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LOCAL AUTHORITY PLANNING: UNRAVELLING THE TIES THAT BIND

The housing shortage continues to place an increasing strain on the entire planning process. However, it is simply facile to say that there should be closer cooperation between the public and private sectors if chronic problems are to be addressed. What is clear is that the local authority planning process is itself in crisis, and those who sit on the other side of the fence in the private sector need to adopt a more collaborative and sympathetic posture.

There is an increasing problem with local planning authorities. Too many do not have enough budget to hire the requisite resources or expertise to tackle a fast growing planning log jam. In turn, we are seeing planning officers having to deal with an ever-increasing caseload.

Indeed, in some parts of the North of England, my experience reveals that individual officers at some local authorities can be handling up to 90 applications at one time. I am sure that this is a situation mirrored right cross the country, in planning departments up and down the land.

Moreover, those councils who can afford to take on staff face a dearth of quality applicants. There are simply not enough skilled people coming into the sector with the ready experience and expertise available to plug the gaps. Indeed, in the skills vacuum this creates, those authorities lucky enough to be able to find good people will still continue to struggle because they cannot afford to pay people a competitive wage. Consequently, there is an increasing imbalance between the public and private planning sectors.

Those of us at the coalface see the repercussions of this on an almost daily basis: applications not being approved in time, or being determined 'as submitted' without any collaboration with the applicant.

There is also a general lack of understanding about the changing local and national planning policy. This is something that I have seen first hand providing consultancy expertise to councils over the last few years.

A great deal of authorities can only afford to hire inexperienced graduates who then sit alongside disillusioned senior officers more interested in marking time until retirement than engaging in effective planning. It is almost akin to a tragedy but it does not have to be this way.

More effective budgeting, changes in work ethics and processes, and more thoughtful resourcing can deliver real change and make planning departments better, more attractive places to work. This is especially the case for newly qualified planners who might lack the experience but burn bright with the youthful drive and ambition that councils can benefit from as they look to tackle our housing crisis.

Indeed, I actually feel sorry for some local planning authorities. The amount of budget in real terms that they have to spend today has steadily been decreasing year-on-year since the last recession; yet we are seeing a rise in planning application submissions - in some cases, back to the levels of 2004/05.

As such, revenue is flowing into local authorities but not always to those with planning responsibilities. It is being channelled elsewhere and spread too thinly across departments that do not generate fee income in the way planning departments do. Yes, they might be important departments but surely if the Government is serious about delivering the housing we need, they will have to get a grip on such practices and better assist local planning authorities by allocating, in the first place, the appropriate resources to help them to do their job effectively. This does not always have to be financial aid, it could be advisory help - simple processes can be changed for the better to improve performance significantly through effective troubleshooting.

Any lack of trust and understanding that exists between the public and private sector does nothing to encourage developers, who simply want to secure planning permission and build their houses as quickly as possible and with minimal hassle.

Greater experience of private sector planning in the public sector can support this, ensuring that fresh thinking, new ideas and best practice are disseminated further and more deeply among local authorities. However, the challenge for local authorities looking to take advantage of new enlightenment remains the creation of advantageous remuneration packages that will tempt those private sector planners to cross the Rubicon into local government.

It is therefore surely time to take a fresh look if we are to offset an increasingly moribund approach to public sector planning and shake ourselves free from a hide-bound, systematic and impersonal process, which is caught up within a financial straitjacket stifling ambition, creativity and imagination? ■