

## **Key Issues Influencing Planning: How to move forward**

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### **Key Issues Influencing Planning: How to move forward**

Planning challenges fall under three main headings:

- land supply pressures and land use demands and needs;
- environmental impact of development and the link with climate change;
- regeneration of existing areas to integrate new social, economic and environmental imperatives.

I make three core assumptions:

- the desire to use more land to generate more economic growth and meet social aspirations will continue;
- the link between land use, climate change and social conditions is direct while our current and planned patterns of development pose serious risks in these areas for our future;
- mounting pressures over restricted space, its distribution and equitable access to it will create political problems.

The market provides an imperfect mechanism for tackling these problems but planning has many limitations, illustrated by bad past decisions such as estate building or the location of some new towns. Growth per se is obviously not an adequate answer as Kate Barker accepts in her recent planning report. We must work within the knowledge that any relief through the use of additional land will be short term due to finite land and environmental problems. Development of all kinds is increasingly difficult and expensive as a result.

#### **1. Land Supply**

Land supply pressures are intense in spite of the much vaunted argument that only 11% of Britain's land is built on. There are several obvious reasons:

- the country is small and densely populated by international standards;
- land prices are therefore high and agreement over planned development increasingly contentious;
- 75% of Britain's land is in use of one kind or another and most places are already under the impact of development in the broadest sense, so agreement is difficult on new uses;
- Britain's high overall average population density, measured per Km<sup>2</sup> is in sharp contrast with its low urban population density per hectare, mainly as a result of outward planning and population movement over the twentieth century;
- urban density has fallen from around 1500 people per hectare in the late nineteenth century to about 85 people per hectare today; other European cities are much denser in their cores and more popular as a result;
- household size has shrunk so far that adequate basic services such as a bus or school now require 50 households per hectare;
- most new housing demand is driven by single person households who may or may not form at current predicted rates;
- space standards have risen, so demands are escalating in the face of increased pressure;
- new building outside existing areas is socially and ethnically polarising.

### Land Use Demands and Needs

Large parts of the country have almost continuous building with many towns almost running into each other. The national parks stand out as sharp delineators of preserved open space, whereas many parts of designated green belt areas are often hard to discern because of the impact of development. The European Union map of urban conurbations shows the UK as having the most extensive built up areas in Europe, in the North West, Midlands and Yorkshire. At the same time, planning, green belts and other land preservation measures, as well as the existence of unusable large areas of hilly moor land, have helped preserve many of Britain's green landscapes. These are highly prized.

Four particular aspects of land use are challenging:

#### a) Building and development.

Widespread hostility to building more roads, warehouses, retail, homes, hospitals and so on is countered by economic fears that unless we follow the demands of the market jobs will jump to Europe and the Far East even faster than they currently are. Commercially driven development is generally insensitive to both social and environmental imperatives, driven by cost cutting and profit maximisation. All development is traffic generating as current evidence shows, in spite of some efforts to curb car growth. At the same time all development is highly energy intensive in embodied carbon even when its operating energy use is low or 'carbon neutral'. There are large amounts of wasted, contaminated, scrap land that remain derelict because incentives for reuse are too low and the barriers to reuse too high. Yet the preference for "new land" generates flood risk, sprawl, car dependence and neglect of existing areas.

b) Social Impact of Current Land Use

The U.S. model of market driven planning for growth and demand has created urban, social and environmental problems on a scale that is still unthinkable here: high and persistent levels of ghetto formation and extension; continuing rapid urban depopulation and suburban growth; loss of public and social provision; huge rise in inequality; six times our rate of incarceration and incidence of violent crime in spite of significant reductions; growth in planned, gated suburban communities involving 20 million people; severe land and congestion problems offering harsh social and environmental lessons. The US uses almost double our level of energy per person to achieve this outcome. We have only one twenty-fifth the land per person; therefore we cannot pursue mainly market driven commercial land use strategies without harming further our urban social structure and the natural environment on which we depend.

Within existing communities in this country, there is a large amount of underused infrastructure, spare capacity and under occupied spaces and buildings. Most urban areas are in need of major reinvestment and intensification of use. Therefore an alternative conservation and recycling approach to planning offers significant potential.

c) Farming

Agriculture currently provides a low return and involves often damaging farming practices; therefore it seems easy to propose converting poor farm land to housing and is increasingly advocated by the housing lobby, both commercial and social. But farming is changing in important ways. There is a big and continuing shift to organic production and local food supplies, leading to more intensive use of agricultural land. There is growing demand for woodland for building, coppicing and bio fuel. There is an urgent need to protect biodiversity and restore natural ecosystems as ecological damage in many parts of the country due to over development and bad farming practice has potentially serious consequences for public health, food supplies, water and waste disposal.

Changing climatic conditions, loss of soil fertility, and continuing population and urban growth in the developing world put increasing pressures on food production overseas. We cannot rely on expansion of distant and unsustainable sources of food and raw materials such as soya, palm oil and wood. The use of irrigation and fertilisers are also close to their viable limit if not already exceeding it. Food outputs per head is falling and food reserves are also falling.

Farming therefore will make bigger not smaller claims on land use from here on.

d) Trees

Britain is the most deforested country in Europe apart from Ireland according to the World Bank and EU. We are now replanting on a limited scale as a source of fuel, an anti-pollution and recycling measure, a carbon sink and food source e.g. fruit. Supermarkets this year simply could not get a fraction of the locally grown apples demanded because of past orchard removals under negative incentives.

Trees also hold valuable top soil in place, retain moisture, reduce wind damage, and help sustainable land use in many other ways. They help urban areas with air quality, shade, moisture retention, land drainage and flood prevention. Trees add cash value to urban neighbourhoods, partly as a result.

Trees play a vital role in biodiversity, the food chain and the environment more generally. Due to international pressures on forests, inevitably in a tree short country we will need to use more land, urban and rural, for trees in the future.

This combination of factors - building development, land use, farming and trees - mean that land supply will continue to be the number one challenge. There are no easy answers. Therefore changing radically our land use patterns through incentives to reuse and use land more carefully seem vital.

## **2. Environmental Impact of Development**

All physical development of buildings and ancillary services has an impact on the natural environment. Beyond a certain point this becomes harmful e.g. tarmac and gravel excavation to build roads; energy to bake bricks; petrol to fuel cars. In the face of ever more powerful evidence of climate change, there is a growing consensus that reducing energy inputs and carbon outputs makes economic sense. By far the biggest potential gain is in conservation, reuse, and lower energy and material throughputs. This applies particularly to buildings and land use. Planning should work within these new constraints.

### New Development

Buildings, development activity and related transport account for nearly three quarters of our total energy use and carbon impact. Costing these in relation to wider impacts would completely transform the economics of land use and building development. For no matter how efficiently we run a new building its embodied energy and related transport and infrastructure impact are significant. New development to make "rational use of land left over" has a cumulative impact on town extensions. Our largely cultivated and therefore "artificial" countryside underlines the need for conservation, reinstatement and a new approach to the environment, now that we face our planetary and national limits. Public protests are not only generated by 'NIMBYISM' but by genuine recognition of the finite limits of land and the cumulative impact of incremental development. Planned new large scale developments do not overcome these problems, no matter how 'eco-friendly'.

## Existing Development

Urban areas rely on large hinterlands for resources, energy and space; our urban footprint is many times the size of our urban land cover. The State of the Cities Report claims that cities are less energy intensive than non-urban areas, but this does not allow for wider environmental impacts and the cheap international manufactured imports on which cities heavily depend. Being 80% urban means that land use, energy saving, reducing environmental impact, and social harmony, mainly involve existing urban areas. Therefore the issue of replacement building, retrofitting, remodelling, renewing existing buildings within urban areas are crucial to future planning social and economic progress. A major shift in the focus of planning to existing areas is urgent. This takes us to our third challenge.

### 3. Regenerating Existing Built Up Areas & Sustainability

Many buildings can last almost indefinitely with careful, continuous care as buildings are effectively rebuilt over time through renovation and remodelling. They can be made highly efficient with lower energy inputs and environmental impact by applying known technologies.

We can halve energy use in existing buildings with known insulation & heating methods but incentives are almost all negative e.g. 17.5% VAT on repair. Similar barriers apply to the reuse of urban land. Kate Barker recommends stronger fiscal incentives to encourage reuse of both land and buildings. We need to look at already developed land and existing spaces for new development, new uses, energy saving, more sustainable communities, social gains, density.

There are nine main ways of helping meet land and development needs while addressing environmental and social problems:

- a) Reuse of existing areas saves countryside & reduces sprawl; it makes services cheaper through greater proximity; the traditional density of urban centres is appealing and offers untapped assets & potential; traditional street patterns & services are also attractive or have the potential to be so (shown by house lender surveys). There is latent capacity in empty and under-used buildings and small sites. Inconvenient as this offer is to large developers, most builders are small and would gain from a shift to incentives for reuse. There is much family housing (3 bedrooms plus garden) in existing areas but the tax on repair reduces their value. Incentives to over occupy space by childless couples limit affordable housing access for families. With changed incentives, we could make much more use of existing areas.
  
- b) Creating more mixed, integrated communities  
New build adds under 1% a year to the stock so it cannot address the urgent need for saving energy, integrating communities, supporting better services. Unpopular existing areas are run down, with poor services, poor populations, unused spaces and buildings. They are unattractive to

better off people and investors, but offer the potential for more mixed communities if renovated, greened and preened. There are inherent attractions in older communities, so incentives for repair, better street maintenance, higher quality public spaces, more integrated services would act as a magnet. Neighbourhood renewal to date has been too narrowly focused to unleash this potential. Existing areas offer an affordable housing supply compared with the big costs of new build, demolition and replacement.

c) Density

Neighbourhood decline currently drives people out causing falling density and rising demand for new house building also at low density. In post-war New Towns, the planned density was 38 homes per hectare to support local schools, shops, buses, parks etc with an average of 4 people per family; around 150 people per hectare. To achieve the equivalent **people density** today requires at least 50 homes per hectare. The government minimum is still only 30. This does **not** make sense. In addition, 40% of the cost of each home is land, but at a more sustainable density the land:cost ratio would fall. Only with more homes fitted into existing areas, will overall urban densities rise to sustainable levels and generate more integrated communities. Higher density should lead to lower energy for transport, health services etc, and more viable schools.

d) Social integration

Ethnic polarisation is a big danger. Since 1991, in spite of wider ethnic dispersal by some groups across most areas, ethnic concentrations have grown within inner cities where they have traditionally settled. Meanwhile new mixed communities outside cities are much less integrated. Neighbourhood renewal done properly offers huge potential to help with social needs, affordable housing, ethnic integration and better service provision in poorer areas and general urban upgrading.

e) Energy saving

Older buildings are currently very leaky but contain much embodied energy. They can be upgraded for far less than the cost of new build and offer a good investment if incentives for repair, renewal and energy efficiency of existing homes and areas are introduced on an equal footing with new build. We need to do this anyway for carbon reasons since stock replacement is very slow. The materials required to upgrade an existing home are about one tenth of new build. Existing buildings can be made as energy efficient as new build at a fraction of the cost. There is big potential for decentralised community power generation in existing communities which saves at least 40% of energy of itself.

f) New uses

Older buildings are adaptable: offices become homes and vice versa; ground floors become shops; schools become play centres; flats over shops are reclaimed. Changing work patterns make home-work links closer and potentially more efficient. The service economy needs multiple small businesses, requiring varied building styles. Homes, churches, pubs, schools, health centres, shops, factories, warehouses, garages, sheds, basements, attics all offer potential spaces and are increasingly in demand. Conversions are labour intensive but save materials, land, infrastructure, and generate demand for local builders, suppliers etc. This helps restore the economy of declining existing communities.

g) New build within existing communities

Derelict unused sites abound. If we focus only on reusing very small sites (1/2 – 2 acres) they can more than meet current housing need even in London; sites under 1/2 acre, which are myriad, can produce 10 homes each. New infill spaces arise continually. Corner ends, back alleys and garages can also provide building space. Petrol stations, as one example, are space hungry, wasteful and increasingly obsolete, so they offer significant development capacity. “Scalpel demolition”, removing structurally dangerous and unusable buildings can create extra valuable space without involving area demolition which is socially contentious and seriously blighting. There are major social and environmental costs to planned area demolition. It is vital **not** to lose urban green space in the rush to infill.

h) Winning existing communities

There are many local objections to higher density, loss of space, more storeys etc within existing areas. Handholding communities in understanding the potential gains of renewing their community and ensuring real community benefits is vital. Incentives are needed to upgrade existing homes; create more and better services; protect green spaces; enhance the familiar character of the area; increase neighbourhood management, security and supervision. Families will be more easily kept together and affordable attractive housing become more locally available if we hold onto and reinvest in existing communities.

### **3. Conclusions**

We are experiencing major land pressures through natural limits, long run urban–industrial growth, rapid household fragmentation and increasing wealth. Current approaches seems politically, socially and environmentally unsustainable; supply does not meet demand, social polarisation & the depletion of built up areas present huge challenges. Planning is a vital tool in preventing irreversible harm to the environment, to our social stability and to urban renewal.

We need:

- continuing tight constraints on further building on green land;

- stronger incentives for urban renewal and renovation;
- a planning focus on neighbourhood level land capacity and renewal;
- stronger environmental measures to reduce overall energy use and environmental impact of building and development.

The following measures would help:

- equalise VAT on new build and repair;
- charge the full infrastructure cost of new development;
- introduce strong fiscal incentives for reuse of small sites and existing underused buildings;
- develop a Code for Sustainable Existing Homes;
- require neighbourhood capacity studies;
- create incentives to free up and modernise existing family homes;
- protect and enhance urban green spaces, gardens, green belts etc;
- create incentives for shared household developments (for elderly, young, emergencies);
- raise the minimum average density for development to 50;
- actively promote greater ethnic and social integration within existing communities through renewal incentives.

## Spatial Planning Issues

<b>Land Supply</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- affordability &amp; supply problems can be greatly helped by density, infill, conversions, upgrading</li></ul>
<b>Land Uses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- building as little as possible on new land, reusing existing / used land and buildings; integrating new within existing communities</li></ul>
<b>Climate Change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- plan for new climate scenario</li><li>- build in and cost <b>full</b> environmental proofing to <b>all</b> new development</li><li>- charge full infrastructure and environmental cost of new development</li><li>- conserve, reduce, recycle</li></ul>
<b>Existing Communities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- focus effort on social integration</li><li>- uncover capacity of existing areas</li><li>- require area/neighbourhood action plans</li><li>- include renovated units within housing targets</li><li>- plan for new build &amp; existing homes to happen alongside each other</li><li>- plan links between existing services and housing potential</li><li>- plan / protect / enhance open spaces and facilities within existing areas</li></ul>

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