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Response to The Barker Review

I'd like to respond to the Call For Evidence on the Barker Review of land use planning please. My apologies for a long letter but I feel very strongly about the proposals.

The main impression given by the Review is that it will, if implemented, result in economic considerations being put before social and environmental ones. It seems to be claiming that economic considerations don't currently receive enough weight – in my experience precisely the opposite is actually the case.

“Sustainable development” does not mean trading off planning criteria as Ms Barker thinks, it means **integrating** those criteria to obtain maximum **overall** benefit to society. From what I can ascertain Barker is proposing to assess plans solely against economic criteria which would be a total disaster for our quality of life. At the very least, the report only focuses on making things easier for ‘big business’ and they aren't generally noted for their care for social/environmental considerations. All of the questions in Annex 1 of the Call for Evidence are biased towards “economic” considerations. The word “economic” appears 13 times, “social” twice, and “environmental” 4 times. The questions are also loaded in that they suggest “too little economic consideration” as their primary option. That shows a pretty fair bias to me!

The report also ignores the fact that good social/environmental planning **is** good economic planning – more energy-efficient housing means less money wasted on energy use later, more people-friendly developments instead of car/developer-friendly developments means healthier and better-adjusted residents, etc. Numerous reports, including Government ones, have proved this link.

A shining example of where good social/environmental criteria have been integrated with good economic criteria is in Merton. They are achieving cuts in CO2 emissions by compelling new buildings to use renewables for power generation. Far from ignoring the scheme, the local B&Q, for example, embraced it by installing wind turbines on their building. They realised that encouraging the plan would increase the likelihood of them being able to make money by selling sustainable power-generation equipment in the shop. Woking have made similar improvements to their planning criteria and have consequently saved their tax payers £700k a year, and thanks to their environmentally-friendly sustainable energy schemes council tenants have had no increases in energy bills since 1992. So much for social/environmental bias causing cost **increases**. If you bias planning towards capital-cost cutting you will make it much harder for forward thinking councils such as these to implement their policies.

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My own county, Bedfordshire, is woefully stuck in the past with their old-fashioned energy-hungry planning, which is inflicting us with massive roadbuilding, and old-style “executive housing estates” despite being told by ODPM to create “sustainable communities”. One example is the proposed development on Dunstable’s ex-TriCo site – the Council and GO-East are not the least bit interested in sustainability issues, and unless you force them using planning laws they will do the minimum possible. Biasing planning even further towards big businesses’ demands will make the Council even less likely (if that’s possible!) to plan sustainably. Your “central direction” appears to be striking the right balance at the moment (before Barker’s comments anyway) but our “regional and local discretion” in Bedfordshire consists of completely ignoring your central direction.

The country needs “quality” planning not “planning pushed through at minimum cost to the developer”. I have first-hand experience of the latter, namely the new Billington Park and Sandhills estates in Leighton Buzzard which are part of your South Midlands and Milton Keynes “growth area” effort. They prove that developers will NOT voluntarily include social/environmental features. They are soulless “executive estates” with no infrastructure at all – no shops, no meeting places, no greenspace, no cycleways within the estate or to the town centre, and no pubs. I am **very angry indeed** about those missed opportunities because the results are destroying my town. As a consequence, all the residents are driving 1 mile to the town centre for everything, causing massive traffic growth and congestion. Further new housing is planned to be adjacent to our A505 “bypass” so it is logical to assume there will be a huge “unsustainable” increase in car commuting unless the plan gives MORE, not less, weight to social/environmental considerations. “Sustainability delivered by voluntary codes”? – no, I’m afraid that “on the ground” the opposite is happening. Oh, and no, “infrastructure” does not mean “more roads”!!!!

To try and be fair to them, conversations with our local planners have elicited many comments that they cannot cope with the speed of development in itself never mind take account of social/environmental aspects. I think this shows that far from the planning process holding things up it should be slowed DOWN to allow a balance to be maintained between economic/social/environmental criteria.

The Barker proposal will result in an exact repeat of 1960s tower blocks but on the ground. Life is about more than bricks and money but the Treasury seems to have no concept of that. You are proposing to swing the pendulum entirely in the developers’ favour – they only care about profit (understandably so) not the soulless legacy left for our children and environment. This is a strange approach for a supposedly socialist government.

I would also like to point out a technicality – Kate Barker is not “independent”, she was placed on the MPC by Gordon Brown. She has also been the CBI’s chief advisor, an organisation not exactly noted for their social/environmental sympathies. In fact, if you will permit me to digress slightly for a moment, one could argue that Barker and her colleagues at the Bank have CAUSED the mess we are currently in with housing by maintaining their policy of artificially low interest rates based on spuriously “low inflation”. One effect of this has been a massive increase in “buy to let” purchases at the expense of first-time buyers, funded by dodgy self-certified interest-only mortgages. The loans have been created by banks simply printing money, “fiat” money. This would normally be registered as inflation and reigned in by correct interest rates but that has not been allowed to happen during the loose monetary policy of the last few years. All this underpins the pyramid selling scheme that is our current housing market. Thankfully the situation now looks to be unravelling with most of the world raising its interest rates, and with our personal debt mountain (which has doubled to 1.3 trillion over only 5 years) now teetering dangerously. It seems to me that demand for “investment” housing is about to take a huge downturn and your assumption that we even need more housing at all will become suspect. Young people are simply priced out - first-time buyers are at the lowest levels ever recorded - and we need a price drop not more property for “investors” propped up by lax lending. Since you cannot afford a price crash because that’s all that’s been holding the economy up, you will just allow us to increase our debts instead. Focussing purely on economic planning will allow you to justify that approach.

Kate’s lack of independence immediately leads me to think that the results of the consultation will be skewed to what the Treasury wants to happen, and that is a relaxation of social/environmental planning constraints.

From my experience, the Government's record on environmental matters is poor and is mainly window dressing, a glaring example being transport where integrated schemes only receive a minute fraction of spending, roads and airports expand uncontrollably, while at the same time Tony claims climate change is one of the biggest threats we face.

Implement the Barker proposals and you will put another nail in the coffin of our QUALITY of life which at the end of the day is the whole point of it.....

Yours sincerely,

Chris Stevenson

On behalf of South Bedfordshire Friends of the Earth

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