

Sitting back on our laurels after Athlone House? Not a chance. The challenges facing us, locally and nationally, are intensifying, our workload is enormous, and for this special 50th anniversary issue, I have 20% less space to cover a vast range of issues. More than ever, we need new members to help us, if only with looking at sites, or helping with campaigns.

As some of you will recall, I have always believed it essential for members to understand the national town planning context within which we have to work, and I normally devote a small part of my reports to it. Currently, the situation is so alarming that it was necessary to devote over half this report to what is going on at the national level, as the Government's demolition of the planning system, on the fallacious grounds that it is preventing the building of housing and holding back the economy, proceeds unchecked. Top concern is the Housing and Planning Bill – of which most people seem dismayingly unaware - currently going through Parliament, described by the Chairman of the London Forum as “**the worst piece of legislation in my lifetime**”, much of it phrased as if written by the development industry. I could fill this report on this alone: but a selection of its worst aspects must suffice. The Government is also pushing through a review of National Planning Policy to make it easier to develop anywhere; together they will make a mockery of Localism.

Among the worst are proposals, inserted at Committee stage with no debate, to *open the planning process to competition*. A developer will be able to bypass local authority planners and *nominate his own consultant to assess his application* and make a recommendation, which the Planning Committee will be almost bound to accept. It is proposed only as a “limited trial”, but will inevitably be “successful” and be imposed everywhere. I give you a few seconds to lower your eyebrows and replace your jaws in their sockets, and continue.

It surely strikes at the heart of democracy. Assuming that local communities still retain the right to object to an application – and the Minister has not committed to say whether the right to object will remain – we will have the situation of an “alternative provider”, appointed by the developer, who will be assessing objections against their own clients' application. This will surely result in serious conflicts of interest?

Its purpose is a significant shift in housing tenure from affordable and social-rented housing to subsidised home-ownership, on the premise that most people want to own their own homes. This will be achieved through “Starter Homes” where the buyer will get a 20% cash subsidy from the market price and a subsidised mortgage, paid for by the sale of high-value rented council housing. If they stay for five years, they will be able to sell at market value and pocket the gain. These will replace the principle of “affordable housing”. Developers will be required to provide a proportion of these in larger schemes. These “Starter Homes” will be the Government's definition of “affordable”; but even at those levels, how many low paid key workers will be able to afford to live in London?

Housing Association affordable rented homes will have to be sold to the occupiers, and the discounts for that and for 'starter homes' will be funded by enforced sale of Council social housing. Families who cannot afford to pay the market rent for their Council-owned home, which they will have to pay when their combined take-home pay reaches £40,000, will have to leave.

There is no requirement for the money to be spent in the borough where the sales occur, threatening not only a significant reduction in social-rented housing, but no additional housing at all, because the money could be spent elsewhere. The impact on London could be particularly severe, displacing lower income households.

The Government's disastrous policy of allowing offices to be converted to housing without planning permission, without any affordable housing element, and without any contribution towards infrastructure (utilities, schools, health, transport, etc), has left Central London boroughs with only 3% available office space as developers rushed to convert offices into luxury housing for the overseas investment market; not one unit of affordable housing has resulted. The Borough of Richmond has suffered so badly that it has had to redesignate housing land for offices. It is driving out expanding businesses from Greater London and put off new ones, due to lack of choice and increased rents, as the RICS predicted. Far from driving up efficiency and productivity, as the Government claimed, it is undermining the social foundations of London by forcing more workers to live outside the metropolis and commute long distances, putting its economy at risk.

“Substantial” weight must be given to using brownfield land for housing - in effect a presumption in favour of development. Only listed buildings appear to be safe, so many of our precious unlisted historic buildings could be lost or damaged. The Bill will allow private housebuilding on small sites anywhere, urban or rural. It will invalidate every Local Plan in England, since authorities are obliged to meet local housing need.

Another astonishing section punishes Local Authorities for non-delivery, even if it's the developer's fault. If a developer gets permission for housing on a brownfield site, and then doesn't build for any reason, is the local authority which will be penalised, for not achieving its targets, and must give the developer consent for another site. There will, in effect, be a presumption in favour of building housing on every type of land. In effect, it will be impossible to refuse housing development anywhere; but, tragically, none will be what is actually needed – “affordable housing”. This totally misguided demonization of our Planning system – admired around the world

– will cause incalculable harm, exacerbate present problems and create new ones. It will encourage developers to avoid brownfield, build on greenfield, and put even more pressure on the urban working poor. There is no effort to address the issue of land banking. Lewis Carroll; George Orwell; eat your hearts out.

Planning is meant to give certainty; the Bill will bring great uncertainty, and is in effect a change from a plan-led system to a developer-led system, despite all its fine words. The planning process has been the strongest protection for the holistic living and working, historic and natural environment; this puts it all in danger.

On local impact, a senior Camden Councillor calls it a “dreadful bill”, and cites the main concern as its impact on communities. “Many of my constituents in social housing are low-paid and public sector workers... [who] need to be well distributed throughout, and within easy striking distance of, London. The ‘Pay-to-Stay’ approach, unless a there is a taper from say c£70,000 (less than the earnings required to afford a mortgage for one of the so-called affordable ‘Starter Homes’) poses a real danger that workers will reduce hours to keep below the threshold and be unable to save to buy a place of their own, and will drive out middle-class income households contributing to London’s economy. The forced-sale of Council homes will empty out inner City areas; it will deplete stock and, once a windfall has been pocketed, the property may simply be rented out to the highest bidder.” It will “increase the availability of private sector market homes only in high-cost areas, to middle-class households already dedicating large percentages of their salaries to maintain a roof over their heads. The consequences will be depleting electoral registers, less spending power for small local shops and businesses and the evening economies that make London the place it is, as well as being a threat to London’s resilience.”

In speaking to practitioners in every field, private and public, the same words are used: “disaster” and “madness”. The Bill is meeting massive cross-party resistance in the Lords, and many amendments and deletions are being fought determinedly. We have ourselves lobbied local peers, who have agreed to help in whatever way they can. Ideally, it needs to be consigned to the scrap-heap.

The Government has also launched a “consultation” on yet another ludicrous idea “to support the delivery of new homes”, by allowing householders to add “a limited number of storeys” to existing buildings in London - again without the need for planning permission, “while protecting open spaces and the Green belt”: nothing about Conservation Areas and little about historic buildings. How this will ensure one single one unit of new housing, rather than simply larger houses, is unclear.

The real source of our housing problems comes out in a report for Hackney by BNP Paribas on the developers’ viability assessment for the Bishopsgate Goods Yard. It found that the developer could have afforded three times as much affordable housing as they claimed. BNP described it as “extremely concerning”, and the Mayor of Hackney said: “This exposes the shoddy, downright misleading viability assessment on which the developers base their case. It identifies ‘distortion’ and a ‘lack of transparency’ throughout the developer’s assessment, argues they have ramped up their costs and downplayed profits, and predicts our communities would be short-changed by the s106 money offered. These proposals[are] based primarily on cashing in on luxury flats way beyond the means of most Hackney residents.” Permission would have been refused – but the Mayor of London has called it in, and he has so far approved every refused development called in by him.

Meanwhile, a *Guardian* investigation in December showed that Britain’s biggest housebuilders hold landbanks for 615,000 new homes, four times the total built in Britain in the past year. It is well-known that developers are sitting on unimplemented consents for 400,000 new houses (270,000 of them in London), and that there are 700,000 housing units nationwide which are vacant, largely because VAT on repair and restoration is 20%, while on new build it is zero. Addressing these issues alone could resolve the short-term housing crisis and avoid the progressive destruction of our planning system, greenfield sites and environment, as happened in Ireland. And, ironically, the Mayor’s Annual Monitoring Report shows that London’s market housing target was exceeded; unfortunately, few people can afford the type of homes actually built, and delivery of social rented homes has been half the target rate. It is patently not the Planning System which is failing us.

I make no political comment. Longer-term members will recall me being equally critical of successive governments’ planning policies. To continue the tradition set in my last report of using Biblical quotes, the last Government “chastised us with whips”; this one is “chastising us with scorpions”.

To summarise the enormous amount of work your Planning Group has achieved over the past quarter in 1,200 words is impossible, and only a few major issues are covered this time:

The old Richardson’s, Archway Road: This has now been given permission. We worked closely with Cllr Morris and local residents to negotiate with Haringey and the applicants over certain details. While we generally supported the development, we expressed concerns as to whether the new basement working space would be adequate. There was concern locally over arrangements for servicing and deliveries to the new supermarket, and when the Construction Management Plan is consulted upon, we will support local residents’ requests that delivery vehicles will not be allowed to stand in Causton Road or Cholmeley Park. 26 flats will be provided, but while the developer will give

£255,000 towards affordable housing elsewhere in the borough, it is unlikely that any will be in Highgate, where it is fact badly needed.

Closure of Pond Square public toilets: Our campaign to prevent a second attempt in ten years to close this essential village amenity, with 88,000 annual visits, has been vigorously led by Andrew Sulston, who produced a detailed discussion paper (which you can read on our website) and organised two public meetings, one addressed by Camden officers who made clear that the Government cuts being forced on Camden – 57%, or £78 million by 2017, their budget halved in a decade - and other local authorities are so severe that decisions like this have to be made. The meeting at 10a was well-attended and we emphasised that closure should be a very last resort and that several viable alternatives need to be worked through carefully. A “Community Toilets Scheme”, where local traders would be paid £750 a year to make their facilities available to the public, is probably not viable. Camden may be amenable to an entry charge: less than ideal but this could save the facility. The campaign continues.; please let us know if you would like to help.

More cheering is news that the **Winchester Pub, Archway Road**, has had a reprieve. Having got permission to convert the upper and rear part of the building into ten flats, retaining most of the ground floor for the pub, a new application added a second flat to the ground floor, while staying below the limit where an affordable housing contribution would be necessary – and also, in our view, making the pub unit unviable, raising concern that it would then close and be converted to flats in turn. However, local residents succeeded in getting the pub designated as an Asset of Community Value, meaning that, if it came on the market, they would have first opportunity to buy it. Thanks to substantial local opposition, Haringey refused the new application, and it appears that the prospective tenants, the London Pub Company, have also pulled out, for unknown reasons.

The Society objected on several grounds:

- The Winchester is a focus of the Archway community, regenerating at last after many years’ decline and blight, as shown by its having been declared an Asset of Community Value;
- the original permission was willingly agreed by the developers and Haringey, and there is no justification for seeking a bigger scheme;
- the applicant’s claim that national legislation requires economic growth to be overridden by the need for housing is not correct, and their claim that the site is “brownfield land” is unsupportable;
- the Victorian publican’s office and bar are unique in the area and must be restored.

Removal of the Archway Station Gyrotory System: there is growing realisation across a wide area that Transport for London’s proposals for the Archway gyrotory will cause serious permanent traffic disruption over a huge area, from Holloway to Finchley. Richard Webber, who has been leading on this for us (and whose full response for the Society is on our website), writes:

“Gyrotory one-way systems are common in London. Many were introduced in the 60s and 70s, including one which used to operate in Highgate Village. Today the fashion is to improve town centres by removing them, Islington’s decision to remove the one at Archway gyrotory being the most recent.

“Whereas Islington’s original design provided for buses and cyclists to have exclusive access to Highgate Hill outside Archway tube entrance, the cycling lobby succeeded in removing buses from this area and scattering the stops serving passengers up Highgate Hill and Archway Road to multiple locations, in different directions from, and further away from, the station. Where now you can jump on the first of a 210, 271 or 143 to the Village or a 43, 134 or 263 to Archway Road, now you will have only one or two of these leaving from any individual bus stop, a major inconvenience to bus passengers.

“Further, Islington’s decision to build affordable homes on land currently leased as the Archway bus terminus now requires the section of the Archway Road originally designed to motorway standards to be used to park 50 buses an hour, which will now perform a U-turn below the Archway bridge. TfL’s intention is to reduce to a single lane the section of the dual carriageway on which morning traffic now backs up and use the section between the bridge and Shepherds Hill as a holding bay for stationary traffic.

“A third ground for our opposition to the proposal is that it will prohibit traffic entering Archway from Crouch End from turning right into Archway Road or Highgate Hill, obliging drivers to manoeuvre through Whitehall Park, the Miltons and/or Cromwell Avenue. All this seems an unreasonable price to pay just for improving cycle access through the Archway.

“TfL’s recent consultation on the buses element has given us, and Haringey, who are equally concerned, the opportunity to press for something better. Bus frequencies and running times may be unchanged; but passengers will not be able to catch many of them.

We have raised the potential problem with MP Catherine West, who advises that she has spoken directly to Transport for London to raise these issues, and that she believes it may not be too late for them to be reviewed.

Immense disappointment that our application for **Fleur-de-Lys, Grange Road**, the finest Arts and Crafts building in the whole Highgate area, for which considerable works and the inevitable basement are proposed by its new owners, to be Listed, has been rejected by Historic England in what we cannot help considering the decision deeply flawed, and, one must fear, constrained by the immense pressure they are under from Government not to do anything which will hold up developers in any way. We are particularly concerned at their unacceptably dismissive and contradictory statement that:

“Fleur de Lys survives externally intact and internally mostly intact, but although solidly built the design lacks cohesion and flair, the plan is a usual one for a middle class house of the time, it has no known technological innovations, it has not been the residence of a figure of national importance and much of the internal decoration is typical of its date and does not compare favourably with houses of its type which have been listed. CONCLUSION Fleur de Lys is not recommended for listing although it is certainly of local architectural interest within a designated conservation area”.

This evades the issue. Many Listed buildings are “ordinary” examples of their type, without “decoration”, and the very fact that it is conceded to be intact shows a worrying indifference to protecting such heritage assets. It appears that Haringey were consulted by them and did not even respond; certainly the disregarded our strong and detailed objection and weakly gave permission, despite this being a “heritage asset” every bit as important, in its own way, as Athlone House. This is yet another example of the assault on our planning system and heritage and further evidence that the Government’s much-vaunted localism agenda is a hollow shell.

One small piece of good news is the achievement of the controlled pedestrian crossing on North Hill at Church Road, which will allow pedestrians to get to the Highgate Group Practice and Highgate Primary School more easily and safely, and the installation of a crossing on the side roads. The Society actively supported the wide range of people and groups who campaigned for this over several years and had a good deal of input into the detail. On streetscape terms, we are less pleased: as always, there has clearly been no awareness of the fact that it a prominent location in a Conservation Area and there has clearly been no informed design input beyond a standardised engineering solution. There is now an vast and ugly expanse of tarmac, where there should be paving slabs, and the tactile paving, which should always be grey in such locations, is a violent red. We are raising the issue of tree planting, and the installation of shrubbery planters, to make the location look far more worthy of a conservation area.

With my reduced 3,000 word allocation, I cannot even start to cover the 60MB of material, representing our work over the last quarter, which sits on my laptop. I will endeavour to put as much of it as possible on the Society’s website, if only to do justice to the almost non-stop work which so many of your Committee put in, in an effort to secure good planning for the area and to stem the worse excesses of a planning process which is being systematically demolished for spurious reasons.

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