

Planning and development – striking a balance

THE enactment of new planning legislation in 1992 and the setting up of the Planning Authority brought about many changes to the development process. There have been improvements in many areas including better design of developments and greater attention to environmental impact. There have been however numerous complaints mostly from persons who make use of the Authority's services on a day-to-day basis.

Over the years, I have heard views expressed by several people, including PA staff, which I find worrying and which provide an indication as to what the cause of some of the current problems are:

The first concerns the PA's role. Some think that this is solely to protect the environment. Nothing could be further from the truth. The role of the PA is land-use planning which, in some instances does involve protection of the environment, but in others requires the promotion of economic or social objectives. Urban planning is all about striking a balance between competing demands for land use.

Current legislation describes the functions of the Authority as "the promotion of proper land development." The Structure Plan's three major goals refer to the encouragement of social and economic development, the

efficient use of land and buildings and the improvement of the quality of both urban and rural environment.

Most PA staff are well aware of the PA's role but there are still a few professional and technical staff who give overwhelming priority to environmental protection. This gives rise to an anti-development syndrome giving clients an uphill struggle to convince the case officer of the benefits of the development.

Some argue that the PA's main client is the "general good". For example, a development that has a negative visual impact in a street is detrimental to persons who live or make use of that street. While accepting that the public is an important client of the PA, it is not acceptable to use "the general good" as a justification to give a poor service to the applicant, i.e. the paying client.

The PA's mission statement includes the provision of the best possible service to the client. In this respect, there has been significant improvement since the PA was first set up. There are still however several shortcomings mostly related to delay or to an excessive eagerness to recommend refusals. There is also a lack of appreciation of the costs which the developer has to pay because of delays.

One argument made to me once by a PA officer was that all that the client

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wants from the PA is the permit. I totally disagree with this stance. What the applicant wants is a fair and equitable treatment in a timely manner. A client feels aggrieved, for example if the report to the DCC committee is biased or if it does not include all the relevant information. A client feels aggrieved when an application, for no good reason, takes ages to be processed.

In a context where restructuring the economy and the creation of jobs is a national priority, the effect of the planning system on job creation is a crucial consideration which the PA cannot overlook.

The planning system has a significant effect on the economy in a num-

ber of ways. Delays in the issuing of permits slows down work of companies in the construction industry. The slow down may lead to the laying off of some workers. More crucially, for any development which is not run-of-the-mill, the developer and his architect have to work very hard to convince the Directorate to recommend an approval. This is a disincentive to investment. I am sure that there have been instances where developers decided not to invest because of the hassle of getting a permit.

Developers invest and take risks. If they capitalise on a development opportunity overlooked by others – then good luck to them, provided of course that the development is in accordance with policy. While the developer makes a profit, the investment generates economic activity.

One or two PA officers have a different perspective and see developers as people out only to make a quick buck. This attitude could easily be reflected in comments made on an application.

I make these comments fully aware that architects, developers and politicians are players in the planning system and as such they have responsibilities of their own.

My concern is that the views held by a small minority of PA staff undermines the good work of the organisation and gives rise to specific instances where the client does not receive the best possible service.

Whereas changes to legislation are important, sustained evolution of mentalities of all those involved in the planning system is also required.

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