**We need to do better for small businesses**

For the last decade or so, the focus of planning committees and planning officers has been solely on delivering housing targets. Under the former Labour government the emphasis was on meeting national targets, and subsequently, following the introduction of the National Policy Planning Framework, priorities shifted to more locally set targets.

This is quite right; this country is significantly short on housing delivery, and without the right sort of housing, in the right place, our economy has and will continue to suffer. The Housing White Paper, published in February this year, brings an opportunity for a more holistic approach to housing delivery.

However, there needs to be a wider overview that ties in the themes of the Industrial Strategy Green Paper and recognises that they should be linked. No longer should economic development be an afterthought. As a country, we shouldn’t be delivering housing without considering its interplay with the local economy.

Economic development is, therefore, at the forefront of the minds of local authority decisionmakers, perhaps more so than ever before. With the lure of 100 per cent business rates retention coming into play in 2020 – albeit subject to the General Election outcome - local authorities will suddenly wake up to the opportunity that supporting, and in particular growing, their business base may offer them financially.

In my area, the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils, we have recently developed a business and innovation strategy to properly understand the nature of our business base and the type of support that we as councils can offer to retain them and help them grow in the area.

The results were staggering. While as a team we believe we are supporting businesses on a daily base, it was clear that we are only just scratching the surface in terms of offering the right sort of support.

There are 14,000 businesses in South and Vale, of which 99.6 per cent are SMEs, the majority at the smaller end of between two and nine employees. What these businesses told us was one of the biggest issues facing them was lack of available business premises, in the right location at the right price. It is at this point where the link with planning becomes intrinsic.

**Where shall they go?**

Employment land has always been an afterthought in planning policy and development of local plans. Because land had always been designated as employment land, there had been no challenge as to whether it was in the right location, whether it was still a suitable site, and indeed why it had never been developed in recent years.

What our businesses have told us clearly is that the current employment land supply is not sufficient. It is not sufficient in terms of where it is – the nature of small business has changed – agile, small businesses want the ability to have a location that is flexible for different reasons, within one of our enterprise zones, close to a supplier or within a new, growing, dynamic town environment.

It is not sufficient in quality – again the way businesses operate has changed. No longer do all employees need to sit in banks of desks in one office; a smaller, more flexible, often serviced, space is what they are looking for. Tired first-floor town centre offices are no longer attractive to these thriving small businesses. While planning policy colleagues fight to retain these uses, as economic development officers did in the past (and sometimes still do), maybe we need to revert to different uses, such as residential to improve our night-time economy in towns, and put forward suggestions for more appropriate locations.

One such location may be at the heart of new residential developments. Clearly housebuilders want to focus on maximising the number of houses on their sites, but planning officers should be encouraging them to think widely about the future occupiers of these houses and what their needs are. Indeed, in the long term it will help attract people to the area and help housebuilders to sell houses. It is the same scenario as providing superfast broadband. For years housebuilders didn’t see why it was important to provide broadband infrastructure to new developments; now they know that having superfast broadband is a serious decisionmaker for buyers.

Provision of small starter units and flexible office space in new developments is the sort of approach we need. With increasing pressures on our road infrastructure, let’s offer residents the opportunity to run their small business close to home, get them out of their back bedroom office or garage, and give them an opportunity to really grow their business locally and network with their neighbouring growing businesses.

By creating a better, more appropriate stock of business premises, we can also help address the affordability issue and really help to put business at the heart of our communities.

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