

Keynote Address

Roberta Blackman-Woods MP

I am very pleased to be at the Oxford Joint Planning Law Conference, and thank you for the invitation to speak. I do hope everyone has a really productive conference.

At first, I thought the setting of this speech would be totally dissonant to, if not entirely juxtaposed to, the case I am about to make for a transformation in our planning system to one more focussed on the needs of local communities, including those that are currently disadvantaged. But on second thoughts I decided that was not the case. Oxford more than anywhere is a place where ideas are created, discussed, and challenged. When thinking about the future of our planning system, that's exactly what needs to happen.

At conference, Labour will formally launch its new Planning Commission, which will seek to develop planning policies to serve not just the 21st century but also the 22nd century, and create a planning system more attuned to the needs of local people. And we need time and space to thoroughly consider and challenge ideas that will be able to deliver that.

So why do we need a Commission?

Up and down the country good planning is taking place and some new developments are truly stunning. RIBA have commented favourably on recent schemes by Greenwich Housing, Bristol CC, and Countryside Properties in Cambridge, which are all good examples. However, we all know that all too often we get a new development that has received planning permission in our current fragmented, partly privatised and under-resourced system, and as a result of that, the development is often of poor quality, is lacking essential infrastructure, is devoid of good public transport links, and pays little attention to issues such as climate change. And that is before we mention the existence of poor external built environments with little green space, and a lack of cultural activity that would enable communities to thrive. I know: I live in one in North London.

In these developments, despite the fact that they are mostly now privately rented and occupied by families, there is often little to support family life at all, and room sizes tend to be small.

And sorry to be political for a moment, but we have a Government that says warm words but has failed to deliver to planning departments the tools and resources required to plan effectively.

In March 2018, the Prime Minister said:

“We’re saying to councils ‘... you’ve got to take local communities into account; you’ve got to ensure you’ve got a proper plan for your area. If you haven’t got it, the Government will intervene’.”

In August 2018, the new Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (“HCLG”) said: “The garden communities programme is about the Government working with Councils and developers to get great homes in keeping with beautiful areas in England.”

Just last week a spokesperson for HCLG said: “Environmental protections is at the heart of our new planning rulebook, setting clear expectations for future development.” Really? Try saying that to those opposed to fracking.

But we know that the National Planning Policy Framework (“NPPF”) is not a blueprint to deliver good quality, community-led, environmentally conscious development. CPRE have said:

“the NPPF’s new housing delivery test will result in many local plans becoming out of date within two years. It is a speculative developers’ charter and will lead to the death of the plan led system.”

The Government has highlighted the importance of quality design to address any concerns about the impact of higher density development. RIBA has stated that they:

“... welcome this awareness and urges further action on how to design high density homes that are desirable; this includes urging the Government to give planners the resources, tools and powers to raise the bar of quality design in the system.”

RIBA makes a clear point that those resources, tools and powers are not there at the moment.

The NPPF is sketchy about local plans concentrating instead on strategic policies. So the general view appears to be that the revised NPPF is a missed opportunity to set out a strong role for planning and delivering the schemes and supporting the infrastructure that the country needs.

It does not do anything to support local plans as the Prime Minister said, or to protect the environment. Instead, councils have little say about fracking, delivering new towns, or driving up quality in new developments.

So I am therefore increasingly coming to the conclusion that good planning is often happening in spite of the current system, and not because of it. This is hardly surprising given that the Government's view, until recently, was that planning is a barrier to development and must be deregulated.

My colleague John Healey often talks about the Government's failure to deliver enough homes, at best less than half of the homes we need each year. And the provision of genuinely affordable homes for social rent within new schemes, is damning: just 2.5% of homes in 2016–2017; a fall of 97% since the Tories took over in 2010.

They have also failed to deliver on garden cities and new towns; failed to deliver on an improved natural environment etc. This is a searing indictment of what the Government is doing—or rather not doing.

I think that all of you are entitled to ask what Labour will do when we become the next Government.

First of all, we start from a very different place than the Government does, when we think of the role of planning. Labour believes that planning departments should be better resourced, and be given the tools to enable us to build and rebuild our country, not just to meet our present needs, but also to meet the future needs of the next generations.

Planning needs to be firmly embedded in our democratic system, so that taking part in workshops to together plan where new jobs should be, where new houses and parks should be located, and where transport routes should go, will all become as familiar to us as preparing for Christmas or for our summer holidays.

We believe that the current, largely market-based system is broken; is functioning poorly and has been allowed to move away from its founding purposes of planning environments for everyone; of being the glue that keeps communities together and helps to reduce inequality and improve access to services.

It has been allowed to become a system that is out of balance; a system that is biased in favour of large developers and finance corporations and is tilted in favour of those with the money to influence councils. Local people are side-lined. They think in the main that planning is something that is done to them. They might protest, only to have their opinions ignored by a planning committee, or overturned by an Inspector at appeal.

They see developers having an automatic right to appeal, which is not offered to the local people who are opposed to the scheme. They see local plans coming forward, often painstakingly put together with wide public consultation just to be ignored by subsequent speculative development. All of this contributes to a lot of the anger that I see out there.

Planning, in its current form, can do little to challenge existing patterns of inequality, or revive neighbourhoods and town centres that are suffering decline, or in some cases abandonment. But it doesn't have to be like this.

Kate Henderson, from the TPCA and now the NHF, reminded us recently in a *Guardian* article¹ that the Planning movement has been one of the most influential mechanisms for delivering sustainable development and social justice for over a century.

It began as a visionary and progressive force, a movement which blended utopian garden cities with environmental protection and a radical idea about redistributing resources for ordinary people. She called it “Back to the Future”; I think it is back to the drawing board for planning, if we are to properly plan our long-term future.

So Labour is launching a Planning Commission at conference; a number of you in this room are sitting on it and for that I am extremely grateful.

We want the Commission to explore what a planning system should be like in a 21st century democracy; what greater role can local people have in shaping the future of their area and planning in advance for new infrastructure; for jobs; for access to schools; new transport; greater access to green spaces and the natural environment.

Local people need to see that they have a say over decisions being taken about all the things they need to help them and their communities grow and prosper. We must not leave vast swathes of the country behind, so we need regional planning too, and a national system that transfers resources to areas where development by the market is most difficult.

We need different tiers of planning that link the national, regional, local and neighbourhood, and we also need a planning system that doesn't operate in silos, and where the full infrastructure needs of our communities are properly planned for and financed through short and longer term income streams.

It needs to be a system too that revolutionises skills training, so that we have enough people to take up employment in the construction trades. We need more opportunities for young people and others to learn new skills in modern methods of building, who are able to use advanced technologies to bring about a step change in construction and in energy conservation. We are under no illusion; this will not be easy.

But we hope that with the collective intellect and experience of everyone in this room as well as the planners, developers, and residents that we will talk with across the country, Labour's next manifesto will contain a new blueprint for planning built on principles of inclusion, social justice, and genuine environmental and social sustainability.

We look forward to having an ongoing dialogue with you about how best to achieve that.

Thank you.

¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2013/mar/22/back-to-future-origins-of-planning> [accessed 4 October 2018].