

Subject cc Masker

ELZATI



File
cc Mr Watson

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

11 December 1985

Dear Robin

PLANNING: THE SAINSBURY GROUP

The Prime Minister chaired a meeting yesterday to consider the further progress which had been made as a result of continuing discussions between your Department and the Sainsbury Group.

Sir John Sainsbury was accompanied by Mr. Christopher Benson (MEPC), Mr. Clifford Chetwood (George Wimpey), Mr. Nigel Mobbs (Slough Estates), Mr. Idris Pearce (Richard Ellis), Mr. John Taylor (Chapman Taylor Partners) and Mr. Roger Suddards (Last Suddards, Solicitors).

Ministers present, in addition to your Secretary of State, were the Secretary of State for Employment, Mr. David Trippier and Mr. Michael Howard. Mr. Hartley Booth was also present.

Your Secretary of State reported that significant progress had been made since the last meeting with the Prime Minister in April. The circular on "Development and Employment" had been published in the White Paper "Lifting the Burden"; it had had a marked effect. The PQ Statement in July on superstores had been well received by the major retailers. The time taken for appeal decisions to be reached had been shortened. On the written representations procedure, work was in hand to reduce the median time taken to about 11 weeks. A circular on aesthetic control was to be re-issued that day which would discourage detailed control of design by planners. A consultation document on the Review of Use Classes Order had just been published, heralding a major change.

Sir John Sainsbury said that some further progress had been made. But much more remained to be done. There was a need to ensure that planning procedures themselves were effectively managed, and that proper progress chasing was set in hand. The message contained in "Lifting the Burden", and the circular with its presumption in favour of development, needed constantly to be reiterated if the change in attitudes were to be carried forward. It was important that the impression should not be created that "green" policies and development were irreconcilable; speed and efficiency were in everyone's interest; furthermore allowing development on unused inner city land would relieve

pressure on the green belt, and promote a more attractive urban landscape.

In discussion the following points were made:

- (i) The Group were still concerned about unnecessary delays in reaching decisions on appeals. In some cases, the delays seemed to be getting worse. The target reduction in the time taken to decide appeals under the written representations procedure of 11 weeks, to be achieved in two or three years, was not enough. A better target might be to aim that 80 per cent of such appeals should be completed within eight weeks.
- (ii) The Group suggested that a clear deadline might be fixed for written representations. Proper exchange of information between the parties could be insisted on. A set date should be fixed for hearings.
- (iii) The Group agreed that a system of awarding costs should be considered whereby the award more closely followed the appeal decision; it was recognised however that there might be difficulties with appeals against deemed refusals, and that the effectiveness of this kind of incentive on local authorities was not certain.
- (iv) Procedures at present allowed local authorities continually to delay decisions by entering into lengthy correspondence. Reform of procedures to prevent this kind of abuse should be considered carefully. It was important that legislation should minimise the opportunity for challenge in the courts if procedural simplifications were introduced.
- (v) The Group believed the abolition of the Metropolitan Counties offered the opportunity of putting more surplus public land to proper use. It would be easier to prise this land out of public ownership if it were passed to the residuary body concerned, rather than to the District Councils. Your Secretary of State confirmed that he was already taking steps to identify such land where appropriate, and take the necessary action.
- (vi) It was proposed that local authorities who wished to hold onto unused land on the grounds that it was needed for a specific purpose might be required to relinquish it after a certain time had elapsed. It might also be possible to provide that the local authority had to discharge the burden of proof when claiming that it had a need to hold onto a particular site.

- (vii) The Group noted that some progress with the disposal of public land was being made by the nationalised industries. A good deal of NHS land around London zoned as Green Belt was likely to become surplus as mental hospitals became redundant following the transfer of patients back to the community; its disposal would no doubt raise sensitive issues.
- (viii) District valuers and local authorities often over-value the unused land in their possession. These high prices themselves had discouraged development, reduced supply, and so have fed back into prices again.
- (ix) The Group thought that consideration should be given to establishing development agencies, with purchasing and planning powers, in some of the areas suffering most from dereliction, following the pattern of the London Docklands Development Corporation.
- (x) Even if it did not prove possible to put derelict land to immediate practical use, it was none the less desirable that it should be cleaned up and its appearance improved. The Department of Employment's special employment and training programmes had a role to play here.
- (xi) Your Secretary of State noted that the Government were looking at the possibility of paying urban development grant direct, instead of through the local authority. The Group welcomed this.
- (xii) The Group urged that further consideration be given to the place of structure plans in the planning process. The circular on development had been a help, but there was still scope for reducing their negative impact in the hands of some local authorities.
- (xi) The Group believed that though the demand for housing, and for industrial and commercial property, was generally less in the north than in the south, it was important not to under-estimate the impetus to growth everywhere which could be achieved by making more land available at a lower price, and by simplifying and speeding up planning procedures.

Summing up the discussion the Prime Minister said that useful progress had been made, but that more work needed to be done to take forward the reform of the planning system. In particular there was still scope for reducing the time taken to reach decisions on appeal; consideration should be given to stiffening the regime for the award of costs; written representations might be made subject to a time limit; the Secretary of State should take forward his review of the case for paying urban development grant direct to the

recipient; further efforts should be made to speed up the disposal of unused public land; and your Secretary of State would consider further, with the Group, the role of the structure plan in planning decisions. The Prime Minister would hold a further meeting with the Group in the spring of next year. ||

I am copying this letter to Leigh Lewis (Department of Employment), Paul Madden (Mr. Howard's office, Department of Trade and Industry) and Mike Winn (Mr. Tripper's office, Department of Employment).

Lev

Mark Addison

(Mark Addison)

Robin Young, Esq.,
Department of the Environment.