

Want to help the UK economy? Invest in our creaking planning system

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By Shahriar Nasser

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Our poorly resourced planning system adds unnecessary obstacles to the kind of projects that are essential if our economy is to flourish once more, says Belsize Architects' *Shahriar Nasser*

There is a great deal of public discussion about planning, yet it remains very much a political football, tossed back and forth with lots of talk and little action. Meanwhile, the current shortcomings in the system remain a major drag on 'growth', the one thing universally accepted as the prerequisite for all the other public policy goals for which there is much aspiration but no cash.

We were ourselves reminded yet again how much good planning processes matter by a recent unsatisfactory and wasteful experience with an application for a very small project, to which I will return below.

There are planning challenges for projects of all sizes, though they differ very much in their form. You can distinguish, admittedly in very broad terms, between large, medium and small-sized applications, particularly in the resource's councils devote to them.

Large housing projects are generally able to get the planners' attention and get processed relatively speedily, albeit at some cost, and with the obvious risk of major public controversy. Nevertheless, councils have a considerable incentive to help progress proposals as smoothly as possible so that housing targets can be met.

Medium-sized housing projects get a reasonable amount of attention. There may be obstacles on the way and progress may be slower, but there is a system of pre-apps which, in our experience, generally works rationally, albeit with some cost, for developers who may have the resources to pay.

Small projects face different obstacles again. Planning resources are scarce, response times are a real difficulty but, most seriously, the staff assigned such cases may lack the experience and judgment to know what is important and what is not, and may often impose quite unnecessary restrictions.

Underinvestment leads to underpaid and demoralised staff. Mentoring is limited if it happens at all, and there seem to be no paths or timetables for how an application should be dealt with. Sometimes an application that could be determined within eight weeks takes eight months. If you are lucky, what might come out after all this time are a few very minor changes, maybe to the angle of the roof, to a material or to the size of windows. But are they really important and really worth this effort? If you are unlucky, you will be asked to withdraw, maybe more than once, yet still without clarity as to what is being sought. This is a system that costs, wastes time yet does not deliver.

Our recent experience provides a telling case study. Our client owned a small cottage within their own garden and was keen to make it more useable through a partial sustainability-led retrofit. The concept was to re-employ elements of the walls and foundations and then wrap these around with new cladding and add a side and rear extension as well as a new roof with a slatted timber rainscreen. The new design contains elements that serve to retain some memory of the original cottage.



Belsize Architects' proposed cottage retrofit

The application was refused. It emerged that the planner had not considered the application until the last possible day, there was no discussion and the grounds of refusal were not argued at all. No objections had been received. The planners said that, subjectively, they did not like the shape of the roof, as the original was pitched, and that the extension was too large, despite the fact that the proposal was within a large open garden with a number of other existing buildings and would be scarcely visible from outside the client's own property.

Delays and abandoned projects all come at a cost to growth, to employment and tax revenue.

What is needed is more, better-trained and better-resourced planners. Action on the RTPPI's strategic recommendations for investing in planning as an essential public service and supporting capacity building in public sector planning is not at all optional.

A planning system fit for purpose can make all the difference to whether we have a flourishing economy or not.

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