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‘LAND USE PLANNING – COMPROMISE OR CHAOS’

Some 70 politicians, planning officers, developers and the press came together on Monday 29 January at a seminar, hosted by the All-Party Parliamentary Built Environment Group and organised International Building Press (IBP), to consider the latest Barker report on planning issues published just before Christmas 2006.

In opening the seminar, civil engineer and morning session chairman **Lord Howie of Troon** put the situation in perspective by quoting figures that 8 per cent of the United Kingdom land mass is built on while another 11 per cent is in the green belt, leaving the remainder as countryside.

The current situation revolves around the need, as agreed by the government, for more housing, notably in the south east.

The problem, suggested **Ross Brodie, Group Land and Planning Director of the Gladedale Group**, currently building over 5,500 homes a year, who was at the core of the seminar throughout the day, is that:

- Too many changes in the past five years in planning;
- A more complicated planning system;
- Insufficient time to adjust to the changes;

In his view, there is an acceptance of the need to improve the infrastructure, notably transport, streamline the appeals procedure and increase the supply of land.

The arguments about taxation were another major topic, particularly in the light of the Treasury wanting a land improvement charge. He cited the example of Milton Keynes pioneering a £20,000 a dwelling roof tax as an example of new thinking on the issue.

Leigh Herington of Kent County Council said that “we planning officers are tearing our hair out at the complexity of the planning system, with layer upon layer of bureaucracy”. Like other planning officers, he doubts whether the system has enough capacity and inhibits risk taking by developers.

Paul Carter, leader of Kent County Council, said: “The regulations have gone too far and many inspectors are not familiar with all the changes.” He believes a more efficient planning system would lower the building costs from £100 a sq ft to £80 a sq ft.

He referred to a number of lessons learnt from the situation in Kent where there is a massive building programme associated with the Thames Gateway and the Eurostar high-speed train link. Among these are:

- The county council does not have enough clout to prevent major mistakes. Here he quoted the wrong decision to build more social housing in Dover on an Asda site; an unsuitable master plan for the Isle of Sheppey from SEEDA, notably the plans for most of the residential accommodation being one-bedroom flats and the reluctance of the Highways Authority to allow the transport improvements for the Eastern Quarry development.

Yvette Cooper, the Minister of State (Housing and Planning) at the Department of Communities and Local Government, made a number of points in defence of the current system and the changes that are proposed by the government.

A white paper due later this year will concentrate on sustainable development that can last 20-30 years and maintain the emphasis on brownfield sites. The minister pointed to the planning successes in the major cities and towns, such as Manchester and Birmingham, in bringing regeneration and an improved economy.

“We also need better design and improved transport,” Ms Cooper added. In her view the green belt had “served us well.” Wholesale changes are not envisaged, as agreed by the Barker report

But she accepted that “there is a problem of delays in the planning process” That is increasingly urgent because of demand for increased housing and higher design standards. “Local authorities can do more to bring land forward for development,” the minister said.

The message is that the government is serious about building more homes and will put more resources into this effort. She indicated that no final decision had been made about the planning gain supplements (as proposed by the Treasury).

Matt Yeoman partner with Buckley Gray Yeoman, architects, mocked the system of local government planning committees “meeting once a month between 7 and 11 PM in a bickering and ill informed debate about proposals, a pseudo jury system.” He believes planning should concentrate on land use while Douglas Horner of Trenport Investments said “there is a wonderful obscurity about who is making decisions. Paul Carter of Kent Council said the whole of the Thames Gateway fell into that category.

Sir Terry Farrell, founder of Farrell architects, said; “Planning should be produced by the public and private sectors and we should end the gladiatorial contest over new development. The system is not sufficiently pro-active and planning occurs by default.” He cited the Thames Gateway as lacking a coherent plan. The idea of building on the green belt is due to the planning problems of building in dense urban areas, which he believes could accommodate all the new housing. “There is no practical town planning going on in the UK at the moment,” Farrell added.

Ken Bartlett of the Hanover Housing Trust said: “There is no shared view in the UK on the need to build more housing. We need to revisit the planning system of 1969 and redesign the process of public consultation.” Sadly, he feels that “planners are the traffic wardens of development.”

Dan Rogerson MP - the lib -Dem spokesperson on housing put the main planks of his party’s policies as:

1. Opposition to the planning gain supplement;
2. Simplify and strengthen the section 106 agreements in favour of a tariff based system.
3. Continue to favour brownfield sites;
4. Bring in a local income tax to replaced rates.

Alistair Burt MP - the Conservative shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government, joined in the criticism of the Thames Gateway where “it is wrong to build so many one and two bedroom flats.” He has a particularly concern about how to revive the northern cities, mainly their suburbs. “We would scrap regional assemblies because we do not believe they are democratic, and return power to the local authorities,” Burt added.

The title of the debate implies that there should have been a resolve to the planning issues currently being deliberated by both national and local government; however, this is a subject that will benefit from further analytical debate by all the constituent players to help focus on a better structured process to deliver well thought out private/public sector partnerships to deliver major town planning projects and affordable housing.