

Building Better Places – House of Lords Select Committee for the Built Environment  
Edge Debate held at the House of Lords on Monday 11 July 2016 at 6p.m.

Chair : Baroness Janet Whitaker (Select Committee Member)

Speakers :

Baroness Kay Andrews OBE (Select Committee Member)

Professor Matthew Carmona, The Bartlett, UCL (Select Committee Advisor)

Ben Rogers (Director, Centre for London, ex-Cabinet Office Policy Unit)

Introduction:

Janet Whitaker introduced the debate. She explained that they had bid to make the Built Environment the topic for the Select Committee because the last time Government had properly scrutinised it was when it produced the 1948 Town and Country Planning Act. Governments needs to encourage good place making so that people can thrive.

Presentations :

Professor Matthew Carmona gave an overview of the Select Committee's report. They had sought it use an evidence led process, based on 200 responses and 50 interviews. They wanted to look to the long term. He said the Farrell report was also taken into account. He said there will always be crises e.g. Flooding, which require immediate response, but there appeared to be very little long term strategy. We need to aim higher :

- National Government should set the ambitions, and Local Government should be empowered, together with the private sector.
- A Chief Built Environment Officer should be appointed who would produce an annual report, and take on the role of producing guidance/initiating research (similar to the previous role of CABE), rather like the role of the Chief Scientific Advisor.
- Government should lead by example.
- Local Government should appoint senior respected members to act as 'street tsars'.
- The design review process should be mandatory for major projects.
- The issue of sustainability needs to be set on a new trajectory towards zero energy growth.
- The Permitted developments' system needs to be changed – Local Authorities (LA's) need more power with regards to 'permissions in principle'.
- Changing demographics need to be taken into account.
- Housing – We need more. We should allow LA's and housing associations to borrow in order to build. Starter homes should be 'as well as', not 'instead of' affordable homes. SME's should be helped to get finance. LA's should be allowed to charge developers Council Tax if they do not build on their land. Viability Assessments should be 'open book'. The Planning System needs to be more proactive. There should be a duty on LA's to cooperate. There is a problem with a lack of skills. Neighbourhood planning needs to be simplified and groups need to be given the right to appeal.

Kay Matthews said that initially she was sceptical about the proposal to install a Chief Built Environment Officer. But she now believes that the report shows there is a need. This person should be a champion of the Built Environment, enabling coordination of policy across the many departments involved. They should head a small unit of experts. She said that :

- CLG has virtually no capacity.
- Place Making does not have enough significance in current policy. We are now seeing the price of that failure. Policy and planning are getting more fragmented. We have no national spatial plan, unlike many other countries. London and the City are dominant. With the loss of CABE we have lost the chance to have these conversations.
- Nearly everything is swamped by the challenge of housing, which is a risk for everything else.
- CLG, DEFRA, BIS, DCMS, DCLG and DfT have no collective way to assess what is happening. There is no capacity, focus, or incentive to link policy to research, or to test what will work for the future. This is a failure of the system. A Chief Built Environment Officer (CBEO) could identify the issues and speak for the built environment as a whole.

She cited various examples of where a cross-disciplinary, cross-departmental approach is required, such as mineral mining in the National Parks. She said that advice can be powerful if given to the right people at right time. A CBEO could warn of problem issues, be an advocate and spot conflicts.

Ben Rogers said that in 2008 he led a review of quality of place for the Cabinet Office (supported by CABE). Unfortunately this coincided with the banking crisis and DCLG forgot it. He said that the things people care most about are the things in their local area. One of the critical issues for the built environment is public health. London now has higher levels of obesity than New York. Pollution, congestion and housing are all critical. He supports the idea of a CBEO, but wonders if Chief Architect might be a better title. We need to get expertise back into the public sector. He would like the report to say more about devolution – more needs to be done at the local and city levels. Cities and towns need more resources. Cities should have tax raising powers. At a time of crisis it is hard to get central government to give away power. He suggested that the ageing population and social media could lead to more public engagement. City Hall should do more to engage the public and have a large city model. Although there is one at the NLA, that organisation is a bit too developer based.

The discussion:

Gregor Harvie : The report is a bit gloomy and backwards looking.

Nicholas Boys Smith : Agrees with the aims, but thinks government would be scared of a CBEO. Let's simplify the system. The codes should be clearer. We know what people like. They want beautiful housing. Planning should be strategic, not about the detail.

Sophia da Souza : It is good to learn from the past. Why can't we make better measurements and learn from them?

Chris Carr : Agrees planning should be simplified. It should be put back into the hands of the architect and developer.

Ed McCann : Noted that the role of Chief Construction Advisor has now been stood down.

Julie Godfrey : Asked if self-build was a way to engage people.

Richard Shennon : Adaptability is a main requirement.

Ziona Strellitz : She is concerned about the centralising tendency. She doesn't think the CBEO should be an architect. She is in favour of more Design Reviews as they allow many professions to contribute.

Matthew Carmona: The Select Committee definitely supports having more Design Reviews. The idea of the CBEO is not about streamlining, nor to follow a Blairite model. National

Government has a critical role in grappling with the problems. The recommendation is not for a single person, but for a small unit to be charged with looking at strategy and foreseeing crises before they happen.

Kay Andrews : It's not right to say 'centralisation versus localism'. We do not currently have a mechanism for looking at the issues at a national level. We do need localism as well. The problem is that we do not have the resources to have enough localism. Planning is about balancing issues and holding up standards. Simplification can be good, but we mustn't allow this to lower standards.

Ben Rogers : Standards did improve as a result of CABE. Education should include the environment.

Kay Andrews : The CBEO should raise the issues of education and post occupancy evaluation. When there was more public money in 2001 it was used to improve the housing stock. The State was seen as an enabler.

Nicholas Boys Smith : it might be that more consistency and predictability, rather than more simplification is needed.

Robin Nicholson : Rather than a physical model of London it could be good if all school kids built physical models of their own local areas.

Janet Whitaker : They hadn't addressed this, but could have.

Kay Andrews : People know when things aren't working on their estate. In Merthyr Tydfil they know what's wrong. These places can be improved.

Carol Riley : Neighbourhood plans aren't being developed and local people are prepared to put in a huge amount of effort. Communities must be listened to. We mustn't let this fizzle out. Implementation funding is needed.

Carol Hayden : We need to learn from what has happened in the past. They looked at private sector funding from 2006-9. This showed that you can't rely on private sector funding in the most deprived areas because of the current lack of finance. In Mosely they have been trying to bring housing into local housing association ownership, but have already been waiting a year. Neither local authorities nor bank will take the risk to provide finance.

Matthew Allon : He asked if the CBEO would add another layer of bureaucracy.

Kay Andrews : The CBEO should make things easier. They would be based in government, not in Planning Departments, and so should be able to engender a better climate. They would act as an advisor. They might suggest/initiate training for the planners.

Tim Forman : He agrees that a CBEO is necessary, but is concerned that it will be difficult to find the right person.

Michael Brooks : What happens if the CBEO has a different view from government?

Jason Longhurst : He is clear on the aims but says there needs to be clarity on the mechanisms for community engagement.

Anne-Marie Connolly : There are likely to be tensions between the aims of government and the CBEO. We must take into account the long term impact of the built environment on people's health.

Helen Muligan : It is important to get all the parts of government involved.

Jane Wernick : We really need a CBEO and their unit to act as an intermediary between all the different parts of government and to be able to inform ministers about all the built environment disciplines. Most MPs do not have knowledge of those subjects.

Harvey Russell : The historical environment can be seen as too difficult to deal with. It needs to be seen as a benefit. The continuous incremental changes in planning regulations

lead to a fear of their implications. We have been losing resources in our planning departments.

Simon Carm : The 'elephant in the room' is the actual politicians – the key is to find the good ones, such as Selwyn Gummer and Ken Clarke in their day.

Chris Carr : We are in danger of becoming bland.

Final summaries :

Ben Rogers : We need good people at the top of government. At the level of the neighbourhood and government, things have changed for the better in terms of neighbourhood planning. There is a lack of capacity, resources and leadership in local government. If we get some devolved government that would be helpful.

Kay Andrews : How will the CBE Officer and Unit relate to government. We currently have a treasury led and a growth led approach to housing, which is squeezing out quality. We mustn't let CLG and DH off the hook. Innovation comes from departments working together. The post will have to be seen to offer solutions for government, in order for it to be accepted. It needs to be a 'critical friend' to government. And whoever holds will have to accept that they may be removed if government doesn't agree with them.

Matthew Carmona : We need a theme free local government. Central government 'talks the talk' but is reluctant to release the funding. Neighbourhood planning is good, but it needs to be simplified. Things don't all have to be done in a statutory way. In national government everyone relies on many sources of advice, but much of it isn't that good. So the idea is that the CBE Officer and unit is that they can provide good information and advice.