

The **London Forum** of
Amenity and Civic Societies



working to protect and improve the quality of life in London

London Forum *Insights*

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Pressure Mounts over Government's Planning Reforms

The Government is under pressure on all sides to abandon its plans for radical reform of the planning system, outlined in last year's Planning for the Future white paper, and again in the recent Queen's Speech. This issue of London Forum *Insights* lists some of the remarks made by Conservative MPs in the debate on "Affordable and Safe Housing for All". There was further criticism from the all-party Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government (see [here](#)) which lambasted the Government's extension of Permitted Development Rights as well as some key measures in Planning for the Future. And even if the Government is willing to face down this criticism from its backbenches, it can hardly ignore the residents of Chesham and Amersham who voted with their...er...votes, due in part, allegedly, to local hostility to the proposed planning reforms.

London Forum members may be concerned that concerted pressure from the "shires" could lead to our cities being required to shoulder more of the development load, as happened when the "mutant algorithm" for housing targets was abandoned last year. However local MPs seem willing to fight the Capital's corner, judging from former minister Theresa Villiers' excellent letter to The Times, and Harrow East MP, Bob Blackman's recent comments in the Evening Standard.

Forum member societies should ensure that their MP is aware of the Government's

intention to deprive local communities and organisations of their right to object to many development proposals in exchange for a greater say in the preparation of Local Plans. Neither London Forum nor the national umbrella organisation, Civic Voice, believe that this will lead to better planning decisions other than, possibly, from the perspective of developers.

Other articles in this issue of *Insights* include:

- a response from Samuel Hughes of Policy Exchange to the previous issue's call-to-arms from Gordon Massey in defence of the suburban way of life.
- an introduction to the wider programme of Open City, the educational charity well known for the annual Open House festival
- a guide to the Voice of Authority webinar series by London Forum trustee, Darian Mitchell
- a report on the Forum's well-attended Zoom meeting on .the difficulties that the changes to Use Classes and Permitted Development Rights will cause for the proper planning of town centres and high streets

We had expected by now to be carrying news of how planning policies in the London Plan are to be implemented. However, the publication of supplementary planning guidance is delayed until the autumn, due to the hiatus either side of the mayoral and GLA elections. Something to look forward to for the next issue?

Strong Suburbs

Samuel Hughes responds to Gordon Massey's article in previous *Insights*

Gordon Massey's excellent article outlines many of the problems surrounding development in Britain today. Everyone agrees on prioritising small brownfield sites, but there seem to be few appropriate sites available. High-rise would do more, but it is profoundly unpopular with local people because of the impact on its surroundings.

This has led to increasing interest in suburban intensification - extending, adapting and redeveloping existing housing. Many civic leaders see this as a potential opportunity to make our cities more humane and sustainable, supporting struggling local high streets. Mr Massey himself highlights the value of carefully adding gyms, offices or other extensions to some suburban homes.

As Mr Massey rightly notes, however, intensification has its own problems. Many residents do not want great changes on their streets, let alone concrete flatted blocks sprouting up in their neighbours' plots. Such changes are often deeply resented for damaging the prized character of the neighbourhood. Many schemes for suburban intensification have been unpopular for just such reasons.

Our proposal, *Strong Suburbs*, is an attempt to address these problems, developed through profoundly helpful meetings with London Forum. We believe that intensification should happen only when existing local residents support it, and only according to codes that they agree to. We developed proposals based closely on neighbourhood planning, but devolved to a still more local level, in which individual streets gain the right to create their own 'street plans'. Our proposals have been endorsed by prominent civic representatives like London Forum's own Peter Eversden, by champions of neighbourhood planning like Tony Burton, and by suburban MPs like David Simmonds and Bob Blackman, who rightly aim to protect their constituencies.

We think *Strong Suburbs* avoids many of the problems that Mr Massey highlights about suburban intensification imposed from above. In fact, we believe there is no real difference between our views. Mr Massey himself supports intensification in 'run-down areas where residents are eager for change', though he suggests that 'such areas are in a small minority'. We suspect the minority might be larger than that. But if indeed it is small, that is fine by us. The *Strong Suburbs* proposal is just to let streets write a street plan, *if* they want to do so. If streets don't want plans, they won't write them. That might make our policy less impactful. But if, like us, you believe in empowering communities, then that would be exactly the right outcome.

Affordable and Safe Housing for All

Peter Pickering picks highlights from the debate on the Queen's Speech

After Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick, presented the Government's proposals, a wide range of members from all over the United Kingdom took part in the debate. London Forum members should note the following concerns about the proposed planning reforms, expressed by Conservative MPs for English constituencies (the reforms do not apply to other nations).

- A constant theme of the debate was the million or so unimplemented planning permissions.

- Bob Blackman (Harrow) sought pre-legislative scrutiny of the Planning Bill; he said that though it might be acceptable not to require planning permission when a local authority had produced a precise planning brief for a site, every other proposal to build should be subject to local democratic control.
- Sir John Hayes (Lincolnshire) said the Government and appeal inspectors should support planning authorities who said no to poor design
- Mark Pawsey (Rugby) supported the three-zone system provided there was substantial democratic involvement with a role for the planning committee
- Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) was against scrapping the present planning system; local democracy should not be taken away from individual planning applications.
- Damien Moore (Southport) wanted to reform the 'archaic' planning system and cut red tape, but was aware of concerns that controversial developments would be allowed against the wishes of local people
- John Howell (Henley) strongly supported neighbourhood plans, which should not be overruled by district councils.
- Crispin Blunt (Reigate) was concerned about the perceived developer connection with the Conservative party; the levelling-up agenda must be built into the planning system.
- James Sunderland (Bracknell) wanted more protection for the Green Belt and open spaces; democratic consent must be implicit in any legislation.
- Jack Lopresti (Gloucestershire) struck an unusual note, criticising colleagues who opposed much-needed housing anywhere in their own areas.
- Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) spoke in favour of local plans, citing one that had been thrown out by an Inspector on a technicality.
- Stuart Anderson and Jane Stevenson (both Wolverhampton MPs) said that the planning reforms would produce sufficient housing on brownfield sites or underutilised buildings in their city.
- Angela Richardson (Guildford) was critical of their local plan, and worried that a zoning system would erode local democracy and accountability.

Winding up, the Minister for Housing concentrated on the need to build more houses and to speed up the planning system, requiring every council to have an up-to-date digital plan, encouraging neighbourhood planning and having incentives to get developers to build out the planning permissions they had. He said not a word about Council and community scrutiny of planning applications.

Stop Press

On 21st June, the House of Commons debated the motion “That this House believes planning works best when developers and the local community work together to shape local areas and deliver necessary new homes; and therefore calls on the Government to protect the right of communities to object to individual planning applications.” The Government kept its powder dry by having its MPs abstain. The motion was carried 231 – 0. See [here](#) for a transcript of the debate.

Much more than the Open House Festival

Hafsa Adan guides us through Open City’s wide-ranging programme

Open City is best known for the Open House Festival - the world’s largest annual architecture festival which champions a better understanding and appreciation of our built environment and how this can inspire a more open, accessible and equitable city. However, Open House is just a fraction of the charity’s expansive year-round series of events and programmes which aim to engage all citizens, particularly from under-represented backgrounds, in architecture and city making. Our programmes, from the Open House Festival and its international network, to our pioneering education projects – open up buildings, conversations and careers to those normally locked out of them.

Accelerate is a long-standing design, education and mentorship programme for young people aimed at increasing diversity in built environment professions. Every year Accelerate provides 30 sixth form students from across London with a series of skills workshops, one-to-one mentoring at an architecture practice and in-depth guidance with university applications. Our well-established, year-round architecture walking and cycling tours are led by specialist guides, helping you look at the themes and issues shaping the Capital today – from the design of homes, to infrastructure and urban landscapes.

Last year we launched the Open City podcast, films and Model London series. Many



cultural and community organisations were hit hard during the pandemic and successive lockdowns, meaning that we were unable to run much of our traditional programming until these measures were eased. These new programmes allowed for our audiences to still engage with and enjoy architecture from

the comfort and safety of their homes whilst allowing us to reach even wider audiences in London and beyond. You can now tune into the Open City Podcast, a cultural platform to discuss the most salient issues facing our city today and celebrate the people, organisations and stories behind London's built environment.

The film series boasts an impressive catalogue of over 30+ short architecture documentaries with a new film premiering every month; join us as we take you through the keyhole of special spaces and places across London and beyond. If, like many you have tired of your laptop or phone screen, our series of architectural models brings the city to you. Cut, craft and learn about some spectacular London buildings whilst building your own London Skyline.

This still only covers a fraction more of what Open City does – our work is made possible thanks to the generous support of our Open City Friends, who share in our belief that engagement with and conversations about the future of London and the urban landscape should not be open just to a privileged few, but to everyone. You can find out more about how to support us to continue our work here: <https://open-city.org.uk/support>

Report on London Forum Zoom meeting on the Impact of Permitted Development on Town Centres and High Streets

Michael Bach introduced this well-attended meeting, reminding us of the Government's recent changes, the avowed purposes of which are to get more homes built and to revitalise town centres. The new Class E covers most shops, businesses (including financial and professional services), non-residential institutions, gyms, etc. Change of use within class E does not require any permission, and while change from Class E to Class C

(residential) does, it is permitted development subject in certain cases to getting prior approval from the local planning authority.

Professor Matthew Carmona (University College London, Bartlett School of Planning) was clear “PDR is not the answer” to revitalise high streets. A new basis to attract people is required (over the certainty, convenience, choice and cost attractions of online). Local high streets now need “enriching incentives” (e.g. social and leisure uses). Deregulation, “let the market decide” through the new mega class E PDR, risks ad hoc conversion and infills which will reduce diversity and lead to ‘holes’, hastening decline. “Proactive curation” is required.

Gerard Burgess (GLA London Plan Team) said the London Plan had identified over 200 town centres (‘Inclusive, diverse hubs’). A general shift from ‘comparison retail’ outlets to ‘convenience, leisure and services’, means London seemed more resilient than the rest of the country (slightly lower vacancy rates). The wide Use Class E and PDRs means less control for Local Authorities (e.g. retail frontage policies harder to enforce) and less involvement of communities in what happens in their neighbourhoods; more flexibility for businesses which could help recovery, but lower-value businesses (e.g. low-cost workspaces, nurseries, health) may lose out to higher value uses. The loss of control could fragment high streets and reduce facilities to everyone’s disadvantage.

It might be possible for boroughs to make Article 4 Directions to control change of use from Class E to residential, (19 London Authorities are trying), though the Government is planning to restrict these. The GLA is working with boroughs to produce the evidence base to enable them to be justified. The fragmentation of ownership in town centres makes it difficult to plan properly, since each site has to be judged on its merits, as and when proposals are received.

The Q&A session highlighted members' fears that individual landlords/owners of high street properties would focus only on their own profit. Mr Bach said that the only safeguard would be the Government’s prior approval criteria. There was general concern that use of Article 4 was time-consuming and “clunky”, and the restrictions would make things worse. Discussion reinforced the need for strategic, active curation management of high streets, as practised by those in single ownership and by shopping malls. Mr Bach said that communities would need to take ‘ownership’ of their town centres.

A longer version of this meeting report can be found [here](#)

Transport for London Finances
Andrew Bosi reports on the latest “agreement”

A further agreement between the Mayor and the Secretary of State for Transport continues emergency funding for operating buses and the Underground. It lasts for six months this time instead of ten days, but it remains fairly described as a sticking plaster with no long-term solution in sight. The “temporary” restrictions on Freedom Passes, and the increase in Congestion Charge, remain in place.

Most worrying to London Travelwatch is the requirement to conduct a review into bus usage in July. They are concerned that this will come before any return to a “new normal” as people will continue to be advised to work from home if they can. Parts of the West End are thriving in the evenings, with restaurants and pubs taking advantage of road closures to serve customers in the street, but during the day footfall is notably down and inevitably this is reflected in bus occupancy. Restrictions on the number of passengers per bus have been eased but people remain reluctant to sit next to strangers. Though TfL put out reassuring messages about the safety of buses and tubes and claim the air is refreshed, the distinctive odour of central London tube stations and the high temperatures on buses during heatwaves suggest otherwise. When a local journalist asked me to accompany him with my thermometer, he was delighted to see the mercury hit the 100° mark. “That makes a better story”, he said. Travelwatch is asking us to lobby our Greater London Assembly Members to express concern at the implications of carrying out the bus review in July.

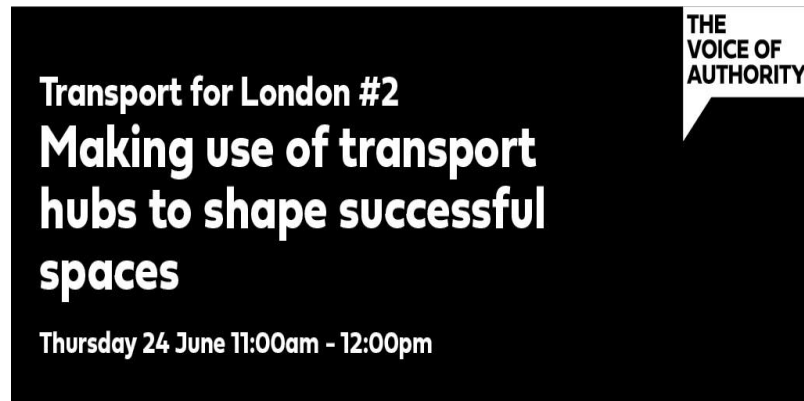
The government has also secured an agreement to investigate the introduction of driverless trains. Even if this can be done safely (unlikely on lines with flat junctions), the capital expenditure involved would compete with that for other schemes. Apart from those close to completion (the Northern line extension and Crossrail1), all are paused. The Bakerloo line extension (BLE), as well as providing new links and a fillip to regeneration, would make the existing line more efficient. Even with a long-term reduction in travel, a strong business case for the BLE will remain – certainly much stronger than that for HS2. It beggars belief that the HS2 juggernaut rolls on, when the money allocated to the Northern Powerhouse for electrification and much needed east-west links has been cut, not to mention other priority areas such as International Aid and the education catch-up budget. All this despite increasing evidence that HS2 costs were knowingly understated or hidden from Parliament, and a business case further undermined by the reduction in demand for travel.

The Voice of Authority

Darian Mitchell on the VoA webinar channel for Councils

The Voice of Authority, part of the 3Fox marketing and events agency, was established to provide webinar channels to connect the private and public sectors so that they can

debate, learn and network with each other on matters that affect us all. It is a digital subscription platform to which anyone can subscribe (a link is [here](#)) which provides an opportunity to hear the views and opinions of leaders in the public sector debating the big issues, together with information, ideas and comments from interested people in the private sector. Discussions frequently touch on the political and ideological, and always on the practical. It allows us to gain insights from those who are immersed in the issues and whose it is job it is to find solutions.



Since the beginning of the year I have participated in webinars addressing the topic of housing supply, one of the major problems facing London. There have been speakers from many councils, (often council leaders), housing associations, the Greater London Authority, housing developers, housing consultants and academics. Council housing and the supply of affordable housing for Londoners is the main issue, not luxury private housing, and how to increase the supply when land in London is so expensive and supposedly scarce. Having been somewhat inert for a number of decades councils are now beginning to build again as this seems to be the only way of securing housing that low-income workers can truly afford.

Their most recent webinar was entitled “Can converted car parks provide a significant supply of new homes?” Speakers from the boroughs of Hounslow and Waltham Forest, Network Rail, Transport for London and a developer were brought together to debate the question. The answer was “yes”, but not easily. A section of the public are very wedded to their cars and strongly oppose any reduction in car parking spaces, even if it helps to address the housing shortage and has other benefits for communities and the environment.

Transport for London is the largest landowner in London and has its own housing programme in which it commits to providing 50% affordable housing. They have 80 car parks which could be developed and 12 active sites. However car parking is a source of revenue which needs to be considered. Network rail have an obligation to provide car

parking for rail users, but this is more important outside London. They are intensifying the use of their car parks so that they can release land for development, but not all car parks are suitable for conversion to other uses. Multi-storey car parks do not generally convert into good housing, and are expensive to demolish. This makes them unattractive to developers.

So although car parks would seem an obvious source of land for housing, financial considerations and public opinion can get in the way, as usual.

Round the Societies - Michael Hammerson and Helen Warner pick out items from members' newsletters

Across London societies are fighting “inappropriate developments”. Along the **Greenwich / Charlton** riverside we see the Morden Wharf development proposals for four towers up to 36 storeys, plus eight other high-rise blocks would overwhelm the houses around it and views from Greenwich Park, a World Heritage Site.

The **Brixton Society / Friends of Brockwell Park** deplore Lambeth Councillors’ agreeing to the large Hondo development and question who is likely to move to a 1960s-type office tower in Brixton. They mention new research showing that any building wastes proportionately more energy with every extra floor above six storeys.

The **Highgate Society** is currently fighting a council granted development, which will “destroy the setting of Highgate’s oldest house”, note that Haringey is among eight London Boroughs censured for not meeting their government-imposed housing targets, and fear “more bad housing developments will be permitted”.

The **Isleworth Society** are fighting an application to redevelop 70% of the Park Road Allotment Gardens, a protected Local Open Space.

The **Sydenham** and **Brixton Societies** have been supporting the Friends of Mais House, against the Lewisham decision to redevelop a low-rise development on top of Sydenham Ridge with blocks up to eight storeys, breaking the tree line and visible across London. To much satisfaction, permission has been quashed at a recent Judicial Review.

On the vexed matter of permitted development extensions, the **Barnet Society** have ascertained that, of 20 applications for extra floors on houses, 14 were refused, 2 approved and withdrawn, while of 25 applications for extra floors on blocks of flats, 16 were refused, 4 approved and 1 withdrawn (the balance pending decision).

The **Dulwich Society** met with 'Three UK' to find out more about their plans for 5G Masts, find that there is little co-ordination between the big four providers and the local authority's planning department is failing to actively manage the process.

The **West London River Group** updates readers on the "sad saga" of Hammersmith Bridge, closed to vehicles for two years and since August 2020 to pedestrians and cyclists. The ferry service promised, is now unlikely to be in operation until late summer.

The **Open Spaces Society** are seeking greater protection for green spaces owned by local councils, by getting them designated as Village Greens. They have launched their 'Grant A Green Campaign', to alert every local authority to their powers, and urge the wider public to identify land in their community which might be eligible and encourage the owner to register it.

The **Greenwich Society** report on their efforts at Guerrilla Gardening on four strips of land; have other societies tried this?

The full length version of this report can be read at <https://tinyurl.com/yh3ogwq6>

Alastair Hanton RIP

We mourn the passing of long-standing London Forum member, Alastair Hanton, ethical banker, founding Chair of the Free Trade Foundation and passionate campaigner for walking, cycling and greener transport. Though well into his 90s, Alastair only stepped down last year as Chair of the Dulwich Society's Travel and Environment Group. The Guardian's obituary can be read [here](#).



More Stop Press - This concerns you!!

There was a disappointing turnout for the **Urban Design Workshop** run by The Glass-

House Community Led Design on 24th June. Participants were enthusiastic about the session, and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to get to grips with the concepts, vocabulary and practicalities of urban design, a topic which can only grow in importance as design codes are introduced. Can it really be the case that only 20% of our member societies recognise this? Surely the £10 fee cannot have deterred many? We are planning a follow-up session in September/October and hope to see many more societies participating.
