

Response to consultation

Barker Review of Land Use Planning (Treasury Pre-Budget Report 2005)

March 2006 (Treasury closing date: 28/03/06)

Background

Bradford Chamber of Commerce & Industry wishes to comment on the above consultation. Land use for industrial, commercial and retail use has become an increasingly important issue for many businesses in the Bradford district in recent years. We expect that trend to continue. An on-going regeneration programme – not only in the city centre but also in other areas of the district – is likely to lead to increased interest in and applications for land development locally.

Although Bradford is not, of course, unique, it does have particular topographical characteristics that have heightened the difficulties of land development in recent years. Measures to improve planning procedures cannot necessarily overcome all these difficulties but can help assuage the frustration and disillusionment felt by businesses that may be affected by this.

Bradford Chamber is accredited to the British Chambers of Commerce, which is in receipt of this paper, also sent to local and regional policy-makers.

Summary

- Bradford Chamber welcomes measures that will support better land use planning
- Urgent steps are needed to placate and support those affected by seemingly incomprehensible decisions, frustrating mechanisms, high costs and (real or potential) political interference in land use planning
- The planning system is perceived by many in business to be too ponderous, bureaucratic and evasive, with local authorities deemed to be in short supply of specialist staff/resources
- Better co-ordination and communication between planner, developer and other informed parties/partners could improve procedures and outcomes
- A negative impact of a planning application decision can have far-reaching consequences within a given area
- The economic imperatives of the planning system need urgent attention in many towns and cities
- It is important that, wherever possible, local discretion takes precedence over central direction so that particular circumstances are handled appropriately.

1. What measurements can make the planning system more flexible/responsive to delivering appropriate developments in the most suitable places?

- a) More flexibility and less regulation are needed in planning processes to ensure the most suitable outcomes in local land use development. The speed of an application should be seen to be moving at a decent pace to give encouragement to the applicant.
- b) More planning officers in local authority offices would also be welcomed to cover both current short-falls and the (hopefully) increasing numbers likely to be seen here soon.
- c) A perception of the local authority as 'developer-friendly' is important. While information on local and sub-regional perceptions can be provided directly by the Chamber, perhaps benchmarking of local authority planning departments should be considered to assist with what is viewed as a 'positive model' for developers.
- d) Negative perceptions could, perhaps, be changed and processes improved through improving communications and co-ordination between planners and other local authority departments.

For example, applications before planners could be discussed with other relevant departments – e.g. roads and highways, drainage/environment, leisure and heritage – for positive and thorough assessment to avoid refusal.

A meeting between the developer and relevant departmental representatives could enhance co-ordination/communication and hopefully improve the chances of success for the applicant.

2. What is the impact of planning on encouraging/impeding business investment?

- a) Insufficient consideration is given to the economic elements in planning. Companies need and appreciate certainty (as far as it is possible to ascertain) in relation to business development, forecasting, recruitment and investment, among other matters.
- b) A good quality, well-informed and well-resourced planning department within the local authority is vital for the prosperity of most towns and cities. Bradford is no exception, and faces its own particular difficulties in relation to planning and allocation of good quality employment sites.

With a higher than average number of listed buildings and a shortage of medium and large employment/industrial use sites, planning policies and procedures become even more important for investment, job creation, regeneration and sustainable development.

- c) Several of the negative impacts of poor planning processes/outcomes are covered in 1 above: negative perceptions, ill-feeling, declining investment, poor communications, relocation, job-losses and transfer of wealth and wealth-potential are some of the outcomes.

Other outcomes (or dangers), which are implied in the above paragraph, are the long-term decline for local communities affected by some of the previous points. Perception – as well as direct experience – can lead to dis-investment, which can create a 'vicious cycle' of

failure to develop land, renovate buildings, train/educate the workforce, or stimulate other commercial activities vital to economic well-being.

3. Are application costs deterring investment? If so, how to reduce them?

- a) We believe that application costs deter investment for the reasons outlined above in 1 and 2.

If a potential developer believes that the planners are 'on their side' there is more likely to be an interest in pursuing development projects. Some local authorities are viewed, rightly or wrongly, as more 'developer-friendly' than others.

- b) Bradford Chamber is opposed in principle to the proposal to introduce a Planning Gain Supplement (PGS), if it proves to be an accumulative tax. If so, it will be viewed as simply another fetter on land development, causing a negative impact on commercial, as well as housing developments. (A separate response to that proposal has been submitted.) However, if the PGS proposal is continued by government, one potential cost reduction would be to include/merge the planning application fee into the PGS.

4. Is the balance right between central direction and regional/local discretion?

- a) We are firmly of the view that central guidance should be informed and influenced by local circumstances, and not, as is often seemed, the other way round. Central direction should only intervene when there is no other possible resolution at local or regional level. Local discretion, therefore, remains paramount.
- b) If intervention does occur, it should be made clear beyond doubt how and why decisions are taken in the way they are. There are examples of applications 'called in' by the Planning Inspector that could, perhaps have been resolved without doing so. While it may be difficult to prove (or disprove) political expediency, allegations get made of political interference at the expense of other considerations.

5. Is there a need for SMEs to be more adequately engaged and represented in the plan-making process?

- a) We believe that engagement is best facilitated through business support organisations (including Chambers of Commerce) and trade bodies and that there is no need for a major re-think in this area.
- b) Some proposals should include Chambers as obligatory consultees, although the final decision on which ones should depend on the policy area, specific topic and the questions being asked.

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