

## **Andrew Boff AM**

**London Assembly Member**

**Chair of the Planning and Regeneration Committee**



City Hall  
The Queen's Walk  
London SE1 2AA

Secretary of State  
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
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Dear Secretary of State,

24 August 2020

### **Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on local planning authorities in London**

The London Assembly's Planning and Regeneration Committee has examined the impacts on the planning system in London of the COVID-19 crisis, and your Government's response. Londoners have experienced their homes and local communities in new ways as a result of the necessary lockdown measures. It has become clearer than ever that high-quality development, and the planning system that underpins this, is essential to ensuring the capital's residents have access to healthy places to live and work. As the Government now takes steps to help our country's economy recover from the COVID-19 crisis, it becomes all the more important to ensure the planning system is delivering new development that serves the needs of local communities.

On 14 July 2020, the Committee heard testimony from expert guests:

- Bethany Cullen, Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden
- Victoria Hills, Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)
- Peter Eversden, Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies
- James Fennell, Chief Executive, Lichfields

Our expert panel identified the ways in which the planning system has responded to the crisis, including innovations that could improve the planning system in the longer term. However, they raised concerns about some areas of the response to the crisis, particularly permitted development rights. I am writing with a number of learnings from our investigation that the Committee recommends MHCLG should take forward.

The Committee recognises that our recommendations would be affected by the proposals outlined in the 'Planning for the future' White Paper, should they be implemented. The Committee will also be submitting a full consultation response in due course, however we hope that MHCLG can consider the recommendations outlined in this letter as part of early thinking on changes to the planning system resulting from the White Paper.

### Recognising the value of planning departments

Development has a clear role to play in the post-crisis economic recovery, which the Prime Minister himself recognised in his 'Build Build Build' speech and in the 'Planning for the future' proposals. However, this development cannot take place without a well-resourced planning system to underpin it. Despite initial concerns, the Committee was impressed that our expert guests were not expecting significant delays to the delivery of planning approvals. In fact, the sector has ostensibly adapted quickly to working in the new ways that are required as a result of the crisis. However, our experts highlighted challenges for the planning system as it moves into supporting economic recovery. As Bethany Cullen told us:

*"Probably the biggest challenge for us in terms of getting through the numbers has been resources, more than technology or adapting processes. That, like for all other planning authorities, is because our staffing levels have been squeezed over the years. It has been challenging for some time and certainly over this period when we have had to face the fact that we have staff who are juggling childcare with doing their day jobs and also in the early part of the lockdown period more staff illness."*

Given the necessity of stimulating development, with the associated benefits for jobs and the economy, the Committee believes that planning departments need to be recognised for the value they add, and appropriately resourced to deliver on their task. As Victoria Hills summarised:

*"One thing that we have noticed is that planning cannot be accused of standing still... We have seen, rather than sit back and down tools, planning has worked very rapidly at a local level to keep pace with keeping the system going... If planning can move that quickly during a pandemic to keep the system moving, now is the time to continue investing in that opportunity to help us recover and build a better future."*

#### **Recommendation**

As Government plans for economic recovery, it should recognise the critical role of planning departments in realising the ambitions laid out in 'Build Build Build'. Government should ensure that authorities are appropriately resourced to facilitate the delivery of ambitious, high-quality development.

### Digital public engagement

With normal consultation practices inhibited by social distancing, questions were raised about whether communities will be adequately consulted. However, our investigation has indicated that local authorities in London have adapted rapidly to conducting their work in new ways,

primarily by virtual means. Four campaigning organisations, including the London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies, of which our guest Peter Eversden is Chairman, set out six principles which looked to safeguard democracy and public participation in the planning system during the crisis.<sup>1</sup> He told us that there was an “amazingly good response” with local authorities adopting the principles.

The Committee feels that many of the changes that have come about as a result of the crisis could be taken forward to make planning more accessible in the long term. Virtual meetings have allowed applications to continue to be processed, and guests told us that virtual meetings have also enabled people to view these meetings where previously they may have faced accessibility or time barriers. We recommend that planning committees continue to offer virtual broadcasts, even when they return to meeting physically.

The Committee also heard about the benefits of three-dimensional modelling technology. Realistic modelling of potential developments allows both planning decision makers and local residents to understand the potential impacts and benefits of development, in a way that is easier to engage with than traditional plans and drawings and without the requirement to visit the site physically. This again reduces accessibility barriers and may be more environmentally sustainable without travel to the site.

As there are more options for engagement, it may be that more residents will participate in the planning process. This is acknowledged in the ‘Planning for the future’ proposals. However, care needs to be taken that any adoption of new virtual methods does not exclude those with less access to technology. The Committee discussed this with guests and was reassured that, although no easy solutions have been identified, it is something that the planning sector is cognisant of as it plans for the future. The Committee recognises that MHCLG administers the Local Digital Fund, and the Local Digital COVID-19 Challenge, and we believe this fund may offer the opportunity for investment in emerging planning technologies.

#### **Recommendations**

Support local planning authorities to undertake more digital consultation processes, continuing after social distancing restrictions are lifted, whilst ensuring that those with less access to technology are still accounted for. MHCLG should monitor changes implemented since lockdown and their impact on community engagement, to identify best practice.

MHCLG should continue to provide funding for digital innovation in local planning authorities, potentially through the Local Digital Fund.

#### Permitted development rights

On 17 April 2020 the Committee wrote to you outlining our significant concerns regarding permitted development rights (PDR) for change of use from commercial/office space to residential units, and upward extensions. We highlighted significant concerns about the poor-quality housing that is being produced under the scheme, including putting forward evidence

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<sup>1</sup> [Press Release From London Forum Of Amenity and Civic Societies, CPRE London, Just Space and Friends Of The Earth](#), 27 April 2020

that nationally, only 30 per cent of units delivered under PDR meet national space standards, compared to 94 per cent under planning permission. It is widely accepted that PDR schemes often produce poor quality housing, with research commissioned by your own department stating that “permitted development conversions do seem to create worse quality residential environments than planning permission conversions in relation to a number of factors widely linked to the health, wellbeing and quality of life of future occupiers.”<sup>2</sup>

The Committee would like to reiterate our concerns regarding PDR in light of COVID-19. Many Londoners have spent most of their time confined to their homes during the lockdown, so having access to sufficient natural light, space, green space and local amenities, has become more important than ever. These are the very things that some PDR schemes are lacking, but that could have been provided had the schemes been determined by full planning permission. At this time, it is particularly discouraging that MHCLG forged ahead with expansion of the PDR scheme despite significant and widespread concern from the sector.<sup>3</sup> The ‘Planning for the future’ proposals also outline a desire to widen and change the nature of PDR, and we have concerns about whether the current issues with PDR would persist in any future model.

As we highlight above, the crisis has given the opportunity to adopt new technologies to increase public participation in planning. Alongside our other concerns, PDR undermines the opportunity for community engagement and any expansion of the scheme would reduce the potential for new development to better reflect the needs of local residents. Our guests also made this case. Bethany Cullen stated:

*“The extension of PDRs is probably far more worrying in terms of the ability of local communities to be engaged and to shape their areas. The community involvement in the planning process, both at preapplication and application, is so important in terms of getting schemes that respond to the community’s needs.”*

**Recommendation**

MHCLG should refer to our previous recommendations on PDR. The Committee encourages you to reconsider any further expansion of the scheme, but if PDR is to continue then there must be a set of mandatory standards, particularly in regards to space and quality, regardless of whether developments proceed with a new zonal planning system, traditional planning permission, or through permitted development rights.

The Committee would welcome a response by 18 September 2020. Please address your response to Sarah-Jane Gay, Senior Policy Adviser, at Sarah-Jane.Gay@london.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely,



**Andrew Boff AM**

Chair of the Planning Committee

<sup>2</sup> [Quality standard of homes delivered through change of use permitted development rights](#), MHCLG, 21 July 2020

<sup>3</sup> [New laws to extend homes upwards and revitalise town centres](#), MHCLG, 21 July 2020