

Planning for the Future Consultation

**Planning Directorate
3rd Floor, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4DF**

Planning for the Future – Response from the Broadway Action Group - Derby

Background Thinking

Over the last fifty years technological, social and economic changes have significantly affected the way we work, live and play. Many of these, largely irreversible changes have been accelerated by the impact of Covid19, and these, in turn, substantially affect the specification and location of future residential housing.

The national recovery from Covid19 will impact on many government portfolios, and it is essential that a coordinated strategy is developed to ensure that different government department aspirations do not compromise others' aspirations. (Government departments often fail to identify obvious adverse consequences of their actions, the reduction in staff resources in Planning and Development is amongst those that clearly need to be addressed to enable progress, both in the short and long term, to be made.)

Some of the changes, and their consequences are discussed below: -

Workplace evolution

- In the 1960's and 1970's a large proportion of the workforce were employed in large industrial or commercial organisations. Many of these organisations were labour intensive and inefficient, often relying on pre-war technology.
- The principal family breadwinner would live close to their place of work, walking, cycling, or using public transport to travel to and from work. Many of these workers would live in council houses near to industrial areas.
- As more people became owner occupiers and car owners, they would choose to live further from their workplace, and public transport became less relevant.
- Commercial pressure forced companies to invest in new technologies which, in turn, reduced the need for manpower. (Those companies which resisted change gradually ceased to exist).
- In recent years there has been a gradual move to allow "white collar staff" to partially work from home. Covid19 has forced many companies to allow essential staff to work exclusively from home.

- After Covid19 it is unlikely that offices will return to pre-covid19 occupation, and many will reduce in size or close altogether.

Retail evolution

- In the 1960's and 1970's most towns and cities had thriving shopping centres which catered for most shopping requirements. Local shops would cater for the rest.
- The emergence of large retail parks lured many supermarkets and larger retailers out of city centres, offering shoppers convenient, and easy free parking.
- Over the past 20 years, internet shopping has offered the shopper, more choice and better prices, resulting in a sharp decline in high street shopping.
- Covid19 has accelerated the popularity of on-line shopping, and many shoppers will not return to the high street or retail parks.
- The government has struggled to find effective ways to regenerate failing city centres, which will struggle further with a decline in city office occupation.
- New initiatives are required to re-purpose redundant office accommodation to create live/work opportunities for small/start-up businesses, to create a more vibrant occupancy of city centres.

Residential housing implications

- In the 1980's the Governments, well-intentioned, "Right-to-Buy" initiative resulted in a massive sell-off of council owned social housing, most of which was not replaced. Most residual local authority housing has now been off-loaded to housing associations, and many of the sold off houses have now been acquired by private landlords who are primarily interested in profit rather than habitability.
- The new residential housing market is now dominated by four major developers, whose business models are dependent on making profits from land speculation. They own large land banks and limit the release of new properties to artificially inflate house prices.
- The houses built by these developers, use outdated and inefficient building methods to construct poorly designed, overpriced and badly built houses. Developers have consistently resisted pressure to change their construction methods to deliver zero carbon homes. (The government, desperate to achieve housing targets has colluded with the developers)
- The dominance of these developers, conditions buyers to assume that there is no alternative to the unimaginative range of houses they offer.
- The UK has world class Architecture Schools, whose expertise is largely exported, via international students. Unfortunately, British architects have little opportunity to demonstrate how modern building and design technology can deliver radical, efficient, and cost-effective new homes.

Changing Circumstances

In reality, there have been such monumental changes due to the current pandemic, it begs the question “ Should Government recall its paper and totally rethink its policy objectives in line with what is now called the “New Normal”?

On the basis that it is unlikely that such a course of action will take place we make the following comments: -

Building Technology

- The technology now exists for factories to manufacture thermally efficient modules, to bespoke architects’ specifications, which will incorporate services etc. These can then be assembled on site by skilled assembly teams.
- Initially, the government could invest in these new housing factories, which could be located in unemployment hot spots.
- The major developers should be encouraged to participate in such a program or lose their land banks.

Post covid19- “The New Normal”

- Many office workers who worked from home during lockdown will not want to return to full time office-based employment. Saving on commuting time and costs will give them more time to enjoy their homes and gardens.
- Reduced footfall from lower office occupation and more on-line shopping will hasten the demise of high street shopping centres. This will also reduce the requirement for public transport

The current requirement for new residential homes

Recognising the comments above, there will be two distinct requirements for residential housing.

1. City Centre living

The regeneration and re-invention of city centres will rely on creating leisure and hospitality opportunities to replace traditional office and retail space. This, in turn, will rely on attracting a new style of resident, predominantly young professionals and entrepreneurs.

These people will require much more than a city “crash-pad” as they will need space to live, work and interact with their contemporaries. Re-purposing surplus commercial and retail properties to meet the live/work requirement will need to address the following criteria:-

- Living space must include separate home office space.
- All accommodation must have good internet/wi-fi provision.
- Ground floor parking, with charging points should be provided.
- Easy access to printing/reprographic facilities.
- Provision for communal studio/ workshop/ meeting space.
- Easy access for delivery services.

2. Family Residential living

Covid 19 has accelerated the trend to work from home where possible, at least part-time. This will encourage many people to move to larger properties with more home office space and bigger gardens for relaxation. Urban “green space” needs to be protected to maintain residential “lungs”. For this reason, recent trends to build new houses in existing gardens should be strongly discouraged. New residential housing should address the following points.

- Living space must include separate home office space.
- All accommodation must have good internet/wi-fi provision.
- Adequate off -road parking with charging points should be provided.
- New residential housing developments should be at a lower density than many current estates. (if this means building on poor quality “green belt” so be it. Currently actual buildings only account for about 2% of UK land area)
- All new residential Housing should aim to be Carbon neutral.
- New developments should have accessible public transport to major local employment hubs.
- Major house builders who do not subscribe to these objectives should be replaced by local builders/assemblers of new technology, bespoke designed, factory-built housing.
- Responsibility for “Social housing” meeting the above criteria should be returned to local authorities.

Local Authorities should be encouraged to develop Supplementary Planning Guidance in order to take account of local needs.

Public Parks should be protected for the future use of the public and no further development of public open space be allowed.

The recent Pandemic indicates there is a need to review the minimum distance between dwellings and in so doing reduce the density levels to enable larger gardens to be created within new developments. Garden space has proved to be invaluable in a great many cases and has clearly proved the need for such a complete review of our Housing Needs.

Summary

Those involved in the process of creating our towns and cities - architects, planners, developers and housebuilders - know that the current planning system is broken by excess bureaucracy, checking of inappropriate detail, and delay. Planning staff are overwhelmed and do not have the time to see, or plan for the bigger picture and the vision of a better future. Hence we are served with more of the same ‘anywhere estates’ throughout the country. The system reactively checks whether applications are too bad to refuse rather than seeking to create an upward spiral of quality.

The 'Planning for the Future' proposed policy changes clearly seek to address this with a clearer, rules-based system, similar to that used to create exemplary urban development in continental cities. Clarity early in the development process, will remove the uncertainty that a host of planning consultants and lawyers feed off in the multiple stages of current planning procedures increasing costs and exacerbating delays.

It seeks to introduce quality by proposing a fast track system for beautiful buildings utilising local guidance for developers to build and preserve beautiful communities. Sadly, beauty is not a word most people associate with development, yet it is not only the basis for original architectural theory, but also a practical realisable goal.

Contrary to the expectations of some, this can be achieved at a viable investment level and if undertaken online by skilled facilitators, involve a wide variety of residents. It is this process that must challenge and agree the designation of areas proposed for Development, Renewal, or Protection, so that the community decides for the benefit of all, and not just the well-educated and affluent few who want to stop development near them. This will enable the community to protect their heritage, and their local green spaces as if they were mini greenbelts, increase the density of development on brownfield sites and champion street trees. Their participation in creating Local Design Codes will require development to exceed a quality threshold for the creation of the new places they and their children will live in.

The emphasis is upon extensive community involvement in the creation of a vision for their place. The proposal to create these initial plans within 30 months will be welcome by communities who despair of serial consultation processes occurring over many years with apparently minimal influence. Exploratory work by Yorkshire Forward just after the millennium, and more recently, the Academy of Urbanism, creating 'Town Teams' from local people to lead the development process, illustrates how successful an emphasis upon action and speed can avoid 'consultation fatigue' and engender not just support, but eager anticipation of a better future. To be achieved this will require an increase in capacity of forward-thinking planners and urbanists at a scale not seen for decades. This is possible but will require national and local government commitment and funding.

For too long, through successive governments, we have failed to provide, not just the quantity of housing needed to alleviate the housing crises, but in particular the right kinds and amount of social housing. The proportion devoted to first time homes, shared ownership and social rent is to be largely decided by the local authority. The proposal to create a simple national levy, understandable by all, could remove the protracted section 106 negotiations which can delay the start of development not just by months but by years. Again, clarity will reduce costs and increase implementation

Submitted on behalf of the members, residents of Broadway (Derby) and its surrounding areas.

Alf Fullerton
Chairman
Broadway Action Group - Derby
27th October 2020
alf.fullerton@broadwayactiongroup.org