

Planning portal We should ditch self-serving planning committees and listen to the people, writes *Piers Taylor*

In the UK, we've devised a planning system that is complex, opaque and all about passing the buck. Planning officers, who are empowered with the responsibility to determine planning applications, rarely use this power wisely, or are indeed able to. Typically, officers fear the accountability of making potentially controversial decisions, and refer applications to planning committees for determination.

This is a ridiculous kind of pass the parcel. We depend too heavily on discretionary interpretation of policy in the determination process, because our local plans are not specific enough. Very few countries depend on – or tolerate – planning discretion to such a degree. This discretion contributes to a fuliginous planning system that is bureaucratic, uncertain, time-consuming and expensive, and has given birth to an entire industry of planning consultants, who imbibe yet more fees from bewildered clients as they help navigate this foggy mire.

The other problem is the planning committee – that grody invention that masquerades as a beacon of democracy but is instead a group of reactionary, myopic obscurantists. When non-specific local plans, risk-averse case officers and a turgid committee work in conjunction, disastrous results ensue – as made manifest in much of the desperately mediocre built landscape we see today.

Most schemes with any degree of complexity or significance are referred to one of these vainglorious committees, made up of elected members who have little interest in planning policy and one overriding concern: votes. Gaining re-election depends on serving the short-term needs of constituents and those who shout the loudest – such as volume housebuilders. Volume housebuilders can shout very loudly indeed.

This planning system is a fitting tribute to David Cameron's vacuous, discombobulated and capricious invention – Localism. Unless there is a robust outline development plan (ODP) in place, local democracy (represented by the planning committee) can quickly become superficial and self-serving, and is often disastrous because of the lack of any long-term

view. Planning is far too important to be delegated to nescient planning committees, and must take a broader view than they are able to offer. Devolving decision-making to committees undermines any intelligence in our wider national policy documents, which are reasonably comprehensive. However, they should, and could, be more specific.

ODPs contained within local plans should control – let's call it design – growth and development. But the main problem with them is the lack of comprehensive drawings outlining how this growth and development takes place, meaning that the system depends on officer discretion to interpret policy. If we had clear design drawings in ODPs which set out the principles and rules for development, our planning process would be

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radically simplified, officer discretion would be largely eliminated, and planning committees abolished.

Critically then, with robust ODPs a real type of Localism could take place – one where local people could make their own decisions without interference from lackadaisical planning officers or inane councillors. These decisions are hugely significant and empowering for local people, yet would be of little wider consequence. This would also eliminate the need for parasitic planning consultants and costly delays during the approval process. What we need is a system that effectively marries the top-down with the bottom-up, and marginalises the bit in the middle.

Piers Taylor is founder of Invisible Studio and co-presenter of BBC2's The House that £100k Built