

Leith Planning Limited

Political debate in Britain is dominated by three huge issues: how to sustain economic growth post-Brexit; how to plan effectively for the welfare of an aging population; and how to boost home-building dramatically so that the generations in their twenties and thirties can get a foot on the housing ladder. As far as housing is concerned it is widely argued that the planning system stymies development. Claims and counter-claims are batted to and fro: that there is a plethora of unimplemented planning consents; that developers are taking too long to build properties; that we should build on green belt land (fiercely resisted); that all necessary development could be accommodated on brown-field sites.



Chris Plenderleith, Executive Chairman of Leith Planning

Leith Planning, with offices in Lytham St Annes in Lancashire and Wigmore Street in London, is a boutique town planning consultancy operating nation-wide. We seek to deliver for our clients a sane path, knowing that politics plays a major role in the planning process and that uncertainty is a fact of life. Chris Plenderleith, Executive Chairman, gives his practical response to the debate.

National Politics and Planning

Long term planning, beyond the political cycle, is critical, and while consensus is often difficult to achieve, it must remain a goal. We are involved in land disposals to HS2, major development projects in London stimulated by Crossrail, and support Hounslow Council in promoting a rail link between Heathrow and Waterloo, including a station at East Bedfont. We are also supporting and promoting the Northern Powerhouse. We promote sustainable development on behalf of clients with well over £1 billion to invest. Connecting the parties on the ground is key to delivering growth from infrastructure investment.

One of the key drivers of demographic change is our ageing population. In the 75 to 84 age group there will be a 30 per cent increase in households during the period 2014 to 2039. In the 25 to 34 age group over the same period, however, there will be a reduction in households of four per cent over the same period. Social infrastructure must meet these challenges, in the knowledge that resources will always be finite and the money available must be used effectively. This challenge will inevitably require greater collaboration on the ground, particularly between social services and the NHS.

Over recent years there has been support, from both sides of the House, for investment in mental health. We are working with Lord Patel of Bradford on new initiatives, including the "Breaking Barriers" programme. In Exeter, we are working with officers and members to deliver an independent hospital for Cygnet Health Care, owned by Universal Health Services, a Fortune 500 company.

AT A GLANCE LEITH PLANNING LIMITED

- » Founded by Chris Plenderleith
- » Established in 1992
- » Offices in Lytham St. Annes and London
- » Services include Initial Site/ Project Assessment, Planning Applications, Planning Appeals, Planning Objections, Judicial Reviews
- » 13 employees
- » We have two other arms to the business, Leith Capital Management & Leith Planning Ventures
- » www.leithplanning.co.uk

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In London, we are working with St. Martin of Tours and Wandsworth and Westminster Mind, developing services fit for purpose. Mental healthcare needs its champions, of which we are proudly one.

Since the 1970s, there has been on average 160,000 new homes built each year in England. It is argued that we need from 225,000 to 275,000 or more homes a year – some housing lobbies go as high as 300,000 – to keep up with population growth and start to tackle years of under-supply. I recently published an article in the Journal of Planning and Environmental Law entitled: “The Holy Grail: Delivering Housing Need”, an article written with Michael Bullock of Arc 4. The conclusion is very relevant:

“However, the starting point for any evaluation (of housing) is objectively assessing requirements in a consistent manner, endeavouring to strike a balance between rented and owner occupied property, providing clear guidance on assessing affordable need and taking account of demographic change in particular the needs of the elderly.

From the point of view of the property industry tinkering with leaks and blockages creates uncertainty. The planning system needs to be fit for purpose and that includes correctly identifying housing requirements. However, the system must facilitate the development of innovative solutions to existing and future challenges. It must also facilitate the reincarnation of tried and tested solutions, which includes new towns and villages.

The search for the Holy Grail is a legend and goal elusive; delivering an adequate supply of good quality housing has proven elusive albeit it is too important to the welfare of the nation to give up the search.”

Local Politics and Planning

It is evident that many authorities which see a large increase in their housing need are also those with acknowledged constraints (Green Belts, AONB's or national parks). Furthermore, a number of authorities which have seen a reduction in their need figures are in areas without many constraints and so would have the capacity for greater housing. The local political narrative, however, is generally sceptical of providing housing above the minimum.

Many planning applications are decided by officers, under delegated powers, albeit most major planning applications are determined by members. Breaking down the “them and us” mentality is not always possible, though it should always be an aim. We recognise the importance of the Planning Inspectorate and the courts; however, we also invest significant time and effort in understanding the local political narrative, engage with members and local residents and endeavour to deliver consent by negotiation. Leveraged negotiation is one of Leith Planning's core skills.

In the 2017 Parliamentary Review I commented that: “Effective town planning helps provide people with jobs, homes, schools and hospitals. It also helps reconcile the potential tension between protecting the environment and accommodating sustainable economic growth and development. However, to be effective it is necessary to review organisational methods and strategy, communicate concepts clearly, promote best practice and respond positively to today's challenges.”

We firmly believe in “participation”. “Consultation” too often becomes an end in itself. Grassroots “participation”, drawing on local expertise in innovative ways, can deliver results. “Socially responsible development”, which seeks to consider both financial return and social good, to bring about social change, is capable of being a sound model for public, charitable and the private sector organisations. At Leith Planning we embrace change. It is, however, often surprising what can be achieved working with the planning system we have and working with the resources at our disposal; more money is not always the answer. Ultimately, those involved in the planning process are judged by results, and that means delivering the development the country needs.