

PLANNERS HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN STIMULATING RECOVERY

Planners are sticking to the regulations and not using their discretionary powers

Leading consultant surveyors, Januarys is calling on planners to work with developers and use their powers to extend planning permission periods particularly on complex or strategically important developments.

Under current planning regulations, the default provision is that developments must begin within three years of planning permission being granted.

"However," says Justin Bainton, an Associate of Januarys "in the current difficult economic climate the three year time limit is actually stifling development, whether inadvertently or otherwise.

Planners do have the discretion to extend that period for up to five years, or longer still if they consider it necessary or appropriate and provided that the longer time period forms part of the Planning Permission, the three year restriction can be overcome. The problem is that too many planners are sticking to the letter of the regulations and not exercising the discretion vested in them.

"Where developments are complex or where they are of economic importance, for example on major mixed use developments, business, science and research parks, the three year time limit may well block development as many schemes simply cannot be brought forward in that time scale.

"Also, the fact is that development finance from banks is hard to find. Banks are simply not opening their vaults to fund what in a better market would be extremely viable, essential schemes, but now are perhaps simply viable schemes!

"Many developers are facing a situation where their planning permissions are due to expire. When that happens the planning permission has to be applied for afresh and with complicated schemes Planning Application fees, including the costs of commissioning a design team can spiral up to tens of thousands of pounds. This is particularly so if the development needs invasive ground surveys, highway reports, flood risk appraisals, ecology reports and market appraisals."

Januarys believes that planners should be working with developers to identify schemes that fall into the categories of 'complex' or 'strategic' and recommend time extensions at the Planning Application stage which are more appropriate and thus make use of their discretionary powers.

The reluctance of planners to use these powers isn't just stifling the prospects of recovery in the wider economy, it is also inhibiting strategic planning for areas around Cambridge like its business and research parks.

“For example,” says Justin “the property needs of R&D companies are often complex and need several years of analysis before they can be brought forward. The time from a decision being made through to the letting of specific contracts can easily exceed three years. This makes it very difficult for expanding research and science parks – some of which are international centres of excellence – to give firm commitments to new or existing companies.

“The irony is that these are the very companies the Government is keen to promote as they add immeasurably to our international reputation.”

Previously, developers who ran out of time could apply for a simple extension of time but all that changed in 2004 when the current three year time limit was introduced.

“We are urging planners to use the powers they have to extend the implementation period and so stimulate our economic recovery, says Justin adding: “The Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Opposition have repeatedly called for new thinking to make the economic challenges we are facing as short and shallow as possible. Surely this is one very easy way of doing just that.

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