



HOUSE OF LORDS

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The Select Committee on National Policy for the Built Environment

Inquiry on

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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Questions 132 - 145

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10.10 am

Witnesses: Richard Blyth and Finn Williams

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Members present

Baroness O’Cathain (Chairman)
Baroness Andrews
Lord Clement-Jones
Baroness Finlay of Llandaff
Lord Freeman
Lord Inglewood
Earl of Lytton
Baroness Parminter
Baroness Rawlings
Baroness Whitaker
Lord Woolmer of Leeds
Baroness Young of Old Scone

Examination of Witnesses

Mr Richard Blyth, Head of Policy, Royal Town Planning Institute, and **Mr Finn Williams**, Director, Planning Officers Society.

Q132 The Chairman: Welcome to this evidence session of the Select Committee on National Policy for the Built Environment. You have in front of you a list of the interests that have been declared by the members of this Committee. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the Committee website. You will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript, where necessary. Can I begin by asking each of you for the purpose of the record to briefly introduce yourselves to the Committee, please, starting with Mr Blyth?

Richard Blyth: My name is Richard Blyth. I am head of policy at the Royal Town Planning Institute and a chartered planner of 25 years’ standing.

Finn Williams: I am Finn Williams. I am a director of the Planning Officers Society and the founder of NOVUS, a think tank for public planning, and a proactive planning champion of the Farrell review.

The Chairman: Thank you very much indeed. You have had the questions, and the Committee members will now ask them in turn.

Q133 Lord Freeman: Good morning. What are the principal reasons for skills and capacity shortages in planning and built environment professions? How can national policy, specifically government, ensure that the right skills are available to local planning authorities and others involved in the planning process?

Richard Blyth: We have done a deep study of the situation in the planning authorities in north-west England, and we certainly found a one-third fall in the number of planning staff in the five years between 2010 and 2015. That has not helped. As a consequence of that process, we found that there have been forced redundancies of more senior members of staff, and their replacement by temporary staff, which means that you tend to rely on people who are possibly at the beginning of their careers rather than more senior.

The Chairman: That is not very helpful, is it?

Baroness Andrews: What are the impacts of that?

Richard Blyth: We received feedback from people who want to make applications for planning permission that there are delays in the process. You sometimes find that the person who is dealing with the application changes and, as I say, you are dealing with people who are probably earlier in their careers and less confident at doing the work.

Baroness Andrews: Can you see the impact on the quality of decisions about, say, the degradation of conservation areas?

Richard Blyth: No, the quality of the decisions is fine. It is the time it takes, the difficulty of communications between the applicant and the local authority, and the difficulties of people not being available—the shortage of staff kind of question.

Lord Freeman: What do you believe central government can do to alleviate the problem?

Richard Blyth: There is a debate about whether the fees for planning applications should be increased. There is a whole series of reasons, which I probably do not have time to go into, about the pros and cons of that and the impact on different parts of the country to do with the strength of the economy in different areas. There is a difficult question to do with local government being a free agent. It is not for government to say to councils that they should spend particular parts of their overall funding on specific functions. That would be to intrude.

In the past, government has specifically grant-aided planning as a function, as a top-up. That is one possibility, but we are in a tight spending environment, so that may not be at all conceivable at the moment. We noted in the north-west study that £16 million of new homes bonus has gone into the north-west authorities. This is the money that is attached to the completion of homes. So our report recommends, if you like, an education process for councils that says in effect, “Planners are bringing all this money into your council coffers just for the new homes bonus, not to mention the impact on the local economy of building

homes and creating jobs. So if you were to see the planning function within your organisation in those terms, rather than simply as a small department with a few staff, that might enable you to bring resources in to fill vacancies, and possibly to restore a little the status of the chief planning officer in the top management team of authorities, which over the last 30 years has pretty much been cleared out”.

The Chairman: Was this a report that you published?

Richard Blyth: Yes.

The Chairman: Could we have a copy of it?

Richard Blyth: Yes. It is linked in our evidence, but I can also provide the clerk with a complete copy.

Q134 The Chairman: Thank you. May I ask a simple question, and then Lady Young wants to ask a question. Do you think that respect for people in planning by other members of the councils is fairly low; it comes as an add-on at the end of schools and all the rest of it? Are there any really shining lights among councils who believe and support their planners, and who make sure that the function is fully staffed?

Richard Blyth: Yes. You have hit on two things. There is a mixed picture. As I say, one of the difficulties about local authority staff grading has been the introduction of the single status, which makes all posts the same and possibly does not give a particular status to professional staff. There is the question of attributing status within the organisation to the number of people you manage and the size of your actual budget within the council, rather than thinking of the role in terms of its wider economic and social significance, which has been a difficulty.

I can point to Plymouth City Council, where the role of planning is held in very high regard. The Plymouth plan is an all-encompassing cross-sector plan of the council as a whole. It is not simply a plan full of development control policies produced, if you like, in a corner of the council; it is the council’s full expression of what they wish to achieve.

The Chairman: That sounds ideal.

Finn Williams: Going back to the question of the skills and capacity in the sector as a whole, arguably they are there across the country as a whole, but they are not evenly distributed, and they are not necessarily in the right places all the time. London, in particular, is one of the world centres of skills in place-making and has an extraordinary concentration of talented architects. Only 16 architects work in local authorities in London. They are not

necessarily distributed between the public and the private sector either. The action has tended to be for graduates looking for jobs in the private sector, or at least that is the perception, and as a result many of them are going into the private sector rather than the public sector.

There is also a debate about what we see planning being for within the public sector. In that context, professions such as architecture and urban design can be more attractive. On the whole, we have an extraordinary wealth of talent; we need mechanisms to get them in the right place.

On the question of what government can do about it, getting the funding in place to resource the system adequately is obviously critical, and certainly raising planning fees to a sustainable level. Currently, taxpayers are subsidising a third of planning fees across the country to the tune of £150 million a year. Setting those planning fees sustainably is a no-brainer. The industry is calling for it. Seventy per cent of developers and housebuilders would like to see fees raised to a sustainable level. Eighty-two per cent of housebuilders identify resourcing as the single most important issue for boosting housing supply.

You also need to define the job as something that is really exciting for people to do and to present it as really worthwhile and a privilege, not necessarily a last resort. You need a mechanism to get those people into the public sector and to give them the tools to do the job. I hope that we can go into each of those in more detail through subsequent questions.

The Chairman: That is a very good tour d'horizon. Lady Young, you want to ask something.

Baroness Young of Old Scone: I have one very brief question on the skills squeeze from a particular point of view, and that is the leadership role. There is a difficulty with the gross numbers of planners, but is there also any shift from having people who have been around the block for a time, who have the ability to influence other departments and other players, and who have a sense of vision of the place over a longer period? Is that still there or is that beginning to disappear? Are some of our more experienced planners being written out of the script as well?

Richard Blyth: In all construction-related sectors there is this difficulty that, whenever you have a recession, everyone gets thrown out. It is not just planning; it can apply to the whole construction industry. There may be something to be said for the kinds of approaches taken in some other countries where you do not necessarily throw everybody out when there is a recession; you keep people going, because you know there is going to be an upturn. In

certain parts of the country, we are now facing a shortage. I think that has been contributed to by fairly strongly recommended early retirements of people during the trough, which has then caused them not to return, and for us to now focus particularly on what we can do about getting entrants.

We have had a lot of success with our postgraduate one-year master's degree. I frequently meet people who have done other careers for, say, five or six years and then, in their late 20s, they do a one-year master's degree and get jobs amazingly quickly, particularly because they have picked up quite a wide range of business and life skills earlier in that process, so they come to the academic part of the planning training with communication skills that they have honed in other jobs.

We are very pleased to report that since the spring of this year we have set up 40 bursaries to do the one-year planning course. That is with support from the Scottish Government and a number of planning consultancies in the UK, and the universities pay a quarter. It is £1,000 all together: £750 from the sponsor, £250 from the university. We have 40 students in place doing that starting this term.

Baroness Rawlings: Which part of the country are we talking about for those bursaries? Are they in London or elsewhere?

Richard Blyth: We have around 40 planning schools accredited in the British Isles. It is available at any particular one; it is not attached to a particular locality.

Finn Williams: The issue of temporary staff has certainly become a real problem on a number of fronts, because of the pressures from a lack of budgets. In a survey we carried out of London boroughs, we found that 83% of London boroughs are recruiting agency staff regularly to cover shortfalls. That is always going to be part of the solution, but when those staff are costing upwards of £500 to £1,000 a day and costing three to five times more than employing someone in-house, the costs are financial but also relate to long-term knowledge and relationships with the people of the place, communities and stakeholders. It can also result in inconsistent decisions when you get a high level of churn through the system.

Q135 Lord Inglewood: I would like to ask Finn Williams a question. This is not intended to be a critical question at all. I have looked at your CV, and I am pretty impressed. It strikes me that you have had an interesting career, but I do not think you have really worked in the public sector as such, have you?

Finn Williams: Yes, I have.

Lord Inglewood: It seems to me that you could not have had as good a career if you had been in the public sector.

Finn Williams: Funnily enough, I have. I have worked in the public sector for the last eight years: five years at Croydon Council and approaching three years at the Greater London Authority. So I have been employed as a completely straightforward planning officer in a place-making team at a local authority level, and now in the regeneration team in the Greater London Authority. It is true that I came to that from working for a so-called starchitect in Holland, and certainly among my peers that was a very unusual move to make, but part of what I do is to try to encourage other people who I teach in schools and universities to do the same thing.

Lord Inglewood: Do you think one of the problems is that, taken in the round, working in the private sector gives you more exposure and more interesting work?

Finn Williams: I have thought about this a lot, because I made that choice. For me, the choice was between, frankly speaking, designing extensions for friends of my parents as a private architect and doing really meaningful things for a place that really needed it: Croydon Council. In a way, the team that we had there was similar to running your own practice: we had a guaranteed flow of work, we had an extraordinarily talented group of people to work with, we had the luxury of being able to think long term and make decisions genuinely for the public good, and we had a great array of tools to work with. Our solution was not only proposing another building; we could work with our parking or housing colleagues to propose very different ways of managing a place. It is an extraordinarily privileged job to have, but you need to be able to create the conditions for people to approach it creatively.

Lord Inglewood: Are there many of them like the ones you have described? Were you an exception?

Finn Williams: One of the reasons why I joined the Greater London Authority was to try to find ways of encouraging and building that culture elsewhere. It is possible. It is happening elsewhere. There are extraordinary teams in Haringey, Brent, and other councils. Admittedly, my experience is focused in London, but there are great teams out there. We need to build more.

The Chairman: Suddenly the grey sky has gone and the sun is shining. It is very nice to have that enthusiasm, I say. Lady Andrews wants to ask a quick question.

Q136 Baroness Andrews: I want to go back to the issue of fees, because at the moment this seems to be the only way of raising the capacity of local authorities if there is no fee income coming in. Because fees are complex, you may need to write to us about this. Of the various fees that can be charged, which ones could be increased, on whom would the burden fall, and would there be any perverse consequences? Do you think there is scope for a new fee regime on things that are now not charged but which could generate income?

Richard Blyth: There is a body that the Government sponsor within the LGA called the Planning Advisory Service. The Committee may have come across it in its work. It has done some fascinating analysis of how to run a local planning department like a business, by which I mean understanding where most of your money is coming from and where most of your activity is. I have to say that it is an 80:20 situation. I do not have the statistics with me, but a large part of the money comes from very few applications. An awful lot of applications are free, such as the ones related to trees. Then there are the householder applications to extend your home that, viewed in a narrow business sense, are loss-making applications. On the other hand, a large housing development where the fees are per unit of housing up to a maximum effectively subsidises the others. The very large housebuilding applications that are contributing to the homes that we need probably pay more than they cost to process and deal with. It is not only a question of the level of fees, as you say, but the distribution between the classes of application. I think that is a matter for Parliament to consider. Do we wish to see a continued arrangement whereby the smallest applications are subsidised? If that is the will of Parliament and the Government, that should be identified almost as a specific subsidy, because if you are trying to run your department as a business and to get efficiencies and invest in people and in equipment, it is very difficult to do so if you have a compulsory subsidy which you have to pay for within your resources.

Finn Williams: There is also a question of what you do with the fees once you get them. If applicants are paying more for a service, they will want to see an improvement in that service. How government defines that improvement is critical, because development management is only part of the planning process. It is right at the end of the planning process in many ways. A lot of the really valuable work on place-making and the quality of the place is the proactive planning that happens at a pre pre-application stage. Unfortunately, that has been the place to suffer first, because it is not the area that is bringing in fees.

To answer the second part of your question, I think there is a role for alternative mechanisms that could help to reinforce and build that earlier part of the planning process that sits alongside a proper sustainable fee level. As an example of that, there is currently a regime of planning performance agreements whereby particularly large or complex developments can pay additional amounts of money to cross-subsidise the cost of processing their fees. That happens on a case-by-case basis in a not particularly strategic or long-term way. There is potentially a model that could see longer-term and wider pooling of the kind of subsidy you get through planning performance agreements in order to really build capacity over time.

Baroness Andrews: Are you aware of anything happening in CLG about this?

Finn Williams: I am afraid I would not know. The conversation about setting fees on a sustainable level is constant and regular, so I would not be surprised if something happens about that—I would certainly hope so—but I do not know about planning performance agreements.

The Chairman: That is really very useful. Lady Whitaker?

Q137 Baroness Whitaker: You have touched on the answer to my question, but I would like to pursue it. How might the most talented individuals be attracted to public sector planning? I recall that when I first became interested in the subject a long time ago, we had the legacy of the visionary planners, many of whom came over as immigrants, and of course we had the garden cities. We were pioneers in visionary planning. How do we get that vision back again? Particularly, how can local planning authorities attract talent without extra money? For instance, it might be interesting to see what more could be done in schools to encourage the right A-levels for planning and that kind of thing. What are your views about that?

Richard Blyth: Last year, in our centenary year, we had an ambassador programme into schools with a superb video about why planning is a good thing. We sent our chartered members into schools to share what they do day to day and to encourage people, because it is often not a profession that people have heard of while they are in school. That has been a useful thing.

Your Lordships have referred to what the Government can do. What it could perhaps stop doing is repeated attacks not on planners, to be fair, but on the planning system, and regarding the planning system as a drag on development. In the productivity plan only of 10 July, there was a long preamble, using evidence that is now quite old, saying that planning is

a drag on the economy, and lots of numbers were produced. In our organisation, we have a research workstream called “the value of planning”, which says, in effect, “By all means let us improve planning processes and not have applicants frustrated by delays, but at the same time let us have a planning system that gives society as a whole a huge series of benefits around creating places that people want to invest in”, as well as, as Finn was saying, the steps that need to be taken before you even get to having a planning application. None of that is quoted in things like the productivity plan. If I was 21, I might think, “This doesn’t sound particularly encouraging or a place to work in. I might want to do accountancy instead”. A little less of that mood music is something that we are very concerned about.

Finn Williams: The skills shortages that we are talking about are not only post-2008, they go much further back; they are long-standing and systemic. For me, they are not purely about resources; they are about what we think planning is for. In 1976, half of all architects worked for the public sector; it was what public sector planning was for. Now it is less than 2%. In 1976, the public sector was building half of all our housing, and now it is around 1%. There is a proportionality to how far we give the public sector the ability to get their hands dirty, deliver and get stuck in. That is what makes the job exciting. That is what attracts you from the private sector.

This is certainly something that I care very passionately about, and I have put together a proposal, which I am working on at the minute and which I have presented as part of the evidence, which is a sort of Teach First for planning. Teach First is a great example of something that has been cost-neutral to the education sector, but they have the most talented young graduates working in the most deprived schools in Britain. I see no reason why you cannot generate the same amount of zeal and social mission around planning in places that really need it. You need to create the right conditions for that. On the costs aspects, with all the money that we are currently spending on agency staff we could quite easily create a not-for-profit agency as a social enterprise that is cross-subsidised by the private sector. They are very willing to do it, as we heard previously. They see the value in a strong, innovative public sector. They are willing to put that resource in to cross-subsidise a not-for-profit programme that would give local authorities access to the most talented staff, and, indeed, would give the young place-makers I teach an opportunity to work for the public good, on their own terms. There is a whole new generation that is desperate to do that.

Baroness Whitaker: Should government prime that pump particularly, and how?

Finn Williams: I very much hope so. We are talking about a London pilot at the minute. Eighty six per cent of London boroughs have expressed an interest and said that it would be useful, and 15 boroughs have agreed in principle to take part in a pilot. The opportunity is clearly on a national scale. Once it is established it will be self-funding, but there is a certain amount of work to do to get it established.

Baroness Whitaker: So national government could have a role there.

Finn Williams: I would certainly hope so.

Lord Clement-Jones: We looked at the Birmingham City Council scheme and were quite impressed by the number of trainees—I do not think the word “apprentices” was used—who they took on board in rather an exciting context.

Richard Blyth: Waheed Nazir is the chief planner there and is very impressive. He is one of our members. He was faced with a situation where they said, “We want to privatise you”, and he said, “No, give me some time. I want this to be in-house”. Then they said, “Will you do it for a certain sum of money?”, and he said, “I’ll do it for half that, but give me the time”. It is also interesting, because that is done through the local enterprise partnership in Greater Birmingham and Solihull. One of our particular concerns is that the whole area of devolution and local enterprise partnerships needs to be brought closely in line with the housing planning that is done in those kinds of areas, otherwise there is a risk that you have economic planning in one corner and more of the traditional planning in another. I sometimes feel that there is huge talent in our local authorities that is not really employed on the strategic economic plans of local enterprise partnerships, because they are seen as a different organisation and in a different sort of silo, which I think your call for evidence was addressing. Certainly, if local enterprise partnerships are concerned about being tiny, lean and mean without huge numbers of staff, if they call on the local planners in the same area to contribute, a lot of them are eager and panting to do so, but there are structures that mean it does not happen or, as we heard earlier, that dealing with the planning applications—the day job—is so difficult when you are short-staffed that you do not have time to think where Birmingham and Solihull will go in the next 20 years.

The Chairman: The type of vision is not right.

Q138 Earl of Lytton: I am interested in the timetable for bringing in these young people or, for that matter, retraining people from allied or other professions sufficiently quickly to start

making a real difference, given where we are with housing and other issues and the great importance of making sure that what we are now building, as opposed to what we might build in 15 years' time, is fit for purpose and, indeed, creates built environments that will be durable. How long will it take for the bright young things, or people from other professions, to become sufficiently numerous and carry the authority and status to drive these sorts of policies forward? How many years do we have to wait?

Finn Williams: You can make an impact immediately, and not just through work on the ground. Realistically, the difference is made in the details of the conditions you write on the application, the Section 106 agreement you secure, and the way you procure a contract. Those are fine details that you work on the front line and at the coal face. That is why we need those skills there right away. Certainly I would hope that these new people coming in will become the new generation of leaders in time. Simply by presenting the public sector as an exciting place to be planning, you hope it will have a wider effect of generating a movement to see planning in a different light.

The programme that I proposed should certainly not be limited to young people. I do not see why people towards the end of their careers, who have worked in the private sector their whole lives and want to give something back, could not be part of it.

Earl of Lytton: There is hope for me yet then.

Richard Blyth: Regarding the routes to chartership, suppose you are a 29 year-old and want to do a planning degree on one of our bursaries. That will take you a year. Proceeding to full chartership takes two years, although that may depend partly on what you did before the degree, because some of that might count. By that method, we ensure that people abide by a code of conduct, undertake regular, continuing professional development and have a set of very carefully analysed competencies, which we review regularly. You would be fully operational within three years. The competency framework is very much not box ticking; it is looking for things such as how you demonstrate leadership and other skills in your workplace and whether you can describe to a third party how you did that. We have a logbook, and that is how those things are checked out, so that we press for the highest standards.

One thing that sometimes concerns me is that quite a lot of people are employed in the sector who are not chartered, which seems a wasted opportunity. If more people pursue the

professional qualification working in planning, that might address the concerns about skills and capacity.

The Chairman: May I pursue that point about the people who do not pursue the chartered route. Surely if it is as beneficial, as I am sure it is, you should be able to sell it to these people.

Richard Blyth: We work very hard on that, yes.

The Chairman: What is their reason not to pursue it? I ask this because I was president of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. We had a similar situation, and had to have both carrot and stick. Why do you think they are reluctant to do it? Is it just not sold with enough emphasis?

Richard Blyth: Scrolling back, there was a time in local authorities when progression to principal planning officer was related to membership of the institute. That has almost certainly been ruled out nowadays. Sometimes people do not consider it as important in an environment where you are in quite a large public sector organisation, because what you do is evident to everybody. You are promoted because people see what you have done, whereas in the private sector there is more of an attachment to letters after your name, because you are selling your services to clients whom you have not necessarily met. Certainly I think that having more chartered planners in local authorities would be a great improvement.

Q139 Baroness Finlay of Llandaff: My question follows on from what you were saying about how to recruit people. Going beyond staff resources, what other tools are needed to support better place-making in the built environment? In answering that, could you address place-making from the point of view also of the mental and physical health of people who are in that environment, and how you get some cross-cutting awareness and ensure that the built environment is suitable for people who are there in whatever role as they become older and who may face degrees of disability. They might be impaired by learning difficulties or acquired mental difficulties, not only by mental illness and so on. We know that there is a link between really poor place-making and mental health; the question is where you improve it. I wondered, listening to your previous answers, whether you feel that when you have granted planning approval and the final product does not match up to your expectations, you have adequate levers, or would you like the capacity to go back with some financial penalty?

Richard Blyth: Questions about mental health and an ageing population are interesting examples of how important it is that the planning is integrated fully across government departments and within localities across the various functions. When health and well-being boards were established, we pressed very hard for the planning function within local government to be strongly represented. It was quite difficult, because we had the difficulty of two tiers, and health and well-being is at the upper-tier level.

At the moment, we are looking in a study at the location of planning permissions, because there is a question both of the immediate environment and whether that is conducive to people as their lifestyles and the public health aspects of their life change, and of where things are. We are concerned that in the drive to get a five-year land supply at all costs, there may be a risk that planning permissions are being granted in quite isolated places as extensions to small villages. That might be attractive if you are my age and you think, “I would quite like to live in a nice house with a big garden in a small village”. In 25 years’ time I might not be as happy about being in such a remote place. There are wider considerations, in the drive for more homes, which we definitely need, to make sure they are not only designed in a way that is suitable for all the health aspects that may apply but are in the right places. Remote locations may not be very suitable in the long term for people who cannot drive themselves or who end up in huge traffic jams.

Finn Williams: I will answer the question on tools and address one particular tool that has come up previously in this Committee, which is design review. I have been a member of a design review panel for the last six or so years and the vice-chairman of the one in Tower Hamlets. Clearly, it holds an important place in the National Planning Policy Framework as one of the specific checks on quality. For me, it is very important to recognise that design review is no substitute for in-house capacity. In fact, it does not work without enhanced capacity to see through those recommendations.

Some recent work that we did in London demonstrated that only 28% of major applications undergo design review. In fact, that represents 1.5% of all planning applications, whereas Croydon’s place-making team, which I used to work in, provided design advice on 94% of all major applications. On its own, design review simply cannot be comprehensive. If we forced every major application in England to undergo design review at CABE’s current prices, it would cost £120 million, which could of course be spent on 2,500 design offices, or seven for every local authority. So there is an argument about where that resource sits. It is very

useful if you have the resource in-house; that is great, but the priority needs to be about getting the offices there in the first place and embedding that resource long term.

To a certain extent, the same thing is true of engagement with communities and the more vulnerable. That close, one-to-one level of conversation is harder and harder to have when you are increasingly processing a case load of 90 applications at one time from Google Earth, as opposed to getting out on the street and speaking to people. I do think that there is an element of the profession itself and its diversity needing to change to reflect the diversity of the population, and therefore to really understand who we are planning for. That is something that new recruitment programmes need to address to achieve proper representation.

Q140 Lord Inglewood: In your previous response you indicated what the best system would do. Are we living in a world where it can be done that way? If we are not, what is the second best, which is going to be the best that we can achieve? What worries me about the whole planning issue is that, in an ideal world, it would work in a particular way and produce wonderful outcomes—England beautiful and all the rest of it—but I cannot see that we are ever going to be in a position to achieve that.

Finn Williams: Ultimately, we are planning across 340 or 350 authorities just in England. There is a hugely divergent picture already. There are already some examples of brilliant practice, but you will never get all those hundreds performing in exactly the same way. There is not one solution to this. There is a baseline that needs to be brought up across the country, and that includes things like planning fees. It is the professional basis of the RTPI and making sure that we are setting bare minimums of performance but also resourcing to enable that performance. There is a huge uncaptured additional capacity that we could bring in. Even if that works on only 20% of local authorities, that will have knock-on effects on the person joining their local authority that might not be part of the programme.

Richard Blyth: I also wonder whether we might not benefit from some kind of blue-sky thinking about what the resources are. Finn has mentioned that you could re-think design reviews. The move of the NHS into Greater Manchester, for example, is a very exciting opportunity to start thinking about a place—in that case a city region—in its entirety.

I produced a paper for the Government Office for Science for Foresight Future of Cities programme, in which I talked about the concept of diagonal funding. The difficulty, particularly in relation to the health aspects, is that the things you do now, such as locating

housing close to public transport or to cycle ways, are all costs that fall now, but the benefits are in the future, because you hope that the NHS bill will be lower in the 2030s as a consequence of investment made now. There are difficulties over time in relation to that and because outside Greater Manchester the NHS budget is a different budget from, say, the budget for the Department for Transport. Might there be ways of creating a municipal bond or something in which the finance is made available to increase the ability to invest now and to have benefits from the reduced costs later? I do not know, but we certainly ought to explore ways in which we think of resources not strictly within, say, the Department for Communities and Local Government's ambit of spending, but look at wider things, such as dealing with diabetes and obesity. I saw some figures for Swindon when I was there on Monday, and it was extraordinary to see what would happen if the current trends on diabetes and obesity were to continue just in one small city into the 2030s.

What could be done about active travel? Again, you have a health budget and a transport budget, and they are seen as different chapters in the comprehensive spending review. One thing that we proposed when we talked about a map for England, a database and website, was whether the implications of the spending review on individual places could be regarded as a requirement for publication by the Treasury. What will happen to, say, Teesside as a consequence of what the spending review announces later this month? That would be very useful and would mean that Teesside could say, "Can we move some of this stuff around, because by pooling some budgets we think we could achieve some wider benefits?". That is place-making at a high level and in quite a radical way, which we have not done very much of in the UK so far.

Lord Inglewood: But the bean counters will run a mile from this idea, however good it may be. I am not saying you are not absolutely right, but the people down the road in the Treasury building in Whitehall will take one look at this and say that this is financial controls gone out of the window.

Finn Williams: What do you mean by "this"?

Lord Inglewood: This approach to accounting forward and evaluating the way in which your public expenditure programmes may go.

The Chairman: If our report gets reasonable coverage, we might be able to change that and have a complete knitted plan. We started this. At our very first meeting, we brought in the health idea, the gearing idea, the demographics, and now on top of that we have another

one, which is a much higher increase in the birth rate than anywhere else in the European Union. It is joined-up government. I know that we have heard it for about 30 years, and there are not many examples of it, but this might well be the thing that will crack it, because it is such an important issue, particularly, as Lady Finlay says, from the point of view of health, transport, greenness and waste of fossil fuels. All these issues are down to the built environment.

Richard Blyth: If someone had said to me even 12 months ago that there was a remote possibility that Manchester would have its own health service, I would have laughed.

The Chairman: All things are possible.

Richard Blyth: The agenda can change quite suddenly.

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff: If you were in our shoes and could have your wish list, given your answers just now, what do you think we should recommend for planning, for example for health and well-being boards, and for other areas? You spoke earlier about a low status, unappreciated, undervalued group, and within the change it seems that we have the opportunity to make recommendations.

Richard Blyth: Certainly for me, and you too may wish to take this up, the devolution agenda is on a slightly different track from the housing and planning agenda within central government. I suggest that they are the same topic. In my institute we have a to-do list about making sure that we communicate our ideas on strategic planning to the emerging leaders.

The Chairman: The institutions.

Richard Blyth: Particularly the northern cities where it is starting, and to communicate to them that it is one thing to have, say, the Manchester Metrolink, which is very nice—it goes all over the place—but what are you doing about housing? Similarly, in other areas that are starting to work together, this is not just about getting handouts from the Government; this is about you working together for example to provide enough land to meet your housing challenge, and making sure that the housing and planning agenda is completely overlain with all the exciting things that are happening in the devolution agenda.

The Chairman: Mr Williams, would you like to comment, briefly, on Lady Finlay's wish list?

Finn Williams: Building proactive planning into large-scale public spending is critical, whether it is through devolution and also potentially through the National Infrastructure Commission and looking at a new generation of public sector housebuilding in a different

way. There is also a role for taking that leadership at a central government level with resourcing and expertise, whether that is through an individual—a built environment officer or a chief architect—or perhaps through something that is more like the Cabinet Office Policy Lab or Government Digital Service, a lab with pioneering and innovative thinking that crosses boundaries. Often with a discrete unit, you are able to move horizontally in a way that is more fleet of foot and can start to connect up different initiatives across government.

Q141 Baroness Andrews: A lot of my question has been answered. It is essentially about cross-disciplinary working. We have said a lot about that. I think that the idea of a place-making budget that integrates funding, if it could be articulated in Manchester, which is probably further down the road, is really interesting, and not a million miles away from the sort of work that was done for things like City Challenge some time ago. We have some models for that.

In national policy we have very few levers. We have virtually no joined-up work or policy direction between housing and ageing and health and ageing. We have less connection than we had between planning and heritage because of the separation of the departments. What tools do we have other than the NPPF? You spoke about the Cabinet Office maybe having a lab for this. Is there anything that you could put into the NPPF that could be implemented and make any difference at all?

Finn Williams: The NPPF, in a way, is only as good as the people who can implement it. Good planners can work around inadequate policy but good policy cannot work around inadequate planning.

Baroness Andrews: Very good.

Finn Williams: When I worked on planning applications in Croydon, we found that we could get things done that were worthwhile for the developer and the place that were not necessarily written in a policy. There is an element of needing to make sure that you have enough people on the ground interpreting these things in the first place, and to a certain extent there is probably resistance to further change within the NPPF from the sector. In a recent survey, 98% of the public and private sectors said that they did not want to see the NPPF disappear. The majority of people wanted it to stay exactly the same or with a few small tweaks. The constant changes in policy, whether right or wrong, are a barrier to embedding good place-making planning over the long term.

Richard Blyth: With regard to the NPPF, it was a great idea to have a single document. I very much welcome the way it has made planning policy accessible to everybody. You can find it quickly. When public health got into the NPPF, there was a lot of applause, but what really makes a difference is how the Department of Health and Public Health England do things with their money and what their guidance is. It is fine to have your own sentence in the NPPF on a subject that is important to you, but it is what is going on behind and underneath that is a key issue as well, whether that is heritage, public health or transport.

Heritage is interesting, because a simple assessment of the time taken to make planning applications happen, and the cost of this therefore to the economy—which we have seen a lot of evidence produced on—does not take account, for example, of how you would value Liverpool Waterfront, and therefore of how you would assist Liverpool to help itself to make that work. It is not simply by saying that a planning application costs so much and delays so much, so it is a drag on the economy.

Baroness Andrews: Especially when Liverpool Waterfront is a world heritage site and raises huge issues of how you value that sort of environment.

I have one very quick question. One of the dogs that is not barking so far is what to do about local councillors and their lack of appreciation of planning impacts, because in the ways you have suggested we can find ways of jacking up capacity among officers, but ultimately the decisions are taken by councillors, who may or may not be at all versed in the implications of their decisions.

Richard Blyth: This month in Birmingham we are running our annual Politicians in Planning Association conference, which is intended to network councillors on planning committees. We bring in experts, people who are working in planning all the time, to share with people who are councillors and therefore doing it as well as their other work. We have a particular stream this time on new councillors, because our understanding is that since the May elections many are on planning committees for the first time. So we are doing our bit to say that the RTPI is not just for people who are members of it, but we have a role in relation to people who are, as you say, the vital decision-makers on how to make better places.

I have a lot of sympathy for councillors, because a lot is put on their shoulders that is difficult to deal with. The responsibility for delivering all the Government's aspirations on increasing housing supply is a big ask when you are accountable to ward members. One of the advantages of thinking across city regions, counties as a whole and strategic planning is that

to a certain extent a bit of that is taken away. We, along with the Planning Officers Society and local government, have put in recommendations to Greg Clark on a two-tier concept on planning whereby the whole strategic area has one plan and is then filled in at local level. In that way, the local members do not have to bear the whole burden of these wider discussions.

Baroness Whitaker: Can we see a copy of that? Is it in the public domain?

Richard Blyth: Yes.

Baroness Whitaker: That would be very helpful, thank you.

The Chairman: Mr Williams, do you have anything to add to that?

Finn Williams: Only to support what Richard said, and to add that the Planning Advisory Service, the Place Alliance and Urban Design London are running really great courses to engage with local members, and have strong programmes on that front. It is happening; it needs to happen more.

Baroness Andrews: Are they compulsory?

Finn Williams: No, they are not compulsory.

Q142 Lord Clement-Jones: I have an interconnected question. I want to come back to the whole question of proactive planning regimes. I mentioned Birmingham earlier. We have an inkling of what a proactive planning regime looks like. What do you think characterises a proactive planning regime? What changes are needed to help move the planning system towards that? You mentioned various mechanisms earlier; I think you mentioned planning performance agreements and the Government's attitude towards the planning system. What sort of package would you put forward?

Richard Blyth: If I had a short amount of time I would focus on the use of public land, particularly all the public sector's land ownership within a city or wider area. There have been some exciting moves to put all that in a single database. The evidence is one thing, but the policy is another. A key element in proactive planning is to think of the use of public sector assets in the long term, maybe encouraging local authorities to use them as a way of creating homes for rent that could then provide the local authority with its own income stream. Simply selling off public land to get the highest price in the first instance is definitely an attack on proactive planning. It would be easier if you could get control using all that land, some of which at the moment is not always used particularly efficiently in making the most use of the asset.

There was an amazing report written by Keith House and a colleague, Natalie Elphicke, under the last Government. I heard Keith House, who is the leader of Eastleigh Council, say, “I say to everybody I meet, ‘Go and employ planners and property professionals in your authorities, because they will make you money’”. Thinking in a wider sense about meeting all the challenges that an area has to meet—housing, health—the land that it has and quasi-public agencies such as fire and the police all have huge assets that, if integrated, could be put to fantastic use as an underpinning of a proactive planning approach.

Lord Clement-Jones: Thank you, particularly for the reference to Keith House, because he is a Lib Dem colleague and friend of ours. You mentioned LEPs earlier and taking a broader view. Is that specific to those conurbations, or do you think there is a broader lesson there?

Richard Blyth: The whole country is covered. In fact, it is overlapped by LEPs, so what I say about conurbations I would say equally about shire counties. There are some shire counties that have a unitary authority in the centre, and we need to think about strategic planning in such a way that that unitary authority co-operates with other parts of the traditional geographical county in a wider co-operative arrangement that addresses these wider questions.

Finn Williams: On the question of what proactive planning can do in many ways and how you get there, many of its benefits are longer term, as Richard has referred to. It increases certainty for developers making planning applications; there is a very real benefit there. It accelerates delivery, if you do it right. It raises the quality of projects, and in turn strengthens local support, because people see better development and are willing to see it come forward. Certainly, as has been demonstrated, it helps to secure more inward investment and funding and stimulate enterprise at a very local level.

On the question of how we get there and what it could look like at the national level, some things we have talked about already. Yes, we need to prioritise the resources for place-making at a local level and have a mechanism to get people into those posts, such as the proposal for a place agency. I certainly think there is a role for leadership within a central government department along the lines of an individual or a built environment lab.

There are ways in which we could use technology much more intelligently to free planners up to be more proactive. One of the no-brainers in the industry that would benefit the private sector and the public sector is not so much having planning consultants but reducing the requirements on planning applications.

Lord Clement-Jones: With all due deference to Lord Inglewood, we can get there not simply just by putting in resources or whatever; it is an approach that we can adopt.

Finn Williams: I certainly think so, yes. Technology to reduce the work that our current planners do, and allowing them to spend that energy and intelligence further upstream in the process to really shape places as opposed to reading through boxes full of statements, would, I think, be welcomed by everyone.

Lord Clement-Jones: Fantastic. Thank you.

Q143 Baroness Young of Old Scone: Can I turn the question around the other way? What I am beginning to hear is that with good will, collaboration, skills and resource locally, not much change is needed nationally. You can get quite a long way past the blockages by proactive planning on a local basis. I never hold my breath waiting for national government to do anything, and calling for national change is often like whistling in the wind. If you had good planners, visionary members, collaboration across the sectors, pooling land for economic benefit, good proactive planning locally—all the things you talked about—are there still some real blockages that need to be addressed nationally, or could you get quite a long way locally?

Richard Blyth: One thing I would like to recommend is that the Home and Communities Agency's disposal programme is not solely considered as something to reduce the size of the national debt as quickly as possible, but that land is thought of in wider place-making objectives. That is within Ministers' control. I appreciate that there are huge pressures, but there needs to be some kind of compromise between getting the maximum return and some of these wider considerations. Some halfway house between one extreme and the other might have to be a useful compromise.

There is a lot of fear in local authorities about property ownership. There could be some warm words around the fact that it is not illegal to consider wider issues than the highest price you can get. I put in evidence to you that you could, for example, establish a situation in which you said that you were doing a disposal. Obviously there must be safeguards to make sure it is not to friends, but one way of doing that would be to say, in a design and build kind of concept, "On this piece of land we wish to see the following objectives". Anybody is allowed to compete, therefore, to achieve those objectives, and who has the best deal to achieve that wider set of objectives will get the contract and be able to purchase the site.

Baroness Young of Old Scone: But that could happen locally now?

Richard Blyth: Yes, but there is fear, so one thing has to be to make people feel that if they did that they would not get into deep water.

Finn Williams: I agree with that. There is also the option of delivering it yourself as a local authority. The will is there among local authorities, but there are nationally imposed constraints, particularly on borrowing caps in relation to HRA, that limit the ability of councils to be genuinely proactive in that sense.

I think the will is there across the sector. There are great people working in local authorities, but where they are making good things happen they are really struggling against a whole series of reforms, which seem to be moving in the opposite direction. So while it is possible on a case-by-case basis, a lot of the most recent reforms have tended to remove agency from the local planner, and even from the local authority, whether that is through the increasing role of the Planning Inspectorate, the increasing number of appeals, to a certain extent special measures, permitted development, the national infrastructure schemes, and even, dare I say it, neighbourhood planning. They are all ways of placing power in the hands of people who are not the local authority and not the local planners. Where the will is there, the tools to do the job are increasingly disappearing or going elsewhere.

Baroness Rawlings: You mentioned the National Health Service moving to Manchester. I declare an interest here. I used to work in the Department of the Environment in the early 1980s and was involved with Salford. There has been a big change with the BBC moving up to Salford. What is your view on big government organisations moving perhaps north to less developed areas? Is that a good thing, with everything that follows?

Richard Blyth: The BBC has been a good thing, but it was made possible by an enormous amount of preparation. We featured MediaCityUK in some of our best-practice literature. If you look at what happened—I appreciate that you probably know Salford better than me—a lot of work was done by the Central Manchester Development Corporation, with high levels of co-operation between two, or possibly three, metropolitan borough councils and the 10-council-wide Transport for Greater Manchester pushing through the Metrolink, and the work of Peel holdings as the property owner. All that had to happen before the BBC was able to consider a move of that kind. That preparation lasted at least a decade, possibly longer. So it can happen, but on its own it probably would not work; it depends on a lot of groundwork being done. But the consequences were astounding. The BBC is a small part of

the whole process now. Regarding the number of jobs, ITV, start-ups and supply-chain companies have all clustered around, so it is not just a BBC question now by any means.

The Chairman: It is a great practical use of clusters.

Baroness Rawlings: It could be looked at for further possibilities.

Q144 Baroness Whitaker: One thing proactive planning can do is anticipate the future with a bit more evidence of trends. Can I impose on you by asking you to write in, because we do not have much time, about how proactive planning can help in place-making in the much longer term? In his evidence Mr Blyth referred to a 20-year housing supply rather than five years. Even that may be too short. Could you map how you think proactive planning could help with place-making needs—transport, environment, housing, infrastructure—over a much longer term so that we know, as much as we can, what kind of people we are going to be?

Richard Blyth: We are happy to do that.

The Chairman: We started off thinking that it would be 30 years, but now we suspect that 30 years is probably a stepping stone. Is that, in a sense, your idea, Mr Williams?

Finn Williams: As far as I see it, the job of planner is often to redefine the here and now. It is a bigger “here” and a longer “now”, and that longer “now” could be 30, 50 or 100 years. We are currently doing a piece of work in London on the London infrastructure plan up to 2050. New York is planning up to 2100 with its infrastructure plan. These pieces of infrastructure and the stuff that we are delivering now had their origins 30 or 50 years ago. We need to do that thinking for the next generation.

Baroness Parminter: One of the key themes emerging from a lot the evidence that we have heard today is the lack of this national spatial planning framework. The RTPI has come up with its proposal for a map for England. Can that deliver all that is required, given the failure of there to be anything at the national level at the moment? If not, what else is needed alongside that?

Richard Blyth: The Map for England was proposed as a multi-layered geographical information system database in which government departments would be invited to put their plans for the future in one place so that if you are, say, in Teesside, you can identify all the things that are going to happen to you. It was not proposed as a national plan, which would be a very big step, but as a way in which people could tell, for example, whether the

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was proposing something inconsistent with that proposed by the Treasury. You could see it all there and drill down.

The priority for us is to concentrate on getting sub-regional planning—that is, for cities, regions and counties—working as a first priority, and then getting them to talk to each other. At the moment, we have an initiative with the think tank IPPR North called, “Do we need a Great North Plan?”. We have a northern summit coming up in January, which is really about saying that it is fine to have Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and Sheffield City regions, but are there some questions that we need to consider across all these areas together? Railways and motorways often seem to be talked about, but do we also need to consider, for example, where the new health-related new industries and advanced manufacturing might be concentrated, and how a series of city regions can work together, building on particular strengths that parts of them may have.

Given the Government’s devolution agenda, the interesting level at which the interactions are going to need to take place is not national. On the other hand, there are policies, for example the way in which the Department of Health approaches the issue of new buildings for healthcare in growing areas, that are currently at odds with the Department for Communities and Local Government’s drive to have more homes. There are policy frameworks where more co-ordination and discussion of impacts would help, but maps and that level of interaction I see as happening much more at the sub-national level and getting people to work together in the future.

Finn Williams: There is no doubt that the absence of larger than local planning has been one of the causes of delays in the production of local plans in many instances. More often than not, they boil down to negotiations over housing numbers one way or another. There needs to be an alternative mechanism, I would suggest, and I totally support things such as the map for England in creating a broader, longer-term, wider framework for those sorts of discussions across authority boundaries. I agree with Richard that it does not have to be a government statutory national plan; it could be more of an alternative mechanism to plan spatially at regional level. There are examples from elsewhere. After a terrible earthquake, the city of Constitución in Chile managed to replan the entire city in 100 days just by setting a time limit on it and getting everyone in the room. It might just need a completely alternative approach—locking everyone in the room in a charrette type of scenario, for

example—to unlock some of those areas where negotiations have come to a standstill over the production of local plans.

Q145 The Chairman: Is there a body of literature anywhere about how different major cities and countries in the world have adopted large plans? Only last week, I was down in the Caucasus, and I was told by the speaker of the parliament that there was a huge plan that completely changed Baku. One of the things they said was that there should be no further skyscrapers because they were blocking out the views. Also, it is very notable now how much friendlier New York and Manhattan are because there are much wider pavements and they have taken out the ground floors of shops and offices and made spaces that people can walk through and sit by a fountain, and all the shops and offices go up from there. It is very good. Is there anywhere an idiots' guide, if you like, to this sort of thing?

Finn Williams: There are certainly publications.

The Chairman: Could you give us a list?

Finn Williams: I am sure your clerk will be able to point you in the right direction.

The Chairman: I am sure he would.

Richard Blyth: Looking in our strategic planning work at other countries, the challenge of getting different councils to work together is almost always a problem across the entire globe. There are very few areas of the world—London is unusual in this—where a single body controls a huge area. In most of the world there are different councils that have to work together. What is interesting are the recipes for success in doing that.

Lord Inglewood: Can I go back to what you said earlier about the way in which more of the initiatives should come at a more local level? Given that we still live in a very centralised country, do you think that the likely response of central government is favourable towards this form of further devolution?

Richard Blyth: Yes, in a word.

Lord Inglewood: So you think the wind is behind the idea?

Richard Blyth: Yes.

Finn Williams: I think certain reforms to the planning system have not been moving in that direction recently. A change of direction with an emphasis on, for example, simply promoting proactive planning at a local level as something that is positive, and indeed necessary, for growth would be a big step in the right direction.

Lord Inglewood: Where you have local initiatives that run counter to the sentiment of the centre, that is when you get trouble.

Finn Williams: Yes.

The Chairman: The last question I was going to ask was what problems are caused for planning professionals by a lack of co-ordination across government on built environment policy, but I think we have covered it all. It has been a fascinating and very stimulating session. I want to thank you both very much indeed. If you have any bright ideas—of course you have lots of them—that you think we need, could you please let us have them. We would be more than grateful. Thank you.