

Development – *why we hate it and what can be done to make it better*

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When we build let us think
that we build forever.
Let it not be for present use
alone; let it be such work as
our descendants will thank
us for. **John Ruskin**

Ruskin's words were cited in a speech by Robert Jenrick, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in follow up to his White Paper, 'Planning for the Future', published for consultation in August 2020. Whilst Ruskin was advocating the Gothic Revival, Jenrick borrowed these words in support of the Government's ambition to undertake significant reform to the current planning system.

THE PROBLEM

In 1947 Clement Atlee's Government passed the first Town and Country Planning Act. It often happens that when regulations come into play they snowball and, indeed, over the last 70 years planning policy at both national and local level has become significantly more complex. It now takes on average seven years for a Council to prepare a new local plan, and will take at least five years, and often longer, for a developer to gain consent for a scheme of any size. There has been a proliferation in the number of groups that must be consulted. All this takes time, and it is often impossible to reconcile conflicting views. It can become a war zone and, all too often, a race to the bottom, with any initial

vision and ambitions for a scheme becoming diluted as developers – in a desperate attempt to secure planning consent – make changes that they hope will appease single-interest groups. This is particularly likely if there is a time-limited option on a piece of land, or if the bulk of the funding necessary to enable the project to continue is contingent upon securing planning permission. This increase in delays and financial risk has pushed many smaller developers out of the market. As a consequence, whereas 30 years ago small- and medium-sized



Wildflower meadows in the 'Suitable Area of Natural Space' (SANG) at Nansledan, with the development in the background

developers accounted for 40 per cent of the housing market, today's figure is just 12 per cent.

The void left by these small developers has been filled by the big, plc housebuilder firms. Their size and financial strength enables them to stay in the game. However, they need to deliver returns for their shareholders, so there is pressure to standardise their 'product' with the same bricks, windows, roofing materials and so on in the interests of economy. Everything is focused upon minimising expense and short-term financial return.

Another aspect of this problematic short-term thinking is that a Council is only required to have a five-year supply of housing land. The reality is that development sites in the UK rarely sell more than 100 houses per year. This is the normal rate of absorption into a community. Any attempts to increase this rate will almost certainly result in a flooded market, pushing sale prices down, hurting financial margins and resulting in cut backs to the quality of materials, green space and so on. The result of such short-term thinking is the proliferation of bland, monocultural housing estates that blight every corner of our country, where there are inadequate green spaces for sport and recreation and where residents need cars to reach undersized town centres.

County Highways Officers insist that each new street tree must have a tree-pit to contain the roots: these cost

between £3,000 and £5,000, so planting new trees is often avoided. The requirement to deliver green space is measured in accordance with Fields in Trust standards, frequently resulting in 'pocket parks' and other small green elements. Significant new green infrastructure can only be funded by large-scale development.¹

Whenever the prospect of a development near us is mentioned, most of us immediately start to think of reasons why it should not occur. The whole concept of development has become unpopular. As a result, there is political pressure for yet more regulation to curb the worst excesses of the plcs. It is a vicious circle, and we need to find a way to break it if we are to recapture our ability to make better, and more sustainable new places.

So Jenrick is right. The current system is broken. At a time of unprecedented need for new housing, it needs to change now, and quickly, if we are going to have any chance of getting it right and creating good new urban places. It is our one chance. If we don't get it right, we will go on creating bad new places that are unsustainable in so many ways, and do too little for the health and wellbeing of residents. Once a bad new place has been completed, it is almost impossible to improve it because of fragmented ownership and the cost of remedial work that will be not funded by further development. The stakes are extremely high, and the Hampshire Gardens Trust is right to be very concerned.

SOME SOLUTIONS?

HRH The Prince of Wales has been working for the past 30 years to campaign for change through his Prince's Foundation, through the pioneering work of the Duchy of Cornwall at Poundbury in Dorset and, more recently, at Nansledan, on the edge of Newquay in Cornwall. At Nansledan the local authority encouraged the landowner to 'forget normal planning policy' and plan for 50 years. At that time, in 2003, Newquay had a permanent population of 22,000 people, growing at the height of summer to over 110,000. The entire economy of the town was focused upon high volume, low spending tourism: it was run down, depressed and struggling.

Local interest groups were set up, and a six-month public consultation identified the needs of the local community and ways in which the local economy could be strengthened and diversified. This process established the brief for a long-term masterplan that includes not

¹ Fields in Trust Guidance was first published in the 1930s with a broad recommendation that 6 acres (2.4 hectares) of accessible green space should be provided for each 1,000 head of population, to enable residents of all ages to engage in sport and play. www.fieldsintrust.org. It is adopted by 75 per cent of local authorities.

Photo courtesy of Hugh Hastings



Left: One of Nansledan's clusters of community allotments

Below: Wildflower meadows in the SANG at Nansledan with a new gateway through an historic Cornish hedge-bank



Photo courtesy of Hugh Hastings

only homes and employment spaces, but new schools, a church, a railway station, a market street (a sub-centre to the main town centre), allotments and play spaces woven through the new urban areas, with community orchards. A linear park along on margins of a stream runs through the middle of the scheme, and there is a new Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG).² At its most basic, a SANG must be a circular walk of a prescribed length through countryside that feels more natural than an urban park, where people can exercise and empty their dogs.

To date, most SANGs in England do not lift the heart, so the exam question at Nansledan was how could it be done better? Advice was sought from the Micheldever-based ecologist Ben Kite and the Alton-based landscape architects Fabrik, led by Andrew Smith and Simon Greig. Kite identified a meadow of unimproved grassland in a corner of a small farm on the edge of Nansledan. Other improved grass areas have now been re-improvised and sown with a wildflower mix to match the species in the unimproved meadow, thus re-establishing indigenous wild flowers across the farm. A herd of South Devon beef cattle, a local breed with a docile temperament, now live on these new meadows: they help to sustain the wild flowers and, over time, there will be a supply of local beef. Residents from Nansledan will be able to walk their dogs from their new homes through wildflower meadows populated by a herd of beef cattle.

Food accounts for about 23 per cent of our carbon footprint, and so at Nansledan there is a dedicated food

strategy to help create a more sustainable development. Streets are planted with edible plants and fruit and nut trees (carefully thought about at the design stage and sited where possible to avoid expensive tree pits) and pollination is aided through the provision of bee bricks for solitary bees in boundary walls. As advised by the RSPB, there is one swift box per house as part of a wider ambition to strengthen and diversify the ecology both of the development area and its hinterland. There are new allotments, play space is integrated within residential squares, and significant new community-run orchards are planted with Cornish varieties of apples and pears. The first of these, Newquay Community Orchard (www.newquayorchard.co.uk), established and run by the visionary Luke Barclay, not only provides another source of local food, but creates an environment where residents of both the new and established parts of the town can meet. They work too with ex-offenders and people with learning difficulties to give them new skills and help them to integrate with the wider community. They run courses for the local schools to help nurture children's interest both in gardening and where food comes from. The primary school was finished in 2019, the first new school to be built in Cornwall for over 30 years, and the Academy Trust that runs it ensures that its curriculum embraces sustainable patterns of living: children are being taught about the natural world and how to grow their own food.

Nansledan is popular as a result of the landowner working in close partnership with the local community,

with a commitment to meet local needs and to put as much money back into the local economy as possible. The original allocation of 400 homes has grown to the current 4,000, with a commitment that 30 per cent of these should be affordable and that a minimum of one employment space is provided per household. Poundbury, where similar principles have been applied, has achieved a rate of over one job per dwelling. A new development at scale will spawn its own needs: with fibre-optic broadband in every dwelling, there is a lot of home working; there is an appetite for the small enterprise units woven through the scheme; and there are other, more conventional employment opportunities.

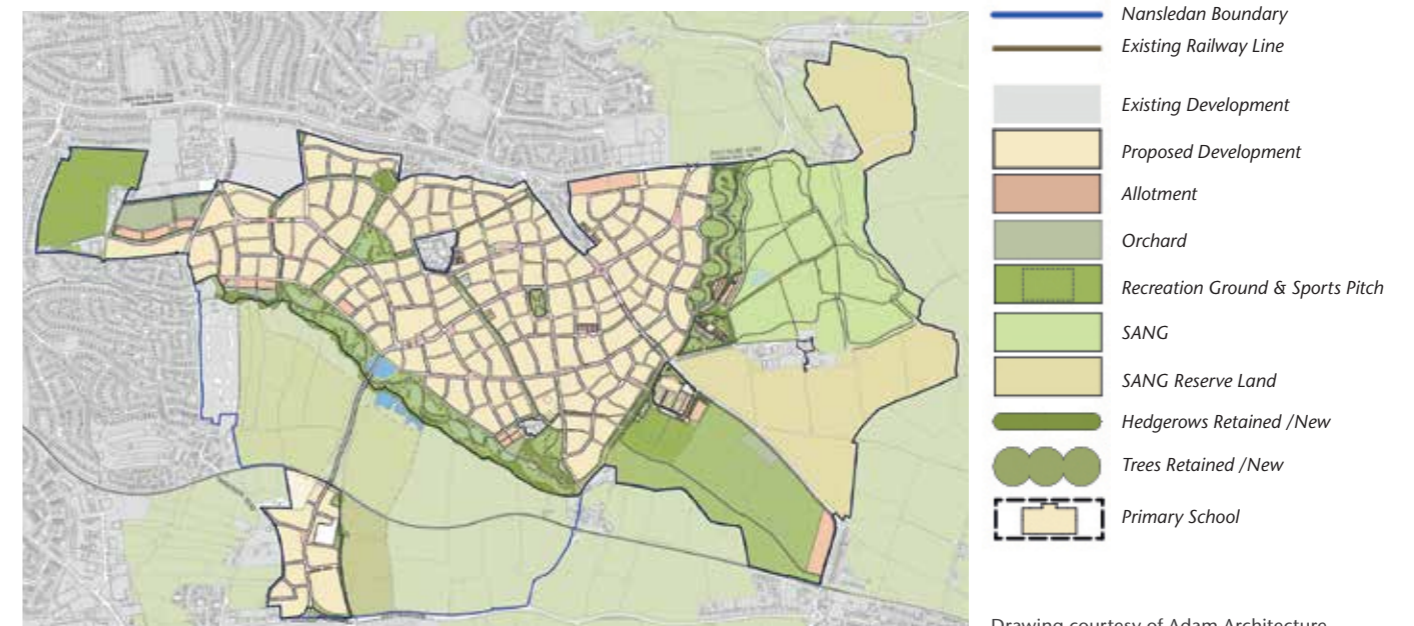
Most landowners sell land to developers at the outset and then have no further involvement. But the Duchy has pioneered a new partnership model, a common aspiration contract, that requires developer partners to deliver the landowner vision, embracing the developers' commercial acumen and technical skill but without ceding design control. The landowner's long-term interest in a development project enables them not only to think beyond the normal planning time-frame, but also to ensure that a proper system of stewardship is in place to secure the delivery of the original vision and thereafter, through covenant control, ensure that the new place is properly looked after: something that the planning system cannot control.

Both Poundbury and Nansledan were cited in 'Living with Beauty', the final report of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, co-chaired by the late Sir Roger Scruton and Nicholas Boys Smith. It was published in January 2020 and shortly afterwards two accompanying technical reports by Knight Frank (www.knightfrank.co.uk) were published: 'Building in Beauty' and 'Cost and Value'. These present a cogent argument that the stewardship model pioneered by His Royal Highness delivers not only more sustainable new places, but also better commercial values in the longer term for all concerned: better social outcomes and happier, more healthy lifestyles where most, if not all, day-to-day needs can be met on foot or by bicycle. It paints a compelling picture.

Across the country, other landowners now are beginning to realise that there are new ways to conceive and control good and more sustainable new development. Too often their ambitions are still being thwarted by the current planning system, but we can hope that they will yet triumph.

In Hampshire we are fortunate that several of the larger sites that either are in the process of securing planning consent or are under construction, are being led by committed landowners with similar visions to those advocated by the Duchy. We hope that, in time, we will see new developments emerge that meet those vital and timeless ambitions advocated by Ruskin.

NANSLEDAN MASTERPLAN



Drawing courtesy of Adam Architecture

² A SANG is intended to protect a Special Protection Area, or SPA, that forms part of a European-wide network of sites of international importance for nature conservation established under the European Community Wild Birds and Habitat directives.