

A better, more beautiful planning system



Nicholas Boys Smith, co-chair,
Building Better, Building Beautiful
Commission

On the one hand, Robert Jenrick, the secretary of state for housing, was kind enough to call it “seminal” and “one of the most important reports we’ve seen for a number of years”. Many of those who expected to hate it, to their surprise, ended up supporting it. On the other hand, it’s 178 pages long, and has 45 proposals and more than 100 actual recommendations. You know you should read the *Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission* report, but do you have the time? And what does it mean for you?

Underpinning our report was the very consistent evidence that the public has lost trust in the planning and development process, and in the quality of the places we are creating. “New places are designed by the wheelie bin operators,” as one of our many workshop participants put it to us.

The newspaper headlines focused on our proposals that the National Planning Policy Framework should be demanding more access to greenery, and on our proposals for 2m new street trees, urban orchards, and for re-greening streets and squares.

This is important stuff – we do need to re-green our towns and cities for the benefit of the air we breathe and our mental health. But it was arguably not the most radical of our proposals. Let me pull out four.

1. Level playing field

First of all, the report makes a case for evolving our planning system to be a more predictable, level playing field. We need to have clearer, shorter, more visual, form-based local plans which set out more clearly what is and is not acceptable.

Once approved, planning applications that accord with



Holborn Viaduct will boast a “living wall”

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the plan should be fast-tracked. As far as possible, we suggest that planning applications be digitised, including using AI.

Our system places too much focus on development control and not enough on plan-making. As one very experienced London official put it to us: “I was brainwashed into the world of thinking that development control is planning, but it isn’t. The plan-making exercise has been marginalised.”

We agreed. Over time, development management should become less important and actual spatial planning far more important.

2. Local views

The other side of this coin is that we need to bring the democracy forward. Local councils need to radically and profoundly reinvent the ambition, depth and breadth with which they engage with neighbourhoods as they consult on their local plans.

More democracy should take place at the local plan phase. Having shorter, more powerful and more visual local plans

informed by local views (“community codes”) should help engender this; but councils will also need to engage with the community, using digital technology and other available resources.

The attractiveness, or otherwise, of the proposals and plans should be an explicit topic for engagement, rather than being swept aside as of secondary importance.

3. Tax incentives

The report makes the case for equalising the tax treatment of different development models so that we cease discouraging a stewardship model.

At present, elements of the legal and tax regimes create a perverse (and unintended) bias encouraging landowners to sell land quickly, rather than taking an ongoing interest in the site (as landowners used to do). This needs to change. We also recommend that industry bodies, landowners and the government should co-operate to create a recognised “stewardship kitemark”.

For situations that meet the

“stewardship kitemark”, the public sector should make available long-term funding to support infrastructure, stewardship and placemaking expenditure.

4. Public land

Finally, there is an urgent need to make changes to the procurement targets, process and scoring within central and local government and Homes England for land disposals. Although there have been some welcome recent improvements, public land sales are far too infrequently taking any real account of quality.

As one of our advisers, Dame Fiona Reynolds, wisely put it: “To talk of beauty in policy circles risks embarrassment: it is felt both to be too vague a word, lacking precision and focus and, paradoxically given its appeal by contrast with official jargon, elitist. Yet in losing the word ‘beauty’ we have lost something special from our ability to shape our present and our future.”

Hopefully, this report will start to right that important wrong.