

Case for greater access

**Handling Geographic Information, Report of the
Committee of Enquiry chaired by Lord Chorley,
London: HMSO, 1987, £14.95.**

FOR ALL who regret the official lack of interest in the level of land rents and prices in the UK, relief may well be at hand thanks to a Committee of Enquiry appointed by Environment Secretary Patrick Jenkin in April 1985.

The Committee, chaired by the eminent Cambridge geography Professor Lord Chorley, was appointed to advise on the "future handling of geographic information in the UK taking account of modern developments on Information Technology and of market need."

The need for such a committee was identified by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology in December 1983. It reported a rapidly growing demand for "geographic information", a demand which will only be met efficiently if immediate action is taken to organise a coherent national structure within which the production and dissemination of such information by private and public bodies may be coordinated.

"Geographic information" can be related to specific locations on the earth. As so much information can be made space-specific it covers an enormous range, including details of land ownership and land values. The idea is that all such information should be packaged in standard spatial units and uniquely referenced to facilitate its usefulness, just as all books are referenced by ISBN numbers.

This task of standardisation is now an urgent one. With the development of computer technology, many of the main users such as the public utilities will be

forced in five years or so to begin acquiring their operational information in which they will use their own reference systems. This will create barriers to the free flow of information and cause costly duplication.

The Chorley Report highlights "four key tasks which need to be put in hand now if important opportunities are not to be lost":

- 1 **Rapid conversion of the Ordnance Survey basic scale map series to digital form (for computer handling) in collaboration with the main users.**
- 2 **More widespread use of postcodes as standard units for holding and releasing socio-economic data.**
- 3 **More widespread use of the National Grid referencing system to link different data sets.**
- 4 **Setting up a Centre for Geographic Information.**

The private sector would benefit through "better management, use of resources, planning and decision-making." For example, the report states that "The private sector has a strong interest in access to information on individual properties and land and market developments, for financial investment and property development purposes ...

INSITE

"In recent years the property industry has produced considerably improved information on market rents and values, including the setting up of computerised property database services, but there are still problems with development data.

"Much time and money is wasted in disputes between developers and planning authorities because there are no authoritative spatially referenced data on the

'development pipeline.' Information on individual properties is held by the District Valuer, the Land Registries and the local planning authority but access is limited by confidentiality constraints."

In their evidence to the Enquiry, Hillier Parker May & Rowden, a major London estate agency, bemoaned "an alarming trend that the published information on which we have relied has decreased" (the last Census of Distribution figures are for 1971, and the Commercial and Industrial Floorspace Statistics publications are to be discontinued).

They also wrote: "We believe it is unnecessary for the rateable value, floorspace and use of property to be confidential, and hope that the Committee will recommend that the legal constraints imposed on the District Valuer be lifted, and that the Valuation Service be encouraged to make information more readily available."

The Inland Revenue's Valuation Office submitted that "If this was thought by Government to be advisable in the interests of improving information available to the property market there would appear to be no further objection to including transaction evidence in a national register of property information. Provided problems of confidentiality can be overcome the advantages ... to commercial and other users would, we believe, be very great. There would also be benefits to conveyancers."

The Committee noted that the Government's Tradeable Information Initiative is encouraging Departments to release data. Disguising the sensitive parts of such information, or minimally aggregating it, would expedite this process.

"It is our view, however, that releasing transaction data in any aggregated form would continue

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TRUE BLUE PROMISE!

FOURTEEN Tory MPs have called for action to release vacant city land for development, writes Peter Poole.

They articulate some of the steps that the Thatcher government ought to take, if it is sincere about solving the problem of city centre blight, in a new booklet published by the Conservative Political Centre. They call for:

- A national land use survey: the Department of the Environment relies on land use statistics produced by the late Robin Best, which are far from satisfactory;

- A Land Register which identifies privately-owned vacant land as well as sites in public ownership suitable for housing;

- A Public Auction Notice System, designed to force public authorities to release undeveloped land to the private sector at market prices.

The vested interest behind these proposals is the need to protect the Tory vote in the shires. Villages now carry more of the burden of housing and industrial development which is spilling out from the metropolitan centres. The MPs fear that their electorally-secure rural

* Nicholas Baker and Jerry Wiggin, *This Pleasant Land: A New Strategy for Planning*, London: Conservative Political Centre, £1.95.

havens might one day become "pockets of rural decay".

"It would be short-sighted and self-defeating to allow this to happen," say the authors. But in wanting to draw the teeth of socialist councillors they add: "The Conservative party cannot afford to allow our great cities, particularly in the north of England, to fall deeper and deeper into the clutches of hard-left councils which have a vested interest in exploiting social tensions."*

Unfortunately, the MPs have not learnt from past mistakes. For example, they call for an exemption from the proposed national business rate (the local property tax) for up to five years for newly constructed commercial or industrial premises in the inner cities. They characterise that exemption as "a powerful incentive", and as proof they point to the developments that have taken place inside enterprise zones, where there is relief from rates.

In fact, exemption from rates

in enterprise zones pushed up rents and the price of land: the benefits were reaped by land-owners who, by speculatively holding onto their idle sites were the ones who caused the problem of under-development in the first place!

But the MPs do hint at one sensible suggestion. Money invested in the rehabilitation of existing buildings should benefit from tax allowances. But how much more dynamic, then, would be the policy of *taxing* site values — which would force owners to relinquish their land, if they did not want to develop it — and compensating for this by *untaxing* capital improvements, which would encourage capital investment.

The Conservative Government has not yet set its sights on such a positive market-oriented strategy. It still sees a solution in terms of planning and moral suasion. But the call for a land use survey from such a strong block of backbenchers is encouraging: and we have to hope that, one day, the party may recognise fiscal reform as the permanent solution.

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to significantly reduce the usefulness of the data to others. In view of the usefulness of HM Land Registry ownership data and Valuation Office transaction data for individual properties we believe there is a strong case for removing the constraints on releasing these data to any interested parties."

So persuaded was the Committee of this point that it forms its main legislative proposal:

We recommend that there should be open access to details of land ownership contained in the HMLR's Register of Title and to

details of land and property transactions held by the VO and the Valuation & Lands office of Northern Ireland. This would bring England and Wales and Northern Ireland into line with Scotland. The necessary legislation to lift current restrictions should be introduced as soon as practicable.

The Chorley Report represents a radical initiative regarding the government's fact-finding capability; this resource should not continue to be devoted simply to meeting its own needs in the cheapest way.

The report goes on: "Information needs to be seen as a corpor-

ate resource and be more widely shared between departments and organisations ... A major promotional exercise is required to maximise returns on the existing national investment in geographic information ... Charges for data should be at a marginal cost, and only at a higher rate if the market will bear it."

In other words, information is a "public good", and public goods should be made to yield the maximum public benefit. Imperfect information is a constraint on the market economy. Chorley has pointed us down the path towards that provision.