

Planning a brighter future

Yesterday the Commons debated our planning system. At issue was the granting of permission to build new homes in Westferry, London, where they are much needed. Tower Hamlets Council failed to provide an answer on the planning application within the quite generous time limits laid down, so the decision fell to be made by the incoming new Secretary of State for the Environment. Opposition parties did not like the way he made it, and or did not like the decision.

Most people in the UK think there should be a planning system, but many disagree with whatever system is in place, particularly when it results in a decision they do not like. There are many people with land who would like to make a big profit by putting it forward for development, who find their land is not preferred. There are many others, often their neighbours, who think their local area has enough development and do not wish to see green fields built on or old buildings replaced by much larger developments . The tensions are understandable. The task for government trying to judge between the competing views is uncomfortable.

The aim of planning policy is to provide some intelligent framework for these decisions, setting out in advance through local plans where development is likely and where it is not. Years ago the system revolved around a fairly simply local map. The map would show through hatched markings which places were to be kept as green openspace and farmland, which remained as built up area and which parts could be used for new building. The built up areas could also gain special protections through area designation as a conservation area, or from individual building listings.

Over the years I have been watching planning it has got a lot more complicated, with local plans now going into huge detail and containing many subsidiary policies about permitted development. I am not sure this added complexity has produced better results or has been any better at allaying tensions over decisions. One of the worst features in my area has been from a landowner or developer gaming the system. They fail to build out the agreed permissions for new homes, whilst putting in for more permissions in close by locations,. It can be more profitable to trade planning permissions than to actually build and sell the homes. This undermines public confidence in the system. It can also lead to bad planning, with too many homes on floodplains or stretching local services too thinly.