

Planning reform is needed

There are major concerns over the time taken and cost and uncertainties involved in the planning process, says Shaun Andrews

The largest survey undertaken of the Government's new planning system has revealed scepticism in both private and public sectors that the changes will lead to increased development and economic growth.

The survey by planning consultants GL Hearn in association with the British Property Federation was published as the Government continues to overhaul the planning system. It reveals that 71 per cent of private sector respondents and 88 per cent of local authorities believe the new system will lead to no change and may even decrease development. When asked whether the reforms would deliver more homes and economic growth, only 12 per cent of local authorities and 32 per cent of applicants responded "yes".

The survey was undertaken to introduce hard data into the debate which is raging as to what extent the planning system is holding back development and economic growth. The results suggest that whilst the planning system is not the main brake on growth, there are major concerns over the time taken and cost and uncertainties involved in the planning process, which exacerbate the economic outlook for development.

It goes a long way towards laying to rest concerns raised that the planning reforms represent a "developer's charter". Indeed, the survey results suggest there is an appetite for further reform particularly that which will reduce planning delays, the costs associated with "planning gain" and that which will deliver greater certainty for investors.

My own view is that we need to look at new ways of getting investment and capacity into local planning departments. Whilst there is often a significant difference of opinion as to how local authorities and applicants rate their performance, it isn't fair or right to blame councils that are in some circumstances significantly under-resourced.

Liz Peace, chief executive of the British Property Federation, said she hoped these results ease fears that the Government's planning changes will lead to a concreting over of the countryside creating urban sprawl. "Ultimately construction will only happen if projects stack up financially. The reason property development projects all over the country have stalled is not primarily down to restrictive planning. Indeed, many local authorities are desperate to get development going and are

very willing to grant permission. The key problem in most cases is lack of financial viability.

The changed economic conditions of recent years means that schemes simply don't stack up anymore. But there are plenty of growth generating and job creating schemes that could be made viable with some targeted help and a more efficient planning system".

On planning itself, respondents were asked whether the changes might produce a materially faster and leaner system. Only two per cent of local authorities and seven per cent of applicants said yes.

Applicants were asked what changes in the way local authorities operated would make the biggest difference to them. The top three answers were: speeding up planning decisions, empowering planning officers and increased funding for local planning authorities.

GL Hearn has undertaken more detailed research looking closely at each of the London boroughs and the processing of major planning applications. It found that, over the 12 months up to to the publication of the NPPF, the Government target of 13 weeks was not met. No London borough achieved an average of 13 weeks or less and the average across the capital was 38 weeks. The research also revealed that appeals for major applications took an average of 31 weeks giving a combined average length for applications that go to appeal of 69

weeks. The Government's ambition is that all applications, including those that are decided by appeal, should take no longer than 52 weeks.

Underpinning the Government's recently proposed reforms has been the 12 month 'Planning Guarantee'. GL Hearn's research demonstrates just how far we have to go to achieve this which, put simply, requires planning decisions to be made in just under half the time they currently are. This will take a concerted effort from both applicants and local planning authorities but we believe the stakes are too high for this not to be our focus. We need a leaner and faster system, the time and cost associated with major planning applications is crippling for both the public and private sector and we need to urgently find ways of lifting the burden.

We would therefore agree with aspects of the Government's recent statements, particularly in relation to speeding up decision-making. We believe that the research provides detailed insight into the process. ■

Over the 12 months up to to the publication of the NPPF, the Government target of 13 weeks was not met. No London borough achieved an average of 13 weeks or less and the average across the capital was 38 weeks. Appeals for major applications took an average of 31 weeks. This gives a combined average length for applications that go to appeal of 69 weeks.



Shaun Andrews is head of investor and developer planning at GL Hearn