



HOUSE OF LORDS

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Inquiry on

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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11.35 am

Witnesses: Simon Foxell and Barry Sellers

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
 Lord Inglewood
 Earl of Lytton
 Baroness Parminter
 Baroness Rawlings
 Baroness Whitaker
 Baroness Young of Old Scone

Examination of Witnesses

Simon Foxell, The Edge, built environment think-tank, and **Barry Sellers**, Urban Design Group

Q308 The Chairman: Welcome to this evidence session of the Select Committee on National Policy for the Built Environment. You have in front of you, Mr Foxell and Mr Sellers, a list of the interests that have been declared by members of the Committee. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the Committee website. You will have the opportunity to make corrections to the transcript, where necessary. Could I begin by asking each of you to briefly introduce yourselves to the Committee, please? This is for the purpose of making sure that we allocate the right answers to the right people for our transcribers. Mr Foxell?

Simon Foxell: I am Simon Foxell, I am an architect and I am here to represent The Edge, which is a built environment voluntary think-tank of senior and relatively young members of the construction-industry professions and a range of others.

The Chairman: Not just architects?

Simon Foxell: Not just architects at all, but engineers, surveyors, builders and various other property professionals, and we have been in existence for about 20 years.

The Chairman: Thank you. Mr Sellers?

Barry Sellers: Good morning, Chairman. My name is Barry Sellers and I am here representing the Urban Design Group, which is a charitable organisation dealing with the built environment. I am an urban designer and a chartered town planner and my day job is

working in a local authority for the London Borough of Wandsworth, primarily dealing with Nine Elms and Battersea power station, and the design review panels.

The Chairman: My goodness, Battersea power station. There is a book about it, is there not?

Barry Sellers: There is, yes.

Q309 The Chairman: I think you sent us one. Thank you. I will start straightaway with the first question. Why do design standards in the built environment fall short of objectives? Should there be a stronger unified code for design standards at a national level?

Simon Foxell: To preface this, it is important to understand what the design standards are, who is setting them and whether they exist. We may be talking instead about the quality of design and effectively how that can be raised, and there are a very wide range of answers to why that may be a problem to establish in this country. One of the most cogent answers to this question was Nicholas Pevsner, the architectural historian, who wrote that the English will spare no expense to get something on the cheap, and often, because of that tendency, good design has to be smuggled into projects, despite all the standards that exist.

The Edge is particularly concerned with partly moving away from issues of good/bad design, which are a very Manichean idea, to the performance of the built environment: how well it does what it is being asked to do, how well it achieves it and what is being claimed for it. The process of design really needs to start from the setting out of a good set of intentions for what is required of it, a good briefing process and a good client process in order to lead to a response to that, which is finding the right solutions to the challenge and then, at the other end, measuring whether we have achieved the objectives and the intentions, so it is a twofold thing. We are falling down very frequently on the good briefing for projects and being really clear about what we are trying to achieve out of them, and, on the back end of that, we are also falling down on the performance of meeting those objectives and particularly on actually finding out whether we have performed or not and feeding that back into the process, so learning the lessons from the process of design. There is a tendency in this country, once infrastructure is complete, to hand it over to the user and not to revisit it. If there is an issue here that we need to emphasise, it is the need for stewardship of projects right through the process of design through to delivery and often revisiting those projects on a frequent basis thereafter, to make sure not only that they are still performing in the way they were asked to perform but that we are learning the lessons from them that can feed into future projects.

Q310 The Chairman: That is very interesting. You made the point that at every stage in the process you should get involved in it, but you also said that handing over the project to the user at the end is not the best idea and there should be a continuing relationship. Surely it should be a relationship, which I suppose there is, right from the beginning of the project so that, when it is handed over, there are no surprises?

Simon Foxell: There is now a process that has been instigated by the industry and has been taken up by the Government called Government Soft Landings, which encourages this process of making sure that the users are brought in early so that they understand what they are going to get, a process of commissioning and briefing them afterwards, and a series of revisits to those projects later on. Government Soft Landings are still a minority pursuit, but it is very encouraging that it exists, and the Government wish to make it mandatory on all their larger projects.

Q311 The Chairman: If you were in our position of making recommendations on the built environment, would you suggest that we should think very seriously about whether there should be not a statutory but a really strong recommendation that the user should be involved right from the beginning? You would then be able to regulate their attitude towards cost-cutting where it is essential.

Simon Foxell: It is very important for the full team of designers, contractors and, potentially, users to be involved all the way through in order to have a good consultation process, but also not to rush into design. Good design is often achieved through good preparation so that the issues are studied and the right questions are asked—whether this is a problem and the answer is that a building or a different response is being requested—in order that the right solutions can be arrived at. Frequently, at the moment, the preparation period for design, and even the design period itself, is being radically shrunk so that there is no time to be asking the right questions of projects and to get the ground rules right. At the moment, for new schools projects, from inception to completion of the design process, there is a period of six weeks.

Baroness Andrews: Is that a change in the law or a change in the guidance?

Simon Foxell: In that particular case, it is a change in departmental policy, yes.

The Chairman: That is outrageous.

Baroness Andrews: How much time? Six weeks? It used to be 13 weeks.

Simon Foxell: It was a much longer period, which varied from project to project down to a departmental target.

Baroness Andrews: It is a target?

Simon Foxell: It is. The design team is obliged to meet that target. On the other side, the team that gives the permission for it to go forward often takes much longer.

The Chairman: Can we ask Mr Sellers to come in on that one?

Barry Sellers: Perhaps I can talk about housebuilding and design, and things like that. In recent years, the Building for Life approach was introduced, which set out a number of criteria to evaluate housebuilding projects and has moved towards more of a self-certification, traffic-light system of appraisal. A lot of that came about as a response to the Design Council/CABE analysis that a lot of the quality of the housing in our country that is being built was not really up to the standard they would be looking for. Certainly the Building for Life approach has been challenging; it gives us a checklist for builders to subscribe to in the way to move things forward.

The other area, of course, is in London where we have the Mayor's housing design guidance, for example. That is always very useful for developers and architects to look at in preparation for putting together a framework for different developments on different sites. Whether that is something that you would look to nationally is another question, because obviously it is very particular to London in that sense, but questions are often raised in the UK that some of the sizes of some of the rooms in our houses are a bit smaller than some of those in Denmark, for example, so we need to look very carefully and we cannot keep making rooms smaller because we need to have certain standards for that sort of thing. Of course, we have building standards for safety, for example, in the way in which we procure the design and construction of houses, which is important for meeting certain critical standards, so the BS standards are very, very important to have.

Regarding urban design, we have national planning guidance on the website, and it is useful to issue guidance nationally to evaluate developments.

Q312 Lord Inglewood: Mr Foxell, a very quick point. Talking about the time you are "allowed" to design a school, in very general terms what would be the optimum period? You can go on looking at the design too often. What do you, as a professional architect, reckon that process should take in order to get the right answer?

Simon Foxell: It is necessary for it to be an iterative process, so that it goes from initial studies, through sketches, through to a more detailed design. In that process, it is important to be in consultation with the users, possibly with the community, and others. It is often the answers that come back that will change the speed. If the answer is, “Fantastic, move on”, then the speed accelerates. If it is, “We still have problems with this. Go back and think about it again”, it is going to take longer, but that time is well worth spending to actually get it right and to get it right to people’s satisfaction. I am not answering your question exactly, but a three-month period would be an adequate time generally to design a building with an adequate consultation process built into it.

Lord Inglewood: But what you are telling us seems to me to be a scandal, if it is correct: that, for the sake of a relatively few weeks, we are creating a lot of suboptimal buildings at very great public cost.

Simon Foxell: It is in part in order to drive through standard building types without too much objection from the people on the ground.

The Chairman: I agree with Lord Inglewood that that does seem crazy. If something is worth doing, it is worth doing well.

Simon Foxell: Indeed.

Q313 Baroness Whitaker: Mr Foxell mentioned “stewardship”. For the sake of clarity, who or what is the steward? Is it a committee? Does this need to be more clearly stated in guidance?

I have another question on the objectives for the built environment. You said that we should interrogate our projects: are they doing what they are asked to do? Are they usually asked to do the right things uniformly—for instance, the implications of a more social nature, transport, accessibility to employment and amenities? Are those normally uniformly fair? So, two questions: on stewardship and the right things.

Simon Foxell: One of the things we have discovered is that this is very much a team effort and there is no single person who takes responsibility for everything. It is much better when it is a collaborative process and people from the outset from many different disciplines add their expertise into it. That includes not only the technical side, the professionals, but the money, the users and so on, and they all need to take on aspects of stewardship.

Baroness Whitaker: Should this be more clearly stated: that a group is necessary to safeguard it?

Simon Foxell: In some cases, it is important. The Edge has been doing a lot of work on the nature of professionalism in the industry, and from our point of view one of our critiques is that professionals need to take more responsibility for the long-term success of their projects, monitoring them afterwards and learning the lessons from them, but also that clients should expect them to do that and be prepared to let them, which is often a barrier.

Baroness Whitaker: So do you think this might be lodged in guidance?

Simon Foxell: I think it should be both lodged in guidance, particularly for buildings that the public sector purchases, but also the professional institutions should encourage their members, as part of their code of conduct, to take a much greater aspect of stewardship in the works they produce. There was a second bit to your question?

Baroness Whitaker: Are projects being asked to do the right thing? You said they should be asked whether they have done what they were asked to do. Are they asked to do the right things?

Simon Foxell: Again, it gets back to the question of preparation and the preparation of a brief. It is not something that an inexperienced client can do on their own; they need expertise to do that well, to ask the right questions, to develop an incisive brief that sets out a series of objectives and targets and so on. There are quite a lot of professional advice systems that exist to help that happen. We are notoriously bad in this country at developing full and well worked-out briefs, which are much more the norm in the process elsewhere in Europe. Various efforts have been made over the years, but we often fall back again into cutting out that process at the beginning because it is seen as time-consuming and potentially an expense that can be spared.

Q314 Earl of Lytton: Good morning, gentlemen. Mr Foxell, you mentioned something about the lack of data coming out of our existing built environment, and that mirrored something that was raised a few days ago in the all-party group on the built environment, which I happen to be involved with, where what you might call “post-occupancy evaluation” on new homes, for instance, is extremely limited and is very often done between six and 12 months after somebody moves in. It looks basically at the consumer bits of the property. It does not look at the wider environment and there is nothing at all longer term—at five years, 10 years or 15 years, that sort of thing. Is there a gap here in our information? Should we be nudging our specialist adviser, who has access to all his very bright students at UCL, to look at that as a research project?

Simon Foxell: You pick up on UCL, and I sit on the steering group for the Centre for Energy Epidemiology there, which looks at buildings. Even though there is a relative shortage, UCL is a shining light in this area, and it is doing a lot of studies on buildings in use, particularly the energy aspect of them. There is a tremendous problem with actually getting that information out to practitioners; it tends to get published in specialist journals that exist behind pay walls. It is a very difficult conduit through to the practitioners on the ground. It is something again which The Edge has been working very fully on, trying to speed up the gap between research in the academic community and research all over the built environment and practitioners, which is currently assessed at being about nine years for specialist knowledge to get from one to the other. We are working with 10 different construction professional institutions on various projects to try to speed that up. One is a digest of recent research that will go out to all practitioners. There is also trying to get them to work together to have a research base that sits between the institutions that is really working very hard on trying to make sure that the world of research gets communicated well to practitioners who have an extreme shortage of time for picking up new knowledge.

Q315 Lord Inglewood: I would like to ask a very specific question, which really requires a pretty short, specific answer. Do you think the system of design review panels is working?

Simon Foxell: In general, where they work well, they work very well. They are a fairly luxurious process in that they are affordable for major projects in areas that have a good number of people who care about that environment, and they are very good at challenging projects to improve them, so there is a process of dialogue that happens with an expert group that can often draw out the issues where projects could be better or they are not performing as well as they might. It is difficult to see how you could implement them for all projects across the country. There are certainly areas of the country that would struggle to provide a good panel locally that knew the area, and they are probably the areas that need such panels the most. What they should not be seen as is a patch on a failing planning system, trying to make it better, which is often how they get used, and they are certainly not a gateway for planning permission itself. They may try to say that a project is simply not good enough to get permission, but that is only guidance within the system. The problem with the current planning system is that it is vastly under-resourced for producing good, well thought through and timely decisions.

Barry Sellers: I run a design review panel at Wandsworth. We have 60 built environment professionals covering a range of skills from architecture to landscape architecture, structural engineering, urban design and planning. They are called upon to review schemes at pre-application level, and over the three or four years we have been running the panel we have found it very effective. It operates primarily at the pre-application period, so it is helping to challenge the development in that early stage prior to the application being submitted. It also enables the developers and the architects to understand some of the issues, which perhaps they have not always covered in their entirety at that stage, and it is a very useful way to get a better quality out of development, because they are always trying to ensure that their issues are properly addressed as part of that application process.

The success of it really has to be the timing of the design review panel as well, because it needs to be fairly early on in the process to enable the actual feedback from the chair of the panel to the developers and the architects as a way forward. At the same time, it is very flexible and we respond very flexibly to the developer's timetable of developments so that it does not hold up their development in any way. These are just for schemes of 50-plus units, generally speaking. Overall, when it comes to the planning application being submitted, we find that the planning committee can refer back to the scheme that was done by the design review panel and see how the scheme has changed from pre-application to the actual application. They can measure the improvements that have been done from the pre-application level to the actual application submitted, so it is quite useful advice from that point of view.

The Chairman: Is it regarded as useful by the people who have used it?

Barry Sellers: The developers find the constructive feedback from fellow professionals very useful. We find that the politicians find it very useful, because they often sit as observers on some of the panels to understand some of the arguments, some of which are very complex when you are dealing with built environment issues across our range of areas, and it is very helpful for them to understand some of the issues, how those conclusions have been arrived at and how that development is being taken forward.

The Chairman: That seems the ideal forum to make sure that we get the best.

Barry Sellers: Yes, it is a way of ironing out a lot of the issues before the application. If you couple that with a planning performance agreement and you slot the design review panel within that, then the developers, as part of the PPA, are given a document whereby they can

say, “Look, here’s the start of the process, here’s the decision time. We know we’ve got that length of time within which we can get a decision. We know that here’s a design review panel who have gone through that process, here’s the application and we know what is at the end of it”, so that they get a clear-cut decision on it.

Simon Foxell: It is really important that they happen early on in the process and that the guidance is given while the scheme is still fairly fluid, as it is difficult to change it much later. It is also very important that such panels look at the place where these projects happen and try to establish the better quality of place. Finally, such panels should be as multidisciplinary as possible not only to produce the architectural design but to influence the way they work from a service point of view, the landscape issues, the environmental qualities of the buildings and so on.

The Chairman: The happiness factor for the people who live in them.

Simon Foxell: That is what we are trying to aim for. The other aspect of them is that when they were first introduced, they often worked with a parallel service known as “enabling”, which was getting in usually a single individual early in the project to take responsibility for upping the game and for raising the aspiration of projects, taking them through the process and really helping them to be given a push forwards that would ultimately create a better project and would sometimes aid them through the design review process.

Q316 Baroness Parminter: Just as a point of clarification, does the design panel process seriously address sustainability as well as the quality of the place so that those decisions can be looked at in the round, because clearly there can be tensions?

Simon Foxell: A good panel would absolutely do that with the right kind of people on it. It is challenging to look at a project in a very short period of time and make a firm judgment on issues such as sustainability, which are in part technical and in part really understanding the complexities of a project and how it works technically, but a good person who has seen a lot of buildings can aid that enormously.

Q317 Baroness Whitaker: You have both emphasised now and in your very helpful written evidence the importance of cross-disciplinary working. What other measures do you think can be taken to support this among built environment professionals? Is there a case for more multidisciplinary teams at the local authority level, and, if so, how should it be achieved?

Simon Foxell: For the past two years, The Edge has been leading a major study and a commission of inquiry into the professional world. Earlier this year we produced *Collaboration for Change*, a report written by the former chief construction adviser, Paul Morrell, which is very much about collaboration through the professions. It has to be said that collaboration on individual projects already tends to be very good; teams come together and tend to work well across those teams to produce complex design projects.

Baroness Whitaker: Is this at the instigation of the planning authority, or do the developers do it?

Simon Foxell: It is from the developer/client point of view. One of the challenges is that those teams rarely stay together and the next project will probably be a different team.

Baroness Whitaker: So you mean that after it is built, there is not that continuing group to look after it.

Simon Foxell: It is partly that, but it is often that a similar project will have a completely different team, or it may have one or two members from that one, so there is a lack of continuity in the process of trying to learn the lessons from one project and taking them on to the next, and the working relationships that can deliver effective projects are often broken up and reinstituted at the next one.

Q318 Baroness Whitaker: What is the remedy for this?

Simon Foxell: It is very much about finding ways of building teams that can go through. I think that is in part a problem with the current procurement process: that it encourages bidding on an individual basis from project to project.

Baroness Whitaker: This would apply to the public sector, including national government procurement very substantially?

Simon Foxell: The private sector is much, much better at doing this, yes.

Baroness Whitaker: They are already good at it?

Simon Foxell: The good ones are good at it.

Q319 Baroness Whitaker: How is it possible, and I hope Mr Sellers will answer too, to make this a national pattern?

Barry Sellers: I work as part of a multiprofessional environment at Wandsworth. In Nine Elms, for example, there are groups set up to deliver civic projects.

Baroness Whitaker: Who are they set up by?

Barry Sellers: They are set up by the council, Lambeth and the Mayor of London, so you have developers on those panels as well. It looks at delivering developments across both boroughs. We also have Transport for London involved, because we have the new extension of the Underground line coming forward, and that collaborative approach is so essential. What is so important about the whole process is the way in which the front-loading of infrastructure investment has enabled the delivery of a strong vision of Nine Elms being a very pedestrian site and a friendly place as opposed to being car-centred.

Q320 Baroness Whitaker: This infrastructure relates mainly to transport?

Barry Sellers: One of the groups I sit on is a public realm group, for example, and that group will look at the delivery of the linear park, the open spaces, the highways, working with Transport for London on creating a new urban boulevard, for example, for Nine Elms Lane. We are also working with advisers there. Transport for London commissions advisers to look at the way in which the highway can be reconfigured and remodelled to create a better place for the people who are going to live there and the businesses that will be there as well. I think it is important that you have so many different people collaborating together in that particular environment.

Baroness Whitaker: I have to say that when I have wandered around the Nine Elms development, I have wondered whether it is going to become a neighbourhood or not. Do not take up too much time on this, but does that come into the calculation as well?

Barry Sellers: Among the guidance that is available is the public realm guidance on materials, for example. There is a materials palette across the public realm which each developer will have bought into, so if you are doing different developments on different sides of the road, rather than one doing one specification and the other doing something else, there is that co-ordination, which is very, very important.

Baroness Whitaker: Would you recommend that as a model?

Barry Sellers: I think you could look at that as a model for, say, city extensions elsewhere in the country, provided that you are going to front-load the public transport investment decision-making process, because rather than having multi-storey car parks on the ground, you get 10% of the car parking, so it becomes a very pedestrian-friendly environment and so sustainable.

Baroness Whitaker: This has perhaps also happened at the end of the Jubilee line at Stratford East and around there.

Barry Sellers: I think you can look at that and apply that process to other regeneration areas in London and elsewhere certainly.

Simon Foxell: Generally, our experience is that local authorities internally work very well together and they are good at seeking advice and there are some shining examples.

Baroness Whitaker: In the major conurbations, you mean.

Simon Foxell: Usually, where there is enough of a job to do. Croydon is moving forwards in a very inspirational way at the moment, with internal teams working in a multidisciplinary way for the overall betterment of the Croydon area, leaving behind the professional differentiation and playing to individual people's strengths as an overall built environment professional rather than with the various labels on them which they may have been trained as. One of the challenges in the professional sector at the moment is the silos between the professions, and the real challenge is in trying to break those down so that there is a career structure for professionals that allows them to move within the sector, much in the same way in which they are currently able to do within a local authority environment.

Baroness Whitaker: This is up to the professional institutions?

Simon Foxell: It is up to the professional institutions, but it really does require a degree of push from the Government to get them to perform better and to perform more collaboratively together. This is particularly so on difficult questions like designing for climate change, which are very multidisciplinary issues, like closing the performance gap, which we have already discussed, and trying to reform the overall industry so that it provides a far better and more effective offer to individual clients.

Q321 Baroness Whitaker: Would what you have just described make this collaboration more effective for smaller towns? The big cities seem to have got hold of the idea, but there are a lot of small towns that are not being well regenerated.

Simon Foxell: I think there is that capacity, so long as people's strengths are played to. The professional sector and the organisations within it represent a very important source of advice and independent judgment that is often ignored within communities. It is not either the public sector on the one hand or the commercial sector on the other and it is capable, sometimes with encouragement, of providing very good, well-founded advice and experience, but it needs to do that as a collaborative piece of work and, to some extent, for the expectation on professionals to be upgraded again after several decades of demolition of the professional ethos.

Barry Sellers: It is important, taking smaller cities, for example, that there is a way in which they can collaborate together. For example, the Urban Design Group has been working on an initiative on urban places as healthy places. We have been working with Place Alliance on this particular initiative because healthy places is something which actually falls between the gaps, whereas actually it goes across departmental services, so it is working with national health, transport and urban design to deliver healthy places, so it is combatting things like obesity. It is so important that, as service providers, we can actually look at our fellow professionals and have a method of working together to deliver a better environment for people in the future.

Q322 Baroness Whitaker: What is that method? That is what we are seeking.

Barry Sellers: The methodology is a question of having the guidance in place, first of all, on how to deliver what a healthy place is and then to look at the mechanisms for working. Now that health has come within local authorities, there is an opportunity for that part of the local authority to work with the transport providers, working with the planning authority, and to deliver expectations for future generations in the way in which that environment can be put together, creating a healthy place. Hopefully, Nine Elms will be that place in the future because it will be a walkable place. There is evidence to suggest that the people who live in places where you can walk and cycle and get public transport are fitter and healthier than if they are living in a car-dependent suburb where you need to rely on a car to go back and forwards to work and do your shopping. We need to think nationally about how we encapsulate those ideas and put them into practice.

Q323 Baroness Parminter: You have just mentioned the word 'nationally' and I just wanted to ask you whether you felt that our design aspirations and our sustainability needs could be better co-ordinated across government and then cascaded down?

Barry Sellers: Certainly nationally. We have a National Planning Policy Framework, but we do not have national spatial planning, as they do in Scotland, for example, and some other countries. There may be a way through the National Infrastructure Commission, as an example, to set out not in heavy guidance but fairly lightweight guidance, such as, "Here's an opportunity to focus on where developments should occur to link high-speed rail and where new developments should be co-ordinated", and then developers will have clarity. If you are going via the high-speed rail from London to Birmingham and there are stops in between, those stops become the focus of new developments that can be very sustainable because

you do not need a car to get about there and you can plug into it straightaway. It is the same with linking airports to rail transport and future developments. It is about co-ordinating that. It does not need a big document, just something that is thought about in the co-ordination of the different expertise involved.

Q324 The Chairman: This goes back to your point, Mr Foxell, that everybody needs to be regarded as worthwhile. Engineering was not regarded as a great profession for a long time; everybody called them plumbers and so on. Everybody's skills should be built on and held in greater respect.

Simon Foxell: And they are often essential to actually getting a good result. Picking up on the question about sustainability, we have some very strong, high-level targets that we need to achieve in this country through the Climate Change Act, the various carbon plans and so on. What is currently very difficult to see is the route map to getting there, partly because a lot of the things that have recently been put into place have also been taken away again. In the previous session, there was discussion about the Code for Sustainable Homes, which has now gone. Our ability to deliver to higher standards is very challenged if they do not exist. Equally, the progression of the building regulations to up the game incrementally seems to be in abeyance at the moment; there is no plan for improving it in a regular fashion. This makes some of our job very difficult and it is being left to individual offers from the construction industry to do better, but without a framework for doing that.

There was a buildings day in Paris at COP 21, and I know that our Government have promised that we will deliver some very stretching targets, which include making all our buildings in this country carbon-neutral by 2050, but we do not currently have a means to get there. It is not so much a question of a lack of joined-up thinking but of making sure that there is a plan for progress in this area. I do not think there is a lack of willingness in that from the construction industry; it is simply that no one is prepared to do this on their own. They need to do it together. We know that we can deliver better projects at the same cost that we deliver them now, but we can only do that if it becomes the norm to achieve that. A better project at the moment, if it is a stand-alone, is significantly more expensive.

Q325 The Chairman: In a lot of our sessions since we started work on this Committee, the issue of skills and apprenticeships has come up. They are relevant in this area where you are saying that they break up instead of staying together.

Simon Foxell: They are relevant completely across the piece really of training. The training of professionals needs to focus on this area to really make sure that they know what is going to work based on evidence of what is apparently working at the moment, which is a very big issue, and there is not very much evidence around this, as we discussed earlier. It is also about the skills of the people on site. It is difficult to build a sustainable building if you do not know the basic principles: the need to make them airtight, the need to achieve good ventilation and so on. Skills on site are also lacking, and many of the mechanisms for improving them have been recently taken away.

Finally, all the aspirations of clients, developers, insurers, in the background of building projects, need to increase rapidly so that they insist on these things and have a framework for doing this, so they can point out a good standard and say, "That is what we want to achieve", which might be a standard that is well over and above the current building regulations but something that is collectively understood by the industry as delivering what is required so that we can all move towards it.

The Chairman: Thank you. Mr Sellers?

Barry Sellers: Looking at the skills in the built environment, I studied architecture, urban design and planning, which covers quite a multitude of areas in the built environment, and often there is duplication when you are studying those areas. The Farrell review identified the possibility of a shared vision for professionals when they are coming in to study various disciplines. That is quite an important example of where you have a whole range of built environment professionals who can perhaps start off with a foundation course almost at the beginning, and then when they move up and increase in specialism they can go on and do other courses after that.

Q326 Baroness Rawlings: How might the appointment of a chief built environment adviser improve design, and should they be elected or appointed? Secondly, how might the Government improve leadership on design matters? I would like to hear your view of the old-fashioned way; do you think competitions work, like the one they had for the Palace of Westminster?

Simon Foxell: If we can start on the idea of a chief built environment adviser to the Government, our recent experience of such individuals has been very strong. The role of the chief construction adviser, which is now coming to an end, has been very effective; it has introduced new thinking into Government and raised the standard that Government is

demanding. The chief construction adviser introduced mandatory building information modelling for all government projects over a certain size, which is pulling the industry together and has been a conduit for all sorts of discussions about better-performing buildings from a carbon point of view and so on. The idea of a built environment adviser is that that gets broadened out to encompass the whole of the industry, because the industry works together, even though it has so many different aspects to it; construction was always only one part of it. It is really to act as a conduit between a large industry, which is a very substantial part of the economy of this country, and the Government in a way that enables a much more effective conversation to happen from both directions.

Also, one of the critical things of having someone who has been around the block is that they have some experience and a memory of whether this has been tried before and know the kind of lessons that need to be drawn to help the Government make effective policy, rather than it being done without that ability to reflect on whether a particular idea has been tried before and whether it is going to be successful. Probably all of us who work in the sector know that the Government comes up with the same idea roughly once every 12 or 15 years, and a good built environment adviser would be able to say, "Move on. Go for something that actually will work".

Baroness Rawlings: Appointed or elected from within the sector?

Simon Foxell: I think it needs to be a collaborative appointment from both the Government side and the sector side. I am not sure how an election would work. I think it is the tricky thing of finding the right, very effective person who can work with both sides of the industry, commands their respect and is essentially known to them. We have had two chief construction advisers who have managed to achieve that and that was probably a fairly delicate system of finding the right person and then persuading them that this was not going to be too poisoned a chalice.

The Chairman: But, in fact, if it is a major job like that, it would almost certainly be advertised anyway.

Simon Foxell: Yes.

The Chairman: It would be in all the public journals, et cetera, and there would probably be a lot of competition for it.

Simon Foxell: Certainly the first time round, less so the second time.

Baroness Rawlings: And the competitions?

Simon Foxell: Competitions work well if there are enough of them so that they are a regular part of the system and they are not overloaded with expectation. In this country, we have relatively few, particularly compared with countries such as Germany, which use them as the standard form of procurement, which often means that for major competitions you get 100 or 200 entries. Each one of those costs somewhere between £10,000 to £30,000 to deliver, and the waste in the sector is considerable, so without it being a normal part of life it is almost impossible to say that it is a cost-effective idea. There are obviously ways around that: having local competitions, sometimes deliberately targeting competitions at younger professionals to bring them on and to invest in them rather than some of their older peers. I would probably recommend for nationally important projects going down that route just because you want to open up the field as much as possible. If you had almost all public sector works and a lot of the private sector going down that route, it would reduce the number of participants to a sensible number and then it would work, but, as it stands at the moment, it is a tricky one.

Barry Sellers: On the first point about a chief built environment adviser, certainly the UK is recognised as having some of the best architects and designers in the world, and to have someone in a leadership role within the Government would be very, very helpful, partly to help to drive a national spatial plan, for example, which I referred to earlier, and to look at the route map for sustainability over the next 20, 30 or 40 years. We have to think of our children and our children's generations. The population in the UK has been increasing tremendously over the last 10 years, and in London it has gone up by a couple of million, and I think we need to look at how we are going to live in the future, which very much needs a sustainable approach.

On the second question of competitions, I certainly like competitions, but I hear from some of the smaller practices, for example, that there are barriers to some of the competitions in that you need to be a certain size, have certain insurance and things like that, which precludes the smaller practices from entering those competitions. I would like competitions to generate ideas, because that is what is important, and certainly we have people who can generate those ideas in this country.

The Chairman: And the involvement of the public as well, which is quite useful.

Barry Sellers: Absolutely.

Q327 Baroness Whitaker: I like the idea of the chief built environment adviser being also something of a futurologist, as we do not have capacity for very long-term thinking. Would his or her duties include promulgating good advice to all local authorities that cannot access the top-level stuff which the major conurbations can access?

Barry Sellers: With the spatial role, for example, you have the concept of the northern powerhouse, which is a whole area on which the local authorities can collaborate together. I think it is very useful to set out what that can mean over the next 10 to 15 years, because there are opportunities there, with HS2 and HS3 coming forward, to begin to think differently about the way in which we develop the development patterns, for example.

Q328 Baroness Whitaker: The person could also ensure that all planning authorities knew of those developments. Would that be a function?

Barry Sellers: It would be a function whereby there would be a spatial framework within which they would work and they could set up their own ways of working. My own local authority is working with Richmond at the moment, and we are coming together as two local authorities, but there are opportunities for other local authorities to come together to deliver particular projects, and they can point out particular people in those areas who have the expertise to deliver those particular projects.

Simon Foxell: On the guidance issue, they very much need to co-ordinate and then produce it. They need mainly to commission a certain amount of good guidance that aids the sector, and that does not necessarily mean that they have to do that work themselves, although they would probably need to have enough of a team to be effective and to do the work. During CABE's most successful years, it produced the most amazing amount of very useful guidance for all parts of the sector which is still relied on.

Baroness Whitaker: Case histories of where it worked?

Simon Foxell: Partly case histories, partly "how to" guides for clients to achieve good design, and research projects that actually looked at where value was provided, or where it was not. We are lacking that being refreshed at the moment, so yes, there is definitely a gap there. They would not need to work much more collaboratively with the many others in the sector to make sure that this was not just government advice coming out but was good, widely accepted industry best thinking.

On the regional point, I think it would be very useful if the northern powerhouse, for example, had a built environment adviser with a degree of clout who could look at the

bigger picture of how that developed and how to achieve high standards, and not necessarily rushing in to do things cheaply when they could be done so much better with a degree of forethought.

Q329 Baroness Young of Old Scone: We have talked a bit about the removal of the national sustainability standards, and things like zero-carbon homes and the Code for Sustainable Homes going, which really talks to the issue of new build, but we have a huge property stock that is not achieving sustainability. Advise us on what you think needs to be done to get a head of steam on retrofit.

Simon Foxell: The most important thing is that we have good information about what is happening at the moment. Display energy certificates, which were about to be used, were vital information on how sustainable almost every building of any scale was, and at the moment they are only being produced on very few major public sector buildings. Real information on our building stock is essential for understanding not only what is going on and learning lessons from it but how to improve it. Improvements can only happen from a basis of reasonably good knowledge. There are a lot of theoretical improvements out there based on modelling that may or may not be good, and until we get feedback from the housing stock or the rest of the building stock, we will not know whether measures are cost-effective and are actually doing what they are said to do. Restoring the idea of display energy certificates, which the property industry is very keen on, is essential.

Beyond that, we need new programmes of upgrading existing stock, but at scale rather than relying on probably individual housing owners to upgrade one property at a time. That may mean that taking a street, an estate or a town at a time would be a very effective way of achieving it, not only because you can do it at scale but because the community together can go on the journey of learning how to live in upgraded building stock, how to make it work effectively, how to share that experience and to do so as a community rather than picking off certain individuals who might be keen and others who are unable to do anything because they are too poor or whatever.

The Chairman: Have you any knowledge of any town in this country that has actually done that? I see a head nodding in the public gallery. There is one that comes to mind which I had the joy of seeing last summer, and that was King's Lynn, which is obviously a very old town, but the necessity to increase the flood barriers was such that it generated a whole lot of enthusiasm, as it was explained to me, for making the place really good.

Simon Foxell: The main movement towards this is the Transition Town movement, which is very much a bottom-up movement for improving the sustainability and liveability of whole towns or sometimes parts of towns at a time. Some of the best examples of whole-area improvement are happening on the continent rather than here, where there are very substantial programmes that move through similar building types at speed, learn very well how to do it and do it at huge cost-effectiveness.

Baroness Young of Old Scone: Who drives them? Is it local authorities or the national Government?

Simon Foxell: Often local authorities. Sometimes there are major landowners who happen to own a large building stock who have been prepared to do that, and they are often done in combination with the energy companies on the basis that they need to be involved in the deal because the money that was going to them is going to go somewhere else.

The Chairman: Before I let you go, if there are any subjects you think we should have addressed or questions we should have asked or any information, and I am sure there is an awful lot, which we should further examine—bearing in mind we only have a few more weeks of work on this before we start drafting the report—we would be very grateful to you just for a scribbled note or even an idea or a few bullet points that you do not think we have covered adequately, although we could have covered it in other sessions, of course. You obviously have open minds, and you have been very generous with your time and your explanations, so thank you very much on behalf of the whole Committee.