



Revised planning policy offers opportunity to limit parking at new developments

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In 2010 Eric Pickles, that intellectual giant of the Coalition Government, scrapped the planning guidance on raising the densities of new housing development, which he had inherited from his predecessors. He also outlawed maximum parking standards and (later) delivered a rant about “penalising motorists” into the National Planning Practice Guidance. At the time I wrote: “Sooner or later housing shortages will force both [central and local government] to look again at urban intensification.” Eight years later there has been a partial U-turn.

The recent changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (LTT 3 August) offer a bigger opportunity, and a bigger challenge, than most planners, transport planners and city leaders probably realise. The NPPF now tells planning authorities to “seek a significant uplift in the average density of residential development” in “city and town centres and other locations that are well served by public transport”. Maximum parking standards, which are generally discouraged, are considered appropriate in such areas.

In making these changes, the housing, communities and local government secretary James Brokenshire is embedding the principle of ‘Transit Oriented Development’ (to use the international phrase) into government policy. The references to parking standards were introduced late in the revision process. Parking standards and parking controls remain touchy subjects for politicians but someone in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) must have pointed out that you cannot densify (too much) without addressing the problem of limited space for parking.

So, what difference will this new policy make? In town and city centres, probably not much. It may help to swing a few arguments in favour of building upwards but high-density regeneration of central areas has been a feature of most cities and larger towns for some time. The new opportunities and challenges will occur in the “other locations well served by public transport”.

The phrase “well-served” has not yet been defined. The National Planning Practice Guidance will be updated in due course but defining “well-served” will probably be left to local discretion. The distinction will not be black and white; modest densification may be appropriate along a high street served by radial buses, whereas taller buildings may be planned around many railway stations.

I was reflecting on these issues when I was invited to address the Scrutiny Committee of Guildford Borough Council on ‘Modal Shift in a Context of Housing Expansion’ recently. Part of my presentation was about best practice in European cities and a few British cities. Good practice can be found in many British city centres, but I have often been asked: where

are the good examples of well-planned urban extensions? From a transport perspective the answer to that is very simple: there are a few in Europe but none in Britain (look at the modal shares – not the claims of promoters and advocates).

What would good practice look like? Even without considering anything radical, like car-free neighbourhoods, we can start by looking at existing town and city centres. In Guildford, an affluent town with very high car ownership, in the town centre wards a quarter of households don't have a car and only a minority drive to work. Why? Because it is "well served by public transport" of course, but also – and more importantly – there isn't enough room for everyone to own, park and drive as many cars as they want, so parking is controlled and some streets are pedestrianised or blocked off to through traffic. Housing and other activities are mixed, often in the same building.

If anyone was serious about Transit Oriented Development – or about raising densities – outside town and city centres, those are the conditions they would need to create. So far in Britain housing urban extensions have always been built at suburban densities with sufficient parking to satisfy demand. A few attempts have been made to build district centres at higher densities but never big enough or dense enough to create those town centre conditions. Opportunities to capitalise on good public transport are routinely wasted. The area around Bristol Parkway station is one extreme example. The last greenfield land around one of the best-connected stations in the country is currently being developed at suburban densities with uncontrolled parking and a new road connecting the housing to the M32.

In new settlements, such as Cranbrook in East Devon, where the authority succeeded against all odds in getting a new station, and Cambourne in Cambridgeshire, where a bus rapid transit is planned, the same mistakes are being made.

Whether the new policy makes any impact on densities, housing delivery or traffic generation will ultimately depend on political decisions, such as imposing higher densities, traffic-free areas and controlled parking from the start of new developments. But transport planners can help to change the mindset that regards all development outside city centres as suburban and car-based.

Guildford is a greenbelt authority caught between pressures to build more housing, conserve its countryside and stop its traffic getting any worse. Two new stations are planned east and west of the town to serve new housing. The developers of the eastern site are considering a district centre next to the planned new station on the line to Waterloo. That would be as good a place as any to start a quiet revolution.

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