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PRIME MINISTER

THE SAINSBURY GROUP

You are having a further meeting with the Sainsbury Group on 10 December to discuss progress on improving the planning system, which you last discussed with the Group in April.

PROGRESS

Since that meeting action has been taken forward on all the proposals agreed with the Group. My officials prepared a detailed progress report on implementation in September and have discussed it with the Group. Hartley Booth has had a copy of that report and I need not go over all the items in detail. I met the Group on 4 November and Sir John Sainsbury and his colleagues expressed themselves well pleased with the action already taken and in hand. Their main concerns now are that the emphasis on the positive use of the planning system to facilitate economic development should continue, and that efforts to improve the efficiency of the system, particularly in processing planning appeals, should be maintained.

POLICY

As regards the general policy approach, the Group clearly feel that the circular on "Development and Employment", which was published in July with the White Paper "Lifting the Burden", fully met their main concern and is having a marked effect, not least on the Inspectorate in dealing with appeals. I was able to tell them that since the circular was issued the proportion of appeals allowed had risen from the average of around 30% in recent years to about 40%, and for major developments (decided by Ministers on Inspectors' recommendations) to nearly 50%.

The PQ statement in July on superstores has also been well received by the major retailers. In a recently published interview Sir John Sainsbury, commenting on the company's experience of planning control,



said that he was pleased to detect "signs that are more encouraging than for many years".

We have also taken steps to keep the Inspectorate better informed of Ministerial policy. Patrick Jenkin addressed their annual conference in July and I have had a useful discussion at a dinner with the Chief Inspector and some of her senior colleagues. My Permanent Secretary is considering with the Chief Inspector proposals for forming a panel of part-time Inspectors drawn from members of the Planning Bar and other professions.

The Group have expressed some concern that the need to demonstrate the Government's commitment to the Green Belt and environmental policies should not be misinterpreted as a swing away from our support for economic development and deregulation. They are well aware of the widespread opposition to large-scale new development in the Home Counties and elsewhere, and, while they recognise the political realities of the situation, they are anxious that the balance should not tilt too far towards the "anti-development" tendency. I have suggested to them that the big developers can do a good deal to counter this hostility by producing good quality buildings, by making full use of derelict and unused land, and by showing themselves ready to modify or improve their proposals in response to local opinion. I suggest that it will be very useful to spend some time at your meeting discussing with the Group how we can best present the positive approach to development, that they want to see maintained, without alienating our supporters.

PERFORMANCE

As regards the Group's other main concern, the performance of the appeals system, there is already a distinct improvement to report in the median times for appeals (from receipt of appeal to decision):



1984		23 weeks
1985	Q1	22 "
	Q2	21 "
	Q3	20 "
	October	19 "

We have just completed an Efficiency Scrutiny of the written representations procedure (which accounts for over 80% of all appeals) and this makes proposals which could reduce the median decision time progressively to about 11 weeks. All these recommendations will be implemented. One of the main proposals is to provide all Inspectors with word-processors on-line to their HQ; this will take two or three years to complete but the system is already being successfully tried out.

Members of the Group, as leading developers, are chiefly concerned with those major appeals (less than 5% of the total) that are decided by Ministers rather than by the Inspectors and which often involve a public inquiry. They can cite cases where the appeal has taken far too long to complete. Large developments that arouse a lot of local opposition inevitably take longer than the run-of-the-mill appeals. But a detailed management review of this work was completed in June and Regional Offices were then set the target of deciding 80% of all such appeals within 13 weeks of receiving the Inspector's report. In the five months since then they have in fact achieved over 90% within the target time, which is a marked improvement on past performance. The aim now is to tighten up the whole process from receipt of the appeal to decision.

AESTHETIC CONTROL

At my meeting with the Group in October the only other important matter that they raised was the question of "aesthetic control", which was also discussed at your earlier meeting with the Group. They asked me to consider re-issuing and re-emphasising the policy guidance on this subject that Michael Heseltine published in 1980 and which strongly discouraged detailed control of design except in very



sensitive conservation areas. I have agreed to do this and the new circular will be issued shortly.

UNUSED PUBLICLY OWNED LAND

I asked the Group what further measures we and they could take to secure the release of unused land in public ownership and the renewal by private developers of badly run council housing estates. They undertook to give some further thought to this and I know that Idris Pearce, who was abroad at the time of my meeting with the Group, is taking a special interest in this subject. He is particularly concerned with land owned by Government Departments and the methods of disposal. I suggest that we could usefully pursue this topic at the meeting on 10 December.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Group are aware that all the proposals in the Planning chapter of the July White Paper are being carried forward, including those that will be dealt with in this Session's Housing and Planning Bill and in the report on the review of the Use Classes Order which I will be publishing shortly. We will be reporting on all these items in the second White Paper on deregulation which David Young plans to publish in May.

The Group have not decided whether they wish to propose any further changes in development plan procedures and there are differing views within the Group on this, but they welcomed what was said in the July circular on this subject - ie that plans should not be regarded as overriding other considerations in deciding planning applications and appeals, especially where the plan does not deal adequately with new types of development or is no longer relevant to today's needs and conditions. This is having a useful effect in reducing the weight attached to development plans in deciding planning applications and appeals.



I believe that the Group are well satisfied with the impetus that they have given to the positive aspects of planning policy and to simplifying the system and improving its performance. They are not concerned to follow all the work on implementation in detail but will be looking to see the results. I have offered to review progress with them at about the same time next year.

I am copying this minute to David Young, David Trippier and Michael Howard.

K.B.

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2 December 1985

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