

planning's little things matter



The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has been chasing a deregulation agenda for some years.¹ The DCLG itself is calculated to generate about 18 per cent of 'administrative burdens' bearing upon us.

As part of its programme to set us free, a 'Householder Development Consents Review' was conducted, looking at the rules which require us to apply for planning permission to do things to our homes. Several wise people had expressed the views that the rules were cluttering up the planning system. Indeed, when the Review was published in 2006,² 'householder applications' were shown to have been about half the total of all applications.

In June 2006 DCLG Circular 01/2006 put into effect key recommendations from the Review. The size of house extensions that could be erected without permission was increased, and local authorities were empowered to make Local Development Orders by which they can take an even more lenient attitude.

The TCPA has supported the Government's decisions on this matter. The Association's view, which is the same of the Planning Advisory Service (PAS),³ is that this will free the public from unnecessary admin, and liberate planning officers to do more creative things.

I think this is more complicated than that. It is my experience that the public values local development control services very highly. For every person that gets very grumpy about having to make a planning application for an alteration to their home, there is likely to be at least one neighbour who will be really pleased that they have to be told about it in advance, and can express their views. People are not good at talking to their neighbours, especially if the house alteration they are dreaming about is a bit pushy – lumpy, ugly, or will steal the sunshine or the view. People are also really bad at complaining directly to their neighbours: when the alteration is under construction it is a bit late to speak up and,

anyway, our culture is not confrontational (except when we are drunk and seize the streets after dark). Some of us are also rather cowardly.

So rules which regulate home extensions tightly provide a civilised way of resolving tensions over the use of intimate space around the home. I think the planning service is good value for money at this local level, and people will be very angry when they become aware that their protection from a bullying or boorish neighbour has been removed.

As for the lifting of burdens, Sarah Richards of PAS goes so far as to say 'if homeowners' plans fall within the given framework, the paperwork ends'.⁴ It might reduce the caseload in the planning office, but the householder is not liberated. For the person altering their home, bureaucracy is still required to obtain Building Regulation approval. Only a planner who has never had to apply for such approval would say that 'the paperwork ends'. Building control is a

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complex area, and getting worse (the Part L Regulations affecting lighting, for example, typically lead people to install low-energy light fittings (to get a 'pass'), only to change them afterwards so that it is possible to see to read the newspaper after dark).

Building control is also a competitively structured service – the officer to whom you speak will be very retail in his manner in case you choose to go elsewhere (yes, you can use a building control officer from somewhere else altogether) – but the paperwork is not removed.

Then we turn to the vision that the development managers (re-branded development control

off the fence

caseworkers) will be released, like cattle in spring, to sunlit open spaces where lush masterplanning, urban regeneration and other enchanting professional opportunities lie waiting for them.

Oh no they won't. There is no spare capacity in development management teams, and the burden of mainstream casework will immediately fill their days: instead of doing 190 per cent of a job, the team might now be able to do 150 per cent. And even if officers were free to move across to plan-making or some equally exciting-sounding area of the vast department, they would find themselves with overworked, stressed-out planners who are obliged to hand out most projects of interest to consultants (recruitment and retention of staff in local government is not difficult because pay is bad, or because pensions are bad, or because leave is bad – it is just that the departments are not allowed the resources to build teams to do the really interesting things themselves).

So while we focus our efforts on trying to make sense of national and regional planning, on trying to work out whether counties are just playing dead until the Tories sound the last trump and their former planners rise cadaver-like from the horrid jobs they've had to take with districts, and on wondering why people still think town cramming is good and new towns are bad, we need to remember what's happening down home. Day to day, in a cul-de-sac near you, someone is very grateful to the planning service for stopping people doing awful selfish things with their homes.

The present relaxations won't last long. Bet you!

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Notes

- 1 *Simplification Plan: The Route to Better Regulation*. DCLG Product Code 06 SPD 04279. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Dec. 2006
- 2 *Householder Development Consents Review: Steering Group Report*. DCLG, Jul. 2006
- 3 PAS is part of the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) and is funded by the DCLG. It includes ATLAS, a sort of parachute regiment of planners kept by the Homes and Communities Agency and available (if asked) to help a local council deal with big applications
- 4 *Planning*, 17 Oct. 2008, 11