

FINCH

One battle after another

Any account of the UK planning system and its endless changes, dictated by politics, the economy or fashion, make it sound rather like a war, thinks Paul Finch

The analogies come thick and fast: the planning system is the battlefield in which operations are conducted. One side wants to build stuff and make money, or fulfil some social purpose like providing sports stadiums. The other, at least since the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act, wishes to control these aspirations, substituting the profit motive with a notion of social value deriving from a command economy model.

Rival ideologies resulted in the wrecking of towns and cities across post-1945 UK, as shopping centre developers and planning regimes fought out one battle after another, sometimes joining forces to impose a fatally flawed notion of modernity on fuddy-duddy medieval town centres.

Planning had become almost a dirty word by 1969, when the famous doctrine of 'Non-Plan' hit the headlines in the pages of *New Society*, where planning radical Peter Hall, iconic architect Cedric Price, critic Reyner Banham, and the magazine's Paul Barker suggested that, given what had happened since 1947, it might be time to try something else – like organic growth, rather than development control.

'Architecture' became an even dirtier word following the attack on by the then Prince of Wales in his 1984 speech at Hampton Court, attacking modernists and all their works. 'Community architecture', and indeed 'community planning' became all the rage; endless consultations would inevitably, or so it was said, produce improved environments and greater social cohesion.

Unfortunately, these aspirations were undermined by the abandonment of planned public housing, and a rapid rise in uncontrolled immigration, making housing shortages even worse than they might have been. Various riots, huge increases in house prices as starts and completions declined, and a growing sense that social cohesions had ended at about the same time as the planning system had been introduced, resulted in a 'something must be done' response from politicians oblivious to their own role in creating scepticism about the 'planning system'.

Indeed, and quite unfairly, the system became the object of attack. It was not politicians scrapping public housing (while in denial about population increase) who were to blame for the housing shortage but planning system. But how to fix it?

The answer came in the 2012 National Planning Policy Treaty (sorry Framework) – produced to hold the line between development desire and rational planning for the 21st century. It was simultaneously a top-down imposition of principles and processes, to which all other plans would need to conform, and an all-embracing defensive wall, holding together the disparate elements of the planning system in a way which would simultaneously satisfy development, heritage, community etc etc.

Alas, the NPPF should now be seen as the Maginot Line of the planning world: no sooner had it been built than people were finding ways round it, in particular the niche new breed of planning consultants who became the SAS, or possibly SOE, in the great planning battles that have amused or infuriated us in recent decades.

Those 1947 ideas about local authority responsibility had been by-passed almost Day 1 by policies which assumed that localism wasn't up to doing anything positive at a big scale: hence the introduction of new town corporations, and later various development corporations which assumed growth would be blocked or slowed by that 1947 system.

Later, in the spirit of Non-Plan, enterprise zones and freeports became the preferred method of bypassing planning, even as regionalists like John Prescott promoted the idea that the wider the area, the better the planning – whether the public liked it or not. The referendum on regional assemblies knocked all this on the head, but the idea of ever-widening zones of planning influence never went away, and indeed in the minds of EU strategy planners, included the elimination of national states in favour of new map-lines devised by themselves. The UK would be part of the Atlantic Seaboard along with Portugal (as these entities would cease to be known).

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In the meantime, back on the local battlefield, it started to become apparent that far from being the answer to all problems, the NPPF was itself a problem. Hence endless revisions, tinkering and modifying, providing endless complications for planning barristers to feast on at public inquiries, where undefined concepts such as 'beauty' or 'grey belt' – the no-man's land of the system – helped bring the entire planning process into further disrepute.

Mad inquiries, conducted at vast expense to little public benefit, have become the order of the day. The War Ministry (sorry, Ministry for Housing, Community & Local Government), sends out new instructions on a frequent if irregular basis. Often these appear to be aimed at stopping housebuilding altogether. What was once regarded as a social good is now treated as a social evil. So in order to build you may have to pay for planning advice (a recent invention), CiL (a recent invention), Section 106 benefits, 35 per cent of a development as 'affordable' (ha ha) housing, and undertake the arduous process of actually obtaining a planning permission, with stupid demands for cycling facilities (for example) which bear no relation to need or demand.

Meanwhile SMEs in the housing sector have gone to the wall, not helped by planning rules which seem to benefit the diminishing number of big boy housebuilders who can afford planning consultants and planning lawyers, not to mention the finance costs of long public inquiries which drive small companies out of the market.

The planning inspectorate has become a form of war crimes tribunal, overseeing the completing

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claims of development and planning irrespective of why the crimes took place in the first place, or what the outcome will be of decisions one way or the other. Spatial planning is now required to include matters properly the province of Building Regulations because they involve numbers and science, for example carbon analysis or biodiversity. Obscurantist arguments about 'viability' bring more misery to the system – in reality cut-and-paste lies told by consultants (another new niche) acting for either side in what should be a mutually agreed technical exercise. It is all about war.

The first victim, as in any war, is truth. Sadiq Khan's lies about housing starts in London, a strategy initiated by former Camden councillor James Murray who, despite no credentials for the job, is

now Chief Secretary to the Treasury. This does nothing for the reputation of a planning system where officers are frightened to express a professional opinion if it will jeopardise the relationship with their political masters.

Maps of London, showing housing developments with permission which cannot be started for various planning and financial reasons, look like the ones who see after a cluster-bomb attack. Yet according to the Starmer government, all is in hand to complete 1.5 million homes by the end of the war (sorry, first term in government!). The phrase 'new towns', which used to mean something significant, now means urban extensions. They won't produce significant numbers this decade.

For governments with no experience of how planning actually works, there is a profound reluctance to create a planning system based on certainty ('If you do this you will get that'). Everything is a negotiation. The armies of applicants and their architects, planning consultants, ecologies, landscape architects, lawyers, viability specialist and Uncle Tom Cobley commit themselves against the planning system's own battalions, many mirroring the opposition's. It all takes ages – Tantric planning that seems to go on forever, but with no guarantee of a happy ending.

The non-combatants, the general public, look on in amazement as the costs go up and up. The trouble is, in a war, nobody much likes the implications of ... collaboration! ■