

## **Streamlining the planning system?**

Peter Stewart

*RIBA Journal, November 2008*

Once, submitting a planning application meant filling in a form with a biro, running off a few prints and sticking them in the post. It's not like that any more. Large applications are delivered on fork-lift trucks.

Nearly everyone involved in planning, on all sides, agrees that the system should be made simpler. The Government's current Killian Pretty Review is the latest in what seems a non-stop series of attempts to find ways of improving things.

The RIBA has submitted a response to the review which sets out a number of suggestions. These take account of feedback received by the RIBA's Practice Department from members, for many of whom the planning system is a never-ending source of frustration and worse. The most significant proposals are:

### *Small-scale development*

There should be a presumption in favour of development in the case of small-scale applications. Such schemes form the majority of applications and take up far more of planning departments' time than is necessary to serve the public interest, particularly in the large majority of cases where few people will be affected by what is proposed. A presumption in favour of development would be a major step in unblocking the system and freeing up the time of planning officers to deal with matters that merit attention.

### *8 week / 13 week targets*

There should be greater flexibility in performance targets to allow local planning authorities to agree with applicants limited extensions to the time allowed for a decision. Although at first glance not an obvious way of speeding things up, this in fact

deals with a significant example of the perverse consequences of 'target culture', whereby local authorities are penalised for failing to meet central government targets for determining applications, even where both sides agree that an extension of time would be the quickest and best way to get to a planning consent. The alternative, under the present system, is a refusal, on flimsy grounds, so that a decision can be recorded within the allotted period. This results in delay, then reapplication or an appeal, and lots more pointless paperwork.

### *Information supporting planning applications*

The response calls for proportionality in what information is needed - excessive levels should not be required for smaller scale projects. Most government guidance - including that on Design and Access Statements - states clearly enough that information requirements should be proportionate, yet local authorities demand more and more. Somerset architect John Jessop's now famous Design and Access Statement submitted in support of an application for a farm shed has already made the point clearly enough (see <http://tiny.cc/lfRrr>) - I hope he has made his own response to Killian Pretty.

### *Local Design Review Panels*

The RIBA's response states that local panels should be available to all local authorities, for pre-application peer and inter-professional design review. Again, some have suggested that this is as likely to slow things down as speed them up. But a well-run pre-planning review process, supported by a presumption that weight will be given to an expert panel's views, can help focus planning officers' minds on the big picture issues, and obviate the endless nit-picking attempts to micro-manage every last aspect of designs that bedevil so many planning applications. And while some architects might prefer not to have their designs reviewed at all, most would accept

that if it is to happen, it's better for it to be done by people with appropriate qualifications.

...

There is little doubt that the present planning system is now pretty dysfunctional. Development control is only one aspect of this, of course. Planning policy and guidance have also become complex and unwieldy, with more and more vaguely worded documents that confuse rather than clarify. But it is in the day-to-day business of how planning applications are dealt with by planning officers that the biggest problems lie.

The amount of attention devoted to an aspect of a planning application often seems inversely proportional to how much it really matters. Somewhere along the way, the system has departed from a clear sense of what is relevant to the public interest, and has headed off into a weird self-sustaining world that barely makes sense to those who deal with it daily, let alone everyone else.

The Killian Pretty review's strapline states that it seeks a 'faster and more responsive system' – pretty much the ambition of previous reviews and reforms. The review is predicated on making the system that we have work more effectively, rather than reinventing it, and the RIBA's response has been made in that spirit. Yet every time the system is reformed, it becomes more complicated. If you were inventing a planning system from scratch, you wouldn't start from where we are.