

IN RESPONSE to Secretary of State Michael Heseltine's challenge that he intends to introduce legislation requiring the preparation of schedules of publicly owned vacant land in specific areas, a study group of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities has published for discussion its own report on the subject¹.

Among the recommendations advanced is the positive and timely suggestion that the current value of property should be properly recorded in the accounts of public bodies.

This proposal is a dramatic step forward in the direction of making available to researchers, developers and the electorate, accurate data on publicly owned assets which for far too long have been conveniently concealed from detailed scrutiny.

The group further suggests that all public sector bodies should maintain records of void and under-occupied land buildings. In addition, public bodies are urged to make one committee or administrative department responsible for property information systems and for reviewing at least annually, property brought into more effective use as well as that being held for development and other purposes.

THERE CAN be no doubt that legislation towards these ends is long overdue. But as far as local authorities are concerned the initiative should not be confined to land in public ownership.

Already the London Boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark have extended their monitoring of the property market to include vacant land in private ownership.

In a recent paper on the Inner Cities², the Leader of Lambeth Council wrote: "One of the interesting facts which emerges (from our property studies) is the relatively small amount of vacant land owned by the public sector – contrary to public belief. There is, on the other hand, evidence that a considerable acreage is held for investment purposes by the private sector."

The Lambeth situation contrasts starkly with that in Southwark and Docklands



● Michael Heseltine

Value of public land: time to end the secrecy

By Peter Hudson

generally, where public bodies including the Gas Board and the Port of London Authority hold substantial acreages, some under the claim that the land is required for future development programmes.

The big question, of course, is this: will the Secretary of State be successful in his drive to bring development agencies, private property companies and public bodies together to regenerate the inner cities?

The Building and Civil Engineering Economic Development Councils here expressed some doubts³, pointing out that pension funds and private developers have underlined to local authorities the need to spend more tax money on road schemes, environmental improvements and projects to reduce violence and vandalism as well as improving the quality of the housing stock and the variety of tenures. Such measures, it is

claimed, are required if the inner city is to be made attractive to investors.

But local authorities are now having to face severe cut-backs in rate support grant to meet Government policy. Some authorities are forecasting that just to keep services at their present level, rate increases of 40 to 50 per cent will be required in 1980-81.

RATES, of course, are levied on the rental value of buildings, and well-improved sites tend to be penalised while vacant sites in private ownership carry no tax burden.

The Leader of Lambeth Council has recognised this. "Could the Government not consider some radical new approach to this problem by putting rates on long term occupied sites or reducing the value of such land for the purposes of compulsory purchase?" This councillor has certainly hit the nail on the head, and it is to be hoped that similar opinions will be vociferously put forward by others.

This same view has already been expressed by the Civic Trust³. Following a survey carried out in 1976, Timothy Contell reported an estimate of 250,000 acres of "dormant land" in Britain. The full facts, of course, are not known because in spite of more than thirty years of detailed land use planning legislation, records have not produced a comprehensive survey of the nation's land assets.

The rating of vacant urban sites would not provide the most satisfactory answer to all the economic problems arising from the private appropriation of land rent. But it would be a step in the right direction – a step which could lead to full site value rating which has been successfully adopted in parts of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The time for this reform is long overdue.

REFERENCES

1. *Development of Publicly Owned Urban Land* – Association of Metropolitan Authorities, price £1.
2. *The Reconstruction of the Inner Cities* – National Economic Development Office.
3. *Urban Wasteland* – The Civic Trust.