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Opinion: Government needs to act on fees

Davis spells out planning fees crisis

Government dawdling over fees will stifle planning process

Westminster's economy is under threat because government delay in approving increased planning fees is threatening the ability of the planning system to meet demand. That was the warning from Councillor Robert Davis, deputy leader of Westminster and cabinet member for the built environment.

Speaking at NLA's conference this month, he said the government's insistence that planning fees be kept low to encourage development was "naïve – keeping the fees low will move us to a tipping point. Sadly, I believe the tipping point is fast approaching."

"Our role is to maintain and improve the city for residents, workers and visitors," insisted Davis. But the current system, which prevents full recharging of costs, is hitting Westminster hard. While many other authorities are seeing reduced development activity, "we have bucked the trend" with an increase to more than 12,000 applications in 2011.

"The question is how to facilitate development by handling applications quickly," said Davis. While there has been consultation on how to change the system, "I'm alarmed about the lack of progress".

Davis said he believed developers accepted the need to pay for advice but in

the current budgetary environment posts would go unfilled, and there would be redundancies, "to the detriment of development".

He said the council had received support from the Westminster Property Association,



Davis: alarmed by lack of progress on fees

"but this can't go on forever - Westminster is already doing everything it can."

"David Silverman, Chairman of WPA, commented: 'We must not underestimate the importance of a fee structure which underpins an effective planning department. The delays are damaging to London's economic success. The WPA is clear – and has

said so to ministers – cost recovery through fees is consistent with the growth agenda. The introduction of a fee for Planning Performance Agreements is not a long term solution."

Davis also spoke about Westminster's desire to encourage a mixture of architecture and the need to get away from "glass box" office blocks. He pleaded for more finely detailed masonry and fenestration, and challenged delegates: "Will the buildings of today be great examples of the Elizabethan era?"

He drew attention to some successes. Leicester Square is undergoing a makeover to be completed in April. "It will be a shiny new home for the film industry," he promised.

Crossrail was a vital boost to the national, not just the local economy: "The disruption has been substantial," but the benefits would be worth the trouble. Victoria too was undergoing a transformation, "with a number of projects already under way. And the next challenge will inevitably be HS2."

The council wanted to relaunch its public realm improvement scheme he said, adding: "We will not introduce the Community Infrastructure Levy until we are statutorily obliged to." ■



Squire to replan Shell Centre on South Bank

Canary Wharf Group and Qatari Diar this month appointed architects Squire and Partners to masterplan the redevelopment of the 5.25 acre Shell Centre on London's South Bank for a mixed-use scheme.

Meanwhile office take up on the South Bank was stronger than expected according to agent Farebrother's latest report. It increased last year by 33% over 2010 to 872,000 sq ft.

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BAYSWATER – MIXED USE

Derwent gets a positive steer to redevelop Queen's Cinema in Paddington for flats

Derwent London's application to redevelop the Queen's Cinema at 96-98 Bishops' Bridge Road, W2 has been granted by majority.

Cllr Boothroyd objected to the contribution in lieu of providing affordable housing on site, which was not compliant with policy and questioned why no affordable housing providing was proposed on site.

A redevelopment, designed by Stiff Trevillion, behind the retained front facade for a mix of uses comprising 16 residential flats, A1 or A2 unit and parking was proposed.

Officer Amanda Coulson said: "It's very distinctive art deco building. It's the former Queen's Cinema. It's vacant and was last occupied as TGI Fridays. It's an unlisted building of merit in the conservation area.

"It's an interesting design. We have objections from the Cinema Theatre's Association who want more of the facade retained.

"On the ground floor will be A2/A1 unit and nine car spaces. There will be public realm works to the Queensway side of the building. The applicant will close the western lane on Queensway and create a new public space with terraces and cycle parking.

"The proposal includes 16 private flats. It's set back to mitigate impact. It's a visual improvement and will enhance the conservation area. The applicants have increased their offer for affordable housing. There is a letter of support from Cllr Brahams and it's supported by the residents' association.

"There are two main issues. One is the affordable housing. The applicant isn't offering it on site but a financial contribution in lieu. That was £500,000. It has been increased to £700,000. It still falls below the policy sum which is £1.34m.

"The applicants argue we should accept the lower payment, particularly with public realm works. This would be £440,000.



Queen's Cinema, Bishop's Bridge Road



The replacement scheme, designed by Stiff Trevillion Architects

"Our viability assessment said the applicants could pay it but the applicant disagrees.

"We agree it's a superior design and we get a building brought back into productive use and get rid of the restaurant and get a retail unit to enhance the district centre.

"There have been a number of objections from Pickering Mews leaseholders. The design has been tiered back to protect the light to this property. However there is an issue of enclosure and overlooking.

"The other issue is parking. Nine spaces are proposed and the highways manager wanted them to be communal but the applicant doesn't want this as there is a car club nearby and public transport is good."

Cllr Davis said; "People are pleased it's to be brought back into use. Residential has to be the least impactful.

"In terms of the affordable housing, a compromise has been made to get this moving. The only issue is the use of the retail unit. It's crucial we have an active A1 frontage and not A2. We need to revive the retail and prevent supermarkets as there will be an impact of deliveries which will affect amenity. We can't grant it tonight as we are only required to give a steer but I would agree it."

Cllr Summers said: "The retail is a strong element of the application and it should be A1. It will be major boost to the local area. In respect of the design it's outstanding.

"We don't want a vacant building but want

something which is outstanding and for me affordable housing isn't an issue."

Cllr Boothroyd disagreed: "I think it's attractive. It's a 21st century interpretation of art deco. It's been designed sensitively to cope with it and minimise the impact. I also agree the retail unit should be A1.

"On the affordable housing I am in disagreement. I am not entirely sure why there is a commuted sum offered. It's got a large frontage and we could fit in a second entrance and provide affordable on site.

"I also don't understand how highways and public realm works mitigate the lower -than-policy sum. We have a viability assessment which says it could be achieved. ."

Cllr Mitchell said; "I agree with my colleagues' comments on this. On the point about the commuted payment for the off-site affordable housing the wider community benefits lower payment is worthwhile to bring this site back in to use.

Cllr Davis said; "By majority we are happy to grant. We are relaxed about the parking but the unit must be A1 only, no supermarket. We are in principle going to grant."

Cllr Boothroyd said; "I would like to record my dissent on the affordable housing contribution." ■

The applicant was Derwent London, the agent was Turley Associates

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