

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.

Getting people back to work

Before the lockdowns there were some 5 million self employed people in this country. Most of them will continue as self employed but never take on a

first employee and start the progress of building a bigger business. They are very valuable anyway, offering goods and services in flexible and attractive ways. They are a crucial part of the UK economy.

It is now an urgent task to tackle the unemployment the virus has already created and the possible job losses that could follow as the furlough scheme is wound down. Today I would like your help, by asking what changes to law, taxes and regulations should the government make to persuade more of the self employed to take on that first member of staff or that first apprentice to grow their business and to help bring down unemployment?

Some self employed I know used to run small businesses, but gave up on them and returned to working on their own for themselves. Going over the VAT threshold caused a lot of administration and worry. Choosing the wrong employee could land them in difficulties, without the resources a large company has to manage the odd difficult staff member. Conscious of the many duties of employers, they decided they would rather spend all their energy on serving clients and customers themselves, and limit their business size to their own work rate.

I have taken up the cause of the self employed in various ways. I have asked for the end of the threat to change IR35 and prevent some people from being self employed. I was one of those who asked for a self employed version of the furlough scheme for those banned from working. I think the VAT threshold could be raised to help. I want the public sector to turn to small business and the self employed for some of their work where the flexibility and price are helpful. So often public sector contracts are too large for small business, and the procurement process is biased in favour of the large companies.

[A European recovery fund?](#)

Last week at the video Council of Ministers the EU began to consider the Commission proposal for a E750 bn Recovery fund. This had developed from a joint Franco German idea. The EU would borrow money, and spend it on grants and loans, with more emphasis on the deficit countries that took the worst hit from the pandemic.

In the hands of the Commission this has become a way of borrowing at EU level against the security of the revenues in the next 7 year cycle of annual budgets. The money would start to be borrowed next year, continuing over a three year period and gradually dispensed as a kind of addition to the budget. So it will not be a fast acting recovery fund which is needed this year and the first part of next. It also implies there will need to be some disbursements to the richer states as well as the most needy. The plan was to spend two thirds of it as grants and one third as loans.

So far the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark have said No. It needs unanimity to pass. They disagree with the idea of grants and especially with the idea of pooled borrowing where they will be partly responsible for repaying these debts. So far their governments have decided to speak for the voters. According to polls there are large majorities against common borrowing in these countries.

The Council and Commission have decided to return to this in July, hoping there might then be some give in these positions . Federalists see Covid as an opportunity for a major breakthrough to a bigger budget and some transfers from rich to poor, as in a single country. The danger is if they push too far in this direction they may give more encouragement to populist forces in several countries.

It is also interesting to see at the same time member states who say they want more integration rapidly moving to more state aids and more national restrictions on commerce and movement. The single market the EU claims to love is under pressure to allow national champions, national resilience policies and more barriers at borders.

[My remarks during the Statement on Statement on the Reading Terrorist Attack](#)

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I hope the whole House will join with me in sending our deepest sympathy to the friends and family of James Furlong and to the staff and pupils at the whole school in Wokingham where he taught. He was by all accounts an inspirational teacher who always went the extra distance for his pupils and was a very kind man who will be sorely missed. The community is obviously very shaken today by this news.

Will the Home Secretary intensify the efforts of the intelligence service, the police, law forces and the others as we have had too many of these mass murders in recent years and we want some reassurance we can get on top of this and save the lives of others for the future.

Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): My Right Honourable Friend is absolutely right and I too pay tribute to the shocking events that have happened and pay my respects as well to Mr Furlong. These are absolutely appalling events and attacks and all our sympathies and thoughts are with his family and his friends.

My Right Honourable Friend is absolutely right in terms of the intensification of the work that is taking place. This is crossing cutting across Government covering a range of measures – police, intelligence,

security. The Right Honourable gentleman also mentioned our borders and the work we are doing in terms of moving our borders, dealing with criminality checks – that is all ongoing work and it will, of course, be intensified.

Dear Constituent

Writing this letter is overshadowed by more sadness as we grieve the loss of life in Reading this week-end. We wish the police well with discovering who was involved and why, so prosecution can follow.

There is some good news about the pandemic. In the last week the latest chart I have been sent shows there were no new cases of the disease reported in Wokingham Borough and only one in West Berkshire. The pressures on the Royal Berks have abated, and I had no more complaints about the supplies of protective clothing or the availability of tests. NHS supplies are working well and testing capacity is greatly increased.

The government has given priority in all its decisions to getting the virus under better control and bringing down the death rate. It now is turning to its second important aim, saving livelihoods and allowing some recovery in business to save jobs. I have worked closely with Ministers on safe ways of working to get more people into work and more businesses trading, whilst encouraging more homeworking and remote working through internet technology wherever possible. I also urged the government at the start to provide financial assistance to people and businesses who temporarily were told not to work. The government came up with the furlough and small business schemes, which have helped many during a difficult time.

We are but part of the way through relaxations to allow more people to work and earn money for their businesses. It is good news that shops can now reopen, and many factories have returned to manufacture. We are now in the run up to two crucial dates. The first is July 4th, when it is likely hotels, restaurants and other leisure and hospitality venues will be able to re-open, subject to social distancing rules. The second is the new school year starting in September, when we hope the schools will return for all pupils.

Shortening the social distance from 2 metres to 1 is important to both these areas of life for re opening to have chance of some success. 1 metre is the required minimum recommended by the World Health Organisation. It can be made safer by the use of screens, air flow management, use of masks and other protective clothing, and one way systems for people where corridors and passages are narrow. Business and schools are currently working on getting the right configuration within their premises and thinking through how to operate safely.

I would like to thank all those teachers and school support and

management staff who have provided an educational service for a limited number of pupils on the school site and a digital service for pupils at home during the crisis. I wish all well in planning the right approach to a return to full time education for all, which may continue to need more digital input than before and some reorganisation of the physical space.

I and many of you have thanked the NHS staff many times for coping with the seriously ill during the height of the pandemic, and I do so again. The task now for all the NHS is to get the rest of the service back to normal. As the Health Secretary frequently reminds us, the NHS is open again for all those with serious conditions like cancer who must not be put off going for care in hospitals. The NHS also needs to set out a plan for tackling the backlog of non urgent surgery which has built up during the intense period of the virus.

Much now rests on the consumer. The majority have kept their jobs and have often spent less over the lock down, saving money on travel, leisure and a variety of services they were not allowed to use. We now need the Town Centres to be attractive and easy to reach to give the shops, cafes, restaurants and service providers every chance to rebuild their businesses and to tempt customers. I hope Councils will work with business to create a warm welcome in shopping areas, allowing good access.

In the days ahead we need both to avoid a major upsurge in the disease and to open up much more of our economy to save jobs. The financial support put in was necessary and has helped, but it is not an affordable answer for the future. It can only be a temporary measure, as it is all being borrowed. The future must rest on good co-operation over testing and tracing to keep the virus down, allied to safe rebuilding of as much of our former goods and services trade as possible so people can earn a living again.

I would also like to thank my office staff for helping cope with an unprecedented volume of emails and cases brought on by these extraordinary times and by the enforced temporary extension of government into so much of our lives.

Yours sincerely

John Redwood