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The London Planning and Development Forum (LPDF)

The LPDF was formed in 1980 following an all-party inquiry into the development control system. It selects topics to debate at its quarterly meetings and these views are reported to constituent bodies. It is a sounding board for the development of planning policy in the capital, used by both the public and private sector.

Agendas and minutes are at planninginlondon.com. To attend please contact secretary Drummond Robson: robplan@btconnect.com

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YEARBOOK 2012

A YEAR OF THRILLS AND SPILLS?

London finds itself at the hub of a tense world as we bring you the tenth Planning in London Yearbook which this year incorporates the 80th issue of the quarterly journal of the London Planning & Development Forum. A year ago we seemed to be tentatively emerging from a nasty recession. A second wave of uncertainty has been triggered by the threat of sovereign default across the Eurozone and the demise of the currency union and here we can only hope to avoid a double-dip as we enter 2012.

Meanwhile in the UK the planning system is undergoing fundamental reappraisal and new development has shuddered to a halt. But London seems to be sheltered by a magic aura. As a safe haven in a troubled world, new housing at the top end sees a lively market, office schemes are moving ahead as are major mixed developments, both those underway as at Kings Cross and more are emerging as at Earl's Court and Nine Elms. Infrastructure projects are supporting London's economy too: Crossrail, the Thames Tunnel and a general upgrading of transport with the Underground and more generally for the Olympics as well as the prospect of HS2.

And not just the Olympics but before then the Diamond Jubilee will give us cause for celebration at home and abroad. The timing of much of this investment is helpfully counter-cyclical and its benefits will be appreciated once the recession is over.

London is blessed too in its planning setup. Localism may be defined as "a political philosophy by which local authorities get the blame for cuts ordered in Whitehall", but with boroughs sheltered by the London Plan and the powers of the Mayor, they can get on with business while the benefits of localism and new neighbourhood plans can only add strength and commitment from our many vibrant communities – both residential neighbourhoods and Business Improvement Districts. We can expect London to demonstrate the benefits to be gained when these come together to inject their vision into borough framework plans.

The Forum continues to achieve a lively and helpful dialogue and understanding between public and private sectors and I thank its members and the contributors to this special yearbook issue of the journal for their thoughtful contributions to the continuing debate.

Together let's ensure that London leads the way out of the gloom and towards an enhanced living and working experience for all Londoners and our many visitors.

Brian Waters, chairman, the London Planning & Development Forum

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Chelsfield



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A world city needs big ideas, big decisions

The major planning issues for London's future as we get ready to enjoy our Olympic year are all at an epic scale. The biggest, the proposals for an estuary airport produced by Foster + Partners and Halcrow, are a reminder that the capital can still think big. Not only does this bold proposition put into context the potential benefits a change in airport location might bring, but reminds us that assumed certainties about London's physical infrastructure are not divinely ordained perpetuities. Nobody believed the London docks would close 40 years before they did; equally, many find it impossible to believe that Heathrow could be the equivalent of the Royals by 2050.

So let's remember our history, and look at the Foster plan with all due seriousness. At first sight, given the extra elements envisaged, such as a new Thames Barrier, it is reminiscent of ideas being promoted by Terry Farrell before his attentions were claimed by West London and the high-speed rail proposal. This is another big issue, with heavy doses of political worry and opportunism thrown in for good measure. It is tempting to see it as part of a European programme of fast train travel aimed at combating carbon emissions as much as speeding up the journey time between London and Birmingham.

There is no conflict between these two gigantic transport proposals and they should not be regarded as alternative investment ideas. They do different things in different ways; what they have in common is a belief that world class transport facilities, with maximum interchange possibilities built in, are essential to maintain London's place at the forefront of global cities, with all that implies for its future as a financial centre.

As to the other big planning and development propositions for London, most are about opportunity rather than problems. Nine Elms, King's Cross, Earls Court, the Royals – all extraordinary areas at different stages of evolution, but all showing that the appetite for development is still with us, despite worries about the broad economic environment. Even Battersea Power Station, that perennial subject of failed proposals, has finally received the boost it needed with a government commitment to see an Underground connection built albeit dependent on new forms of local financing.

It should be noted that all this is happening in advance of the supposedly revolutionary reforms taking place in the planning system, and hasn't had a huge amount to do with localism except in the sense that it took 20 years too long for something to happen at King's Cross. So will the government's new policies produce a huge boost for the development market, or will we spend the next few years building out what has been produced under the existing regulatory regime? Probably the latter, at least as far as 2012 is concerned; the emerging policies for post-Games regeneration show that our old friend the development corporation is alive and well. The Mayor's version will have powers even the old LDDC would have envied.

The key point in all this is that London is still a focus for intense development and planning activity, supplemented by transport investment; the stakes are high, but it is a good game to be in. ■

Ignorance is not bliss

The sudden disappearance of planning performance statistics will do nothing for planning or performance. The genesis of the "Development Control Forums" was to monitor the perceived poor timeliness of planning authorities in processing planning applications. They were the government's response to a parliamentary inquiry into development control in 1976. Regional fora and a national forum, intended to bring together representatives of local authorities and the development industry, held local planning authorities to account with particular reference to their speed (or lack of) in processing applications. Only the renamed London Planning & Development Forum (LPDF) and the National Planning Forum (NPF) still function today.

The consolidated planning performance statistics have fallen victim to The Cuts, replaced it seems by a memo telling authorities to publish their performance on their websites. This of course, even where they bother, will mean little to the locals who will have no basis for comparison and will make this important data effectively inaccessible to applicants and their professionals. If performance slides who will be surprised?

In recent years LPAs have been well incentivised to meet handed-down targets. The Planning Delivery Grant was replaced by more abstract targets relating to housing starts, but encouragingly the culture of the eight and thirteen week deadlines continues and data should be reported to the DCLG. At least until cuts took their toll last March, since when no data has been collated by the department.

We have sought to remedy this omission, asking London boroughs to supply basic performance figures with their profiles published in this Yearbook. Not all have obliged. Where they are posted on their websites they lack the essential comparison with their peers and we are only able in this issue to print the last available set up to last March (see Briefing, page 68).

Planning departments have to be well resourced and their fee income has to be adequate. We believe that if the government does allow a fee free-for-all with boroughs charging what they like (justified by full cost recovery) then competition along the lines of Building Control has to follow. We are talking about the applicant being given a choice of provider. That is, to process the application before submitting a planning report to the relevant LPA for its decision.

The competition may be achieved by allowing any LPA to offer the service or the introduction of "approved inspectors", or a combination. A degree of "self certification" by approved agents would also make sense, as the government is now considering for listed building applications. Planning, unlike Building Control, has a democratic dimension, hence the need for the local authority to take the decision, but this should not be overstated since 95 per cent of applications are in any case delegated to officers. And planning inspectors manage to do this job!

Such a regime would relieve development control of much unnecessary donkey-work and free skilled officers to focus on the neglected art of visionary plan making. But in order to operate, the need for comparative performance statistics would be even greater than it already is. Efficient boroughs and approved inspectors would want them to be easily available as much as the customers of the planning system. ■