

time for a fresh think?



This piece is written just three weeks before the general election, when the atmosphere suggests that there might be a hung Parliament. For those of us interested in planning the use of our land (rather than just leaving it to market forces), that would not be a bad result.

We are in need of a period of reflection about what on earth we are expecting our planning activities to do for us, and how we get there from the tangles we are in right now.

The two main parties have been competing over how much they intend to cut public expenditure to pay off the bankers' debts, and planning is in the front line for cuts. Superficially it is easy to see why: despite all the silly language (such as 'spatial plans', 'place-making' and 'tests of soundness') and rebranding ('development management', which it isn't, instead of 'development control', which it is), and despite all the guidance, best practice notes, and financial inducements, very little is being produced.

Housing starts and renewals are at their lowest levels for nearly a hundred years despite a soaring and relatively wealthy population. Economic development and associated commercial property development are stalled. Planning for reduced carbon and for climate change, and the exciting ideas behind the eco-towns movement, are becoming tools for the anti-development lobby ('If we raise the bar high enough, no developer will ever be able to jump over it, tee hee!').

There are recurring attempts to unpick the development control system under cover of setting us free, despite all the evidence being that it is what the public value most about planning. The plan-making system is opaque and inefficient in its processes, and castrated by lack of people and cash as a means for making good things happen in the right place at the right time.

The national policy framework drove us (despite many warnings!) to unwanted high densities and

forms of housing, and forced such low parking standards upon us that cars now fill the streets, the pavements and the grass verges in new development areas. Transport planning disappeared up its own exhaust pipe: we didn't get the Eurostar to all parts of the UK, and we didn't get the trams or trolley buses that were dangled before us.

Town centres have been smartened up but are full of drunks after dark, and the shops and family entertainments are in sheds on the outskirts.

Planning gain – now switched off because of the recession – became the main source for subsidised housing for lower-income people, and for an ever-widening shopping list of goodies for every local authority department that was awake enough to ask. Now planning gain is to pay for infrastructure on a big scale, although no-one has worked out how the money that is to be collected is actually going to be spent when and where it is wanted.

So we seem to have developed an unloved and unproductive planning system which is being picked and poked at all levels, and while we can all make serious constructive suggestions for patching it up,¹ there is a case for taking the time for fundamental reform.

'Propositions such as these are not addressed in the present general election – which is really strange: through planning we make the arrangements for our lives, our commerce, our culture, and our environment for the future. How can there be such silence about it?'

Asking 'What's it for?' takes you to a strong development control system which can either be artful and use trained planners or can be highly codified and operated by tick-box administrators. Either way, there needs to be rules for controlling

the use of land, and for resolving disputes without physical violence. It takes you to a properly resourced plan-making system with an overarching national vision and infrastructure plan, sub-regional action areas, and regional development corporations with which the owners of allocated strategic land have to treat in joint venture. And it takes you to a Planning Inspectorate located in the Ministry of Justice so that someone can call everyone properly to account.

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How have we come to the point that the only *dramatic* vision on offer – that of the Conservatives with their promise to abolish regional plans and let local people decide the future of their patch – is one that is designed to stop things, rather than make them happen?

We seem to be heading up a cul-de-sac, obsessed with processes and not outcomes. We need time for a re-think.

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Note

- 1 See, for example, the two most recent 'Off the Fence' pieces – D. Lock: 'A case for regional planning reform'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2010, Vol. 79, Jan., 14-5; and D. Lock: 'Salvaging the LDF system'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2010, Vol. 79, Feb., 65-6

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