

Reforming planning – 1 An underlying conflict

Post war planning controls were brought in to speed development, encourage the right type of development in the right places, and to protect the heritage and best parts of our landscape. Private interests owning land were to be more strongly controlled by government deciding how land can best be used. There were high hopes of a better world from the substantial increase in state control.

In practice the planning system has left many frustrated by its high costs, delays and complications. The truth is there is no easy way of reconciling neighbours who have different views of their neighbourhood, no single answer to what is worth preserving and what modern developments look good or are appropriate, and no convincing way of controlling what everyone does do with their land, whatever the law may say.

Let's take a common simple disagreement within a community. Mr X lives on the edge of a beautiful Home Counties village adjacent to fields. He paid a premium to buy the house with the views, and called his home Field View House to reflect his priorities. His neighbour, Mrs Y, bought some agricultural fields and wants to make a living from them. She did not have enough money to buy a farm, as even agricultural land values are high and rents low as a proportion of the capital value if you just let the land out to a farmer. Mrs Y recognised the shortage of things for the young people of the village to do. She proposed a Go Kart course on her field, with her organising the events. Strong village opposition resulted in planning permission being refused, to the relief of Mr X who did not want loud karts revving past his garden. Mrs Y is now pursuing a planning application for a skateboarding park. In the meantime she has offered the land on a short lease to a local farmer, who is using it to fatten pigs. Mr X now has a view of corrugated pig shelters and a once greenfield that is now a dust or mud hole.

The planning authority is caught between these two very different views of what the edge of the village should look like and how working land should be used. They cannot stop agricultural uses as it is currently demarked as farmland. They can prevent the owner from gaining permission for new business uses, and do prevent housebuilding in many such contexts.

In such a situation what should the planners do? Who should make the decision about what Mrs Y can do with her land, and what rights should Mr X have to enable him to enjoy the peaceful use of his garden? How far should the law go in laying down answers, and how far should landowners be free to do as they wish with their land?