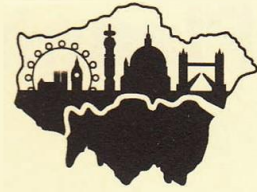


The **London Forum** of
Amenity and Civic Societies



working to protect and improve the quality of life in London

London Forum *Insights*

Issue 6, September 2021

Michael Gove set to pause Planning Reforms

Welcome to the September issue of London Forum *Insights*. As we go to press, Robert Jenrick has been dropped as Secretary of State at MHCLG in favour of Michael Gove. Does this pave the way for a more comprehensive climbdown on the proposals in last year's Planning White Paper than the previous ministerial team could have stomached? Time will tell. On the one hand Mr Gove will have his hands full delivering on the Levelling-up Agenda, and he has just announced a time-out on planning reform. But we should not forget that the new boss at MHCLG was founding chairman of Policy Exchange, the think tank behind the Planning White Paper, so a fundamental change of doctrine may be unlikely.

This issue carries an article by Forum trustee, Michael Hammerson, summarising a number of statements by our President-elect, Ben Derbyshire covering a range of topics including the risks of a free-for-all on Beauty as the recommendations of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission are translated into policies and actions.

Fellow trustee, Michael Jubb summarises recent developments on Design Codes, and alerts member societies to an upcoming workshop with The Glass-House. We also reproduce an article from Civic Voice about the role of civic societies in the planning system. Last but not least, we report on July's well-attended Open Meeting on getting to Net Zero.

Michael Hammerson draws attention to recent pronouncements from London Forum's President-Elect, Ben Derbyshire

The London Forum's President-elect, Ben Derbyshire is one of many to criticise Nicholas Boys Smith, former chair of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission and now chair of the advisory board for the Office for Place, for supporting the government's controversial planning reform agenda and expansion of permitted development rights, despite his own Commission criticising widening of Permitted Development.

Derbyshire called the commission "a Trojan Horse that threatens the planning system from within". After years of austerity there are inadequate resources to implement the proposed reforms, and particularly the work necessary to create new local plans and design codes. He was scathing about the most recent PDR allowing the conversion of most high street outlets to residential - "Our struggling high streets need planned mixed use, not a free-for-all." On this, he is in good company. TCPA Policy Director Hugh Ellis called the expansion of PDRs "shameful", current RIBA President Alan Jones used the phrase "truly disgraceful", and former PM Theresa May said it would lead to "the wrong homes in the wrong places".

On 19th August in *Housing Today*, Ben Derbyshire said the government's proposed reforms are contradictory and risk confusing beauty with popularity. The chocolate-box imagery of 18th-century cottages to sell the concept of Living with Beauty contrasts with the Secretary of State's hasty and unlawful approval of huge towers at Westferry Printworks. The call for "gentle density" is out of kilter with councils' strategic housing land availability assessments, and much development is now taking place at superdensity on the available sites. The upheaval required for local planning authorities to draft zone-based local plans and prepare design codes ignores reduced resources that will render them inadequate to the task.

He adds that the deferred (but not scrapped) algorithm-based housing supply targets are undesirable and undeliverable, while digital engagement, intended to prove the popularity of design codes, will exclude much of the population. A "fast track to beauty" via permitted development for schemes that obtain prior approval in accordance with these codes will be based on appearance alone. Will local people have been sufficiently engaged? Will the codes capture local aspirations? Will they be sufficiently flexible to meet shifting markets and changing demand? Will planning authorities have the resources not to be out-manoeuvred by developers with the expertise to treat these codes as putty in their hands? The reforms that have emerged from Living With Beauty's recommendations are full of compromise and contradiction. There will be a dangerous free-for-all, but by the time the repercussions become apparent, the politicians responsible will have moved on and society will be left to pick up the pieces.

Ben will be speaking at the London Forum AGM on 12th October. Click bit.ly/3mgd5qL to register.

Good Turnout for first in-person event in 18 months

With some trepidation, London Forum tested the appetite for in-person gatherings by holding a reception for member societies on the roof of 75 Cowcross Street, courtesy of Alan Baxter Associates. We need not have worried; the 35 or so participants were rewarded with a glorious evening on which to enjoy fine views across the City, as well as lively conversation and “Covid-compliant” refreshments. Many welcomed the chance to speak to their counterparts in other organisations, free from the pressure to stick to an agenda which is an inherent part of the Forum’s programme of Open Meetings. We should look to include an event such as this in our calendar for future years.



Getting to Net Zero - Report on the (Zoom) Open Meeting, July 27th

There were three presentations on this hugely topical and challenging subject.

Chris Lenon, had a career in carbon reduction, is author of *'Zero Carbon Our Choice'*, and formerly chairman of the Green Tax Group.

Chris distinguished 'zero carbon' from 'net zero carbon' – the balancing of emissions through 'off-setting' elsewhere. For example, if tree planting is used to off-set, that requires land and checks to ensure it's being achieved appropriately. He also emphasised that it's not just big business's responsibility. While 34% (44% if agriculture / meat production included) was business, 34% was also the responsibility of individual consumers. It's how we travel, heat and insulate our homes and what we eat (how food is produced and delivered to us). The big issue is the speed at which we all need to change the way life works. For London it would mean less commuting, more diffused employment structures and greater emphasis on using local facilities – “the 15 minute city”. Slides are at <https://tinyurl.com/ye34rxwz>

Nicky Gavron has very recently retired from serving on the Greater London Assembly, where she has been Chair on the Planning Committee.

Nicky raised the importance at looking at 'embodied' carbon - the carbon emitted from mining, processing, transportation, and waste production, saying it's 50% in the lifetime of a building. So, she was enthusiastic about the potential of factory-built homes to minimise the production of carbon including the use of timber, as well as reducing the disruption caused to the neighbours of building sites. The GLA has brought in a life-time carbon cycle emissions policy. She told us about the new mantra:

Be lean – use your energy less

Be clean – use the latest technology

Be green – store energy through batteries / on-site heat pumps

Be seen – have monitoring devices to check performance

Slides are at <https://tinyurl.com/yzrwaygq>

Kate Hand is the Head of Climate Change in the Policy and Public Affairs Division of 'London Councils', the organisation that represents the London Boroughs. Most boroughs have set a target to reach carbon net-zero by 2030. Kate produced an impressive list of the initiatives being taken by councils, individually and collectively.

The presentations were followed by questions and answers. These included discussion on possibilities of using energy that did not involve carbon emissions. Mr Lenon felt that wind and solar power were not very practicable in London, and that all solutions would increase energy prices. He was more optimistic about developments with heat-pumps. However, as they work differently from gas central heating, concern was raised about the implementation issues, particularly in older housing stock in cities. The decision by the North London Waste Authority to build a new incinerator came in for some criticism.

Speaker's notes are at <https://tinyurl.com/ydtpa8qj>

The impact and practicalities of changes on lower income families was a reason why a recent referendum to make changes had been lost in Switzerland.

There was concern raised that the '15 minute' high street could be undermined by recent changes in Permitted Development Rights (PDR) and constraints on Councils' use of Article 4 directives.

The need for a national tree strategy was raised as a means of soaking up carbon dioxide. The use of 'green cover' (although welcome when used well), should not be an excuse for building on (or failing to provide) quality green spaces.

Changes to parking standards and more effective road pricing should be employed to reduce car use. Electric cars were admirable for exhaust emissions, but are heavier, produce more particulates and have high embedded carbon in their construction. Advocates of hydrogen as a fuel should note that almost all of it currently uses fossil fuels in its production. Gasification from waste might be a way forward, but there were many problems to be solved.

The session reinforced that dealing with the very real climate emergency will mean life-style changes for us all.

Design Codes – Michael Jubb outlines the direction of travel, and London Forum’s involvement

The creation and use of Design Codes is fast becoming a central plank in planning policies at national and local levels. A key stimulus came from the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, co-chaired by the late Sir Roger Scruton and Nicholas Boys Smith, founder of [Create Streets](#), a research institute working on planning and urban housing. The Commission’s [interim](#) and [final](#) reports were published in 2019 and 2020.

Design Codes featured prominently in last year’s [Planning for the Future](#) White Paper, and in the [National Design Guide](#), published in draft along with [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#) the National Model Design Code (NMDC) in January this year, with final versions in July. They make clear that design codes must cover a wide range of issues: the character and context of each area; transport and movement; the natural environment; building density and height; identity and sense of place; streets and public spaces; mix of uses; quality and mix of housing; energy use; and stewardship and lifespan. In short, they cover many of the features currently covered in local plans. How all this might sit with the extension of Permitted Development Rights, and unrestricted conversion of commercial premises to housing is but one of the unresolved questions in the Government’s planning policies. There are also concerns about the lack of urban design specialists in local planning authorities, and whether planners have the capability or the capacity to create design codes. To help build some capability at community level, [The GlassHouse Community-Led Design](#) ran a workshop for London Forum in June, to introduce societies to the language and principles of urban design.

Both the NMDC and the latest version of the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) stress the importance of community engagement. The NMDC specifies that “When preparing design codes, communities need to be involved at each stage of the process”: analysis and scoping; development of a design vision and coding plan; master-planning; and the creation of guidance both generally and covering specific types and areas. But little is said about how broad and effective community engagement might be achieved. If developers themselves take up the suggestion that they might create design codes, it becomes especially unclear how communities might be involved “at each stage of the process”. Discussion on these points will be the focus of a [second workshop](#) the Forum is organising with The Glass-House on 7 October.

The White Paper said that design codes would be given weight in the planning process only if they met the requirement for community engagement. Whether and how this is being put into

effect in the 20 MHCLG-backed pilot design codes now being developed, including one in Southwark, is not yet clear. Nicholas Boys Smith, appointed in July as Chair of the new [Office for Place](#), has suggested that accrediting design codes will be an important part of its role. How that role will work out for the future remains to be seen.

1980s London: Making the Best of It

Andrew Bosi reviews conservationist Alec Forshaw's latest book

This is a personal account of life in London in the 1980s, a sequel to the author's earlier work *1970s London: Discovering the Capital*. It is somewhat Islington centric, unsurprisingly as the author lived and worked in the Borough throughout the period under review, but the breadth of his interests: buildings, music, pubs, street markets, eateries, sport, local politics to name but seven, take him and the narrative across the whole of London and occasionally beyond.

It is a timely reminder of how London has changed, both in appearance and in the attitude of its citizens, since the period in which the population declined to its low point since the war and began to climb. The text is well annotated with footnotes that bring the story up to date, including the Coronavirus years. The easily readable style will appeal to those interested in our social history who do not want an A Level text book on the subject.

A particular pleasure for me was the reminder of some of the characters that graced the planning department in the Islington, many of whom survived into the 90s but whose names go unrecorded in the directories of the time.

There are one or two errors of detail but they do not detract from the general sense of the story. Alec Forshaw was for twenty years one of the most respected conservation officers in London and has continued to provide advice and guidance to those seeking to preserve and enhance the built environment ever since.

1980s London: Making the Best of It by Alec Forshaw, ISBN 978-1-83952-231-4

How much do you know about London Councils?

It became apparent during the Open Meeting on Getting to Net Zero that many of our members know little or nothing about the London Councils organization, other than, possibly, that it

administers the Freedom Pass system across London. No wonder, given that its name is almost willfully confusing! To quote Wikipedia “London Councils is the local government association for Greater London, England. It is a cross-party organisation that represents London's 32 borough councils and the City of London. It was formed in 1995 as a merger of the London Boroughs Association and the Association of London Authorities. In April 2000 it gained further functions as strategic local government in London was reorganised. London Councils is a think tank and lobbying organisation, and also provides some services directly through legislation that allows multiple local authorities to pool responsibility and funding.”

There is a good deal of information about London Councils' activities on its website [here](#). Those sufficiently interested can sign up for the weekly newsletter; unsurprisingly it has been dominated by the Covid pandemic for the past 18 months.

[Recent research](#) commissioned by London Councils showed that whereas the Capital is largely meeting the demand for homes at market prices, the demand for affordable homes is outstripping supply by a factor of more than 7.

London Forum members may be interested to glance through the [London Councils Business Plan 2019/20](#), which sets out their ambitions through to 2020.

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

Across London societies' newsletters we continue to read about tall buildings with unnecessary height and massing being proposed and regularly granted permission. This includes towers on the Mais House site on Sydenham Hill, one of the highest points in south London, which the **Sydenham** and **Dulwich societies** report will be visible across London. Approved despite objections from the local MPs and the recommendation of Lewisham's own Design & Review Panel for a reduction in height. **The St. Marylebone Society** report “cliff-like scale” of proposed residential blocks for their Church Street regeneration area, which will overshadow the surrounding area and market. **The Isleworth Society** deplore the ‘up to’ 17 storeys blocks to replace the Syon House Homebase and the Osterley Tesco Superstore. **The Knightsbridge Association** report on the proposed development around South Kensington Station, the justification being that the proposed tall building reflects the scale of surrounding buildings and the low scale of the listed station is an “anomaly”. **The Highgate Society** are fighting what they

regard as a “disastrous and mistaken permission” by Haringey for an “overdevelopment” of houses off the High Street which impacts on a local listed building. The application did not include Listed Building Consent so the society have engaged a barrister (who led them to victory in the 2016 Athlone House campaign), to prepare an argument which could enable Haringey to justify refusing, having granted the original permission. In East **Greenwich**, a group of tower blocks up to 36 storeys on the Morden Wharf riverside brown field site have been granted permission despite the concerns of the Council’s own conservation officer, objection by local MP and all local community groups. The impact has been likened to a ‘Manhattan by the Thames’, which will impact on the skyline and iconic views from Greenwich Park and the World Heritage Site.

The Islington Society reports that early monitoring of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) has improved air quality and walking conditions, but not on the main roads. Highbury Corner and the Archway schemes are described as “a total disaster” for bus users, cyclists, cars and pedestrians. Some London LTNs have been removed, others are being modified, so we await review of modified schemes.

The **Westcombe Society** report local outcry over Network Rail’s decision to suddenly close the historic Angerstein pedestrian level crossing on spurious ‘safety grounds’. In use since 1852, the crossing over the single track, lightly used branch freight line is an important pedestrian route away from the very busy, polluted Woolwich main road. One of only two such crossings left in London, it is listed by Greenwich as a Heritage Asset. Residents, Councillors and local MP are fighting closure.

The Wimbledon Society report that the Co-op has launched (and Sainsburys are about to) a scheme to collect soft plastics, i.e. plastic crisp packets, pasta bags and chocolate or biscuit wrappers. Most Councils will not process them and send them for incineration. Forum members could ask their local branches to consider introducing the scheme.

The Friends of Battersea Park provide the useful advice that Horse Chestnut seeds contain a chemical, triterpenoid saponin, which is emitted as they dry and, placed among clothes, wards off clothes moths. You have a new excuse for gathering conkers!

Civic Voice launches a survey to explore the role of local civic societies in the English planning system

This article is reproduced from Civic Voice's Civic Update, 17th September 2021



In collaboration with the University of Reading, we are delighted to launch a new survey. The survey is aimed at exploring the role of civic societies in the English planning system. Fundamentally, it responds to a question from Civic Voice's Regional Forum for us to: 'demonstrate that civic societies remain the best route for serious community involvement in the planning system'.

At such a crucial time for the planning system, we want to demonstrate the value of civic societies to the planning system. To ensure the results are independent, we have commissioned the University of Reading to do the survey.

Why do we feel now is the time to do this? We want to explore this because there has been little work on the role of civic societies in planning since the National Planning Policy Framework's introduction in 2012 when we published *The History of the Civic Movement*. This survey is part of our broader work to consider whether Civic Societies should be given formal status in the planning system.

This survey has gone through several iterations as we have co-designed it to get it to the point

that works for Civic Voice, Civic Societies and the University of Reading. The questionnaire is circulated to all civic societies under the umbrella of Civic Voice to develop an extensive understanding of how civic societies are involved in planning processes throughout England.

You can take the survey via: <https://reading.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/civic-societies-and-the-planning-process-exploring-the-ro-2>

Dates for your diary

7th October, 14.00 -16.00 hrs

Workshop on Co-designing Design Codes:

How could meaningful community engagement work?

For more information and to register, click [here](#)

12th October, 18.15 for 18.30 hrs

London Forum Annual General Meeting

To be followed by a talk by our President-Elect, Ben Derbyshire

PLEASE NOTE the need to register online by the day before at bit.ly/3mqd5qL
