

Planning reform will protect us from aesthetically offensive development

To be involved in local government in the current climate is to be at the forefront of the very mixed response to the recent 'Planning for the Future' White Paper. Wychavon District Council occupies the lion's share of the Mid Worcestershire constituency, but also includes West Worcestershire, represented by Harriet Baldwin. Both are set to face a disproportionate increase in allocation from Whitehall, in spite of working hard over the past decade to bring their land supply and housing stock up to levels what would originally have safeguarded against such dramatic increases.

As a newly elected councillor, I spent time with the Wychavon planning department in order to better understand the development process. Speaking to the planning officers, I was struck by the complexity of what seemed an impossible balancing act. While interpretation of Government policy, as the criteria against which a prospective development is appraised, should function as the principle consideration, in reality it is often a game of cat and mouse with the major housebuilders. They can afford access to the best resources in order to best exploit that policy. At the same time, the major developers themselves are battling to satisfy shareholder expectations and maintain consistent growth in the midst of turbulent commodities markets, where the cost of raw materials and project delivery can fluctuate dramatically.

For this reason, Local Government planners often look at indices as indicators to predict developer activity and forecast the rate of development, in terms of the amount of units delivered against units approved. The difficulties are clear: a local authority is powerless to guarantee delivery of the units approved, so that multiple sites must be put forward as a contingency, and planners must work against an estimated completion rate, in order to satisfy delivery targets.

The recent White Paper represents a fundamental shift, away from measuring development purely in terms of units delivered. It recognises the limitations and failures of previous policy, which has empowered developers to deliver poor quality and aesthetically offensive development. While developers have lived up to the 'letter of the law' they have failed to embrace the *raison d'être* for development, namely to provide edifying homes fit and proper for human habitation, to contribute to the edification of the individual and families, to build stronger communities and reduce social isolation and loneliness.

The belief that place-making and urban design play a vital role in the edification of the human person permeates and underpins the current paper. The term 'beauty' appears on fifty two occasions in the paper itself. The ancient concept that has occupied the minds of philosophers since time immortal plays a pivotal role in unlocking the rationale behind the

latest planning reforms. Read as fragmented series of planning directives, the meaning can easily be lost on those who seek to compartmentalise aspects into positive or negative elements. However, 'Planning for the Future' must be read through the lens of 'Living with beauty', the report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. The report must itself be read through the work of the late Sir Roger Scruton, who asserted that anything built purely for function would not last, and indeed would inevitably become functionless, insofar as the pursuit of beauty, as a gateway to the divine, necessitates the import of aesthetics in all human endeavours.