

When we think of Town Planning today we tend to think of red tape and bureaucracy, the dreaded council regulator with a high-vis tabard and a clipboard standing between the greedy developer and the 'got nothing better to do' NIMBY objectors. We hear about endless delays in Public Inquiries on the nightly news and of Local Plans and Core Strategies which are constantly being updated without ever actually being declared 'up-to-date'.

Whatever happened to the visionary Town Planners of yesteryear who understood 'place making', who knew how to adjudicate the competing demands of private investors with the protectionist instincts of the



'Working proactively' with developers is a concept which planners find hard to grasp, says North Star director **DANNY SHARPE.**

Bold new national planning policy sounds great, but...

conservation lobby? From the early pioneering philanthropists of the late 19th Century who built 'Model Towns' for their workers, through to the Garden Cities movement, the planning system was founded on bold visionaries who understood fundamentally the role that private equity and investment needed to play to achieve success.

The post-War Town Planning Act of 1947 brought in many of the rules and regulations which still underpin the regulatory system we have now but the role of the planner as leader and adjudicator has been eroded over the years and, rather than balancing the competing aims of disparate groups and finding practical solutions which benefit communities, create employment and make the best use of land, we seem to have created a box ticker who is afraid of standing up to any of the consultees he/she is required to deal with. The highways engineer says the visibility splay is an inch too short; the ecologist says there might be bats present; the tree officer says the self-sown sycamore is more important than building housing for elderly people ...

The planners of old would have balanced all of these issues and afforded a level of priority to them. Today's planners simply defer to their colleagues and demand that the developer satisfies their every request.

But that all stops now: or so we are told. The newly-amended National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) says:

'Local planning authorities should look for solutions rather than problems, and decision-takers at every level should seek to approve

applications for sustainable development where possible. Local planning authorities should work proactively with applicants to secure developments that improve the economic, social and environmental conditions of the area.'

This couldn't have come at a better time for me. I have a two-acre brownfield site on the edge of town which currently contains a motley collection of tin sheds, an old brick building and a disused commercial business which has long since shut down, leaving a pile of rusty old equipment gathering dust on a vacant, tarmac-covered hardstanding.

I drew up my plans to demolish all of the existing structures, designed a new state-of-the-art two-storey care home, using local materials. I put these together with my demographic/demand information which showed a shortfall of more than 200 care home beds in an area populated by more than 14,500 people and with no elderly care homes at all, and submitted it to the local authority.

I couldn't wait for the invitation to sit around the table with the planners, engineers and assorted representatives of the District Council to discuss how WE could take this forward 'proactively', now they were no longer looking for problems and seeking to approve sustainable development applications in a proactive manner.

Okay, so they missed the deadline for an initial response, by two weeks or more but, to be fair, they are pretty short staffed. I sent an email to enquire when they might hope to get back to me.

And okay, I haven't actually had a reply to that, but I expect they have either forgotten

or have perhaps deleted it by accident.

I did get a reply... eventually. It set out all the problems inherent in the proposals. They accepted that the site was previously-developed, brownfield land, but thought that we should consider other sites first (which may or may not be available for sale) as being located in the town centre would be much better. I pointed out that it wouldn't be better as our residents would not be walking to shops and restaurants and that a more peaceful location at the edge of the town was actually more suitable but they said we should still examine every other site nearer to the town centre first. They said there may be bats. We said there might not be. They said the two-storey building would be visible from the main road. We said the current two-storey buildings were just as visible. They said we should undertake a heritage value assessment of the brick-built tin-roofed sheds and 1930s house which currently occupied the site. We said there was absolutely no heritage value whatsoever. They said, 'we know but you need to do it anyway....'

I have to say the bold new proactive approach to finding solutions isn't working so well for me. Clearly nothing has changed. Unless we get a Secretary of State who actually enforces these policy changes at national level then the reign of the clipboard clerk will continue and that is not how great places are made. Until that time I urge everyone to quote the new NPPF wording to their local authorities and demand they work proactively on solutions and seek to approve planning applications where possible. We can but try... ct