

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Build! Build! Build!

I have been dreading this day, when I have to start thinking about what Gromaticus will say in October. Where do I start? Will anything I say now still be relevant then? It seems best to look at issues that are likely to be relevant in the slightly longer term, regardless of what may happen in the rest of 2020.

The most obvious one is the pressure to de-regulate and 'streamline' the planning process in order to build more housing and to promote economic growth. I touched on this subject when I discussed Brexit in a recent issue,¹ but it's worth going into a bit more depth, for which I shall rely on information provided by the ClfA (Chartered Institute for Archaeologists).

The NPPF (Nation Planning Policy Framework)

We must remember that the context for the management and protection of the historic environment comes from the NPPF. This could be bypassed by removing, in one way or another, the need to apply for planning permission for a particular project. One way that caught my eye is the automatic granting of permission in principle to housing sites in local and neighbourhood plans and on brownfield registers. This means that planning permission could be granted without appropriate archaeological assessment and (if necessary) evaluation. Further, the ability of planning authorities to apply conditions when granting planning permission is also under threat.

Such conditions are essential to ensure that archaeological safeguards are in place and that public benefit is delivered by the subsequent development. Since 2017, it has been possible for the Secretary of State to prevent planning authorities from imposing pre-commencement conditions. All in all, it is becoming progressively more difficult to defend

the historic environment and hence the common good, even within the existing NPPF. At the very least, these threats would greatly increase the workload on local authority historical environment and archaeological services, which have been seriously reduced in recent years and struggle to cope with even the existing situation.

We need to stress that much-needed housing development is not just about building housing, but about building communities which are able to create, maintain and advance social cohesion and personal well-being. It follows that we must be able to demonstrate the public benefit that comes from the proper archaeological involvement in large-scale development. We all feel that, but how do we measure it and demonstrate it convincingly to others?

Postscript

Since writing the above, and coming just weeks after the government's announced intention to expand permitted development rights, the Housing Minister, Robert Jenrick MP, launched the white paper *Planning for the Future* on 6 August² – a 12-week consultation process intending to streamline the planning process to deliver homes faster.

Local community agreement will lie at the centre of proposals with every area having a local plan in place. Proposals will see all land in England classified as either growth areas allowing automatic development; as renewal areas benefiting from permission in principle, allowing development without full planning applications; and the protection of green spaces and Green Belt.

MOLA's new project

Here we welcome the project *Bringing the Past to the Present: measuring, maximising and transforming public benefit from UK government infrastructure investment in archaeology*.³ This has been funded for four years by UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) and is led by Dr Sadie Watson of MOLA, who has been awarded a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship. You may remember her as a

speaker at the LA@50 Conference in October 2018 (if not, I recommend that you buy a copy of the conference volume and read her account of the 'trowelblazers').⁴ The project abstract states that:

the hundreds of millions invested in the field of development-led archaeology are audited as part of the construction process, but the question of public benefit has not been audited in the same way. There are no consistent, transparent criteria for assessing the knowledge generated, or the social, cultural and economic benefits delivered through this archaeology, despite the fact that the historic environment has untapped potential to improve social cohesion and tackle inequalities through knowledge creation and participatory action research....

The research will identify and design consistent and transparent systems that provide frameworks for assessing the social, economic and cultural benefits of archaeological work conducted as part of infrastructure development....

Yes – this project is specifically about government infrastructure, but it seems to me that its outcomes will have far wider application. The project is therefore timely, and I will follow it with great interest.

Museum of London news

The very day that I received my copy of the Summer 2020 issue, I read that the Museum of London had received planning permission on 23 June for the plans of its new site at Smithfield, which I had discussed in that issue. I offer my congratulations with a tinge of regret that my timing was slightly out.

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The Index for Volume 15 is being distributed with this issue. If you have not received your copy, please contact the Membership Secretary (see the Contents page).

The Fieldwork and Publication Round-up for 2019 (Volume 15, Supplement 3) will be distributed with the Winter 2021 issue.

1. *London Archaeol* 15 (12) (2020).

2. Available from <https://tinyurl.com/yxwhnjwl> [accessed 7 August 2020].

3. Available from <https://tinyurl.com/y2e2cjdz> [accessed 7 August 2020].

4. V Ridgeway, D Briscoe, J Hall and B Wallower (eds) *Fifty Years of London's Archaeology* (2020).