need for a profession called Town and Country Planning. For heaven's sake, if Planning has any real meaning let's try to get back to its fundamentals again before we disappear in this organisational cacophony, which I try hard to see a greater aim for than merely to manipulate future voting patterns rather than genuinely trying to make the places we have better.

# London planners show how to plan to live within our means

Leonora Rozee previews September's forthcoming Planning Summer School



Leonora Rozee OBE is President of Planning Summer School

With its theme of 'Planning to live within our means', this year's Planning Summer School at York in September will lead on the impact of new government policy for the planning profession and decision makers with London planners playing important roles.

When and where better to learn about the new challenges we face and develop the skills to meet those challenges. Don't miss this opportunity to prepare for a new era of 'austerity' planning.

The line up of speakers for both Planners' and Elected Members' Schools includes John Gummer MP, Baroness Andrews, Lord Richard Best OBE and CLG Chief Planner, Steve Quartermain. Head of planning at LB Camden Ed Watson will show how

to manage development and Stewart Murray from LB Barnet will talk about "Planning on a Fiver". You can take advantage of our early bird and multi-buy discount tickets and allow your authority to maximise the benefits it will gain from the whole school package.

The many and varied practical and informative workshops and study tours will provide up to date knowledge and skills for the new era of planning. In addition, and within the context of the coalition's thoughts on the 'Big Society', we will be having two 'Big Debates'.

Elected Members will debate housing with consultants Kelvin MacDonald and Julie Cowans alongside HCA Chair, Robert Napier and Andrew Whitaker of the Home Builders Federation, whilst another session will focus on the continuing need to coordinate infrastructure provision with papers provided by Jack Hegarty, Managing Director of Wychavon Council and Infrastructure Planning

Commission chairman, Sir Michael Pitt.

The Planners' School will feature a debate on prosperity and growth, issues close to the heart of the new government's agenda, when University of Surrey Professor Tim Jackson alongside the TCPA Chief Planner, Dr Hugh Ellis will face London School of Economics Professor Paul Cheshire and financial expert, Kate Barker.

PSS provides training "by practitioners for practitioners" and is run by its volunteer members who have their day jobs in a variety of public and private sector businesses. Its residential and campus format, with evening lectures and entertainment, and its egalitarian ethos, allows delegates to get to know others and learn from their experiences. Quality training at excellent value for money is what we pride ourselves for.

*The Elected Members' School takes place from 3-7 September and the Planners' School from 7-11 September. [www.planningsummerschool.org](http://www.planningsummerschool.org)*