

A Planning problem we can all agree on...

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Coming just weeks after a fiercely contested Island Development Plan debate that saw lobbying on all sides, a whopping 23 amendments and some elements scrape through with the barest majorities in the States, it might sound strange to say that there's a major Planning issue on which almost everyone in the island would agree.

It might sound strange, but it would be the truth - almost everyone in Guernsey would agree that we need to do something about affordable housing and infrastructure investment. After a long period of gentle decline, the most recent house price figures showed an increase - but more importantly, the bottom rungs of the housing ladder are still out of reach of a wide section of the community. That, and the need for capital infrastructure investment, are the two themes that most of us would agree on.

But having agreed on the problem, the recent debate in the States demonstrates that we're a long way from agreeing on the solution.

Just a single vote saw the States agree to change the plans so that any development over 20 homes (rather than the five originally proposed) would have to provide at least 20% affordable housing, and there was another tight vote on changes that lifted the maximum number of parking spaces that could be allocated to new housing and office developments.

It's not as though Guernsey's politicians are the first to deal with these issues, or the first to find them difficult.

In the UK, the construction of homes promises to become a major political issue - it's estimated that 250,000 new homes are needed each year, a figure more than double the current output. Meeting that estimated need would require construction to reach heights not seen since the 1970s.

The Conservative and Labour parties have pledged to increase construction, but have yet to go far beyond their promises in terms of how that increase would be achieved.

Across the water in Jersey, a policy requiring direct developer provision (like the Guernsey model) was dropped unceremoniously after it became clear that the case for it had not been made. Only now are new plans being put forward, this time for a UK-style levy on developers themselves.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the levy proposal has not been universally popular, particularly within the construction industry. The proposals - similar to the UK Community Infrastructure Levy - would see developers contribute to a centralised pot which would be used for infrastructure and public works.

But also unsurprisingly, our politicians are watching the progress of the Jersey scheme with more than the usual level of interest, to see if it could provide the solution needed.

Characteristically, the two islands have chosen two very different models of solving a very similar problem. The hope for islanders is that one or both of them actually does the job.

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