

Five lessons the French can teach British planners on smarter growth

Former environment secretary John Gummer rightly praised the role that planning has played in a series of “grand projects” in London (*Planning*, 19 October 2012, p12). But he was wrong to say that “planners in Paris could never have pulled them off”.

In September I visited Paris with urban design and sustainability consultancy Urbed’s TEN group of London-based senior local government officers. I saw how the railway tracks into the Gare d’Austerlitz terminus, just south of the River Seine, have been built over to create Paris Rive Gauche – a splendid 130-hectare mixed-use development stretching from the National Library to the *Périphérique* ring road.

Similarly in Plaine Commune St Denis, a poor post-industrial area north of Paris, offices adjoining the French national stadium are helping to finance new housing, much of it social.

The RER rapid transit system crisscrosses Paris, with five lines compared to London’s half-built Crossrail and Thameslink. Eight new tramlines are being built to connect poorer suburbs.

French strategic planning in Greater Paris is backed up by the use of *sociétés d’économie mixte* – public development companies – to mobilise investment. New light rail projects are supported by a charge on employer payrolls, the *versement transport*.

In the TEN group’s report from the visit, *Learning From Paris*, we set out some lessons for British planning:



Paris Rive Gauche: planning lessons

ted from the opening of the Channel Tunnel rail link and the high-speed line to Paris. A hi-tech automated metro, pioneered in Lille, now links the three centres and their suburbs.

Devolution helped the economic performance of provincial cities such as Bordeaux and Montpellier to grow, as city centres were linked by high-speed trains, and trams connected suburbs.

2

Link investment to spatial planning

Central and local government sign contracts with each other to provide public funding certainty to underpin investment schemes, as now envisaged in England’s City Deal process.

Efforts are concentrated on publicly identified *zones d’aménagement concerté*. Projects which get approved in the spatial plan can then bid for public funds. City administrations work together with infrastructure companies, not in isolation from them.

3

Fund infrastructure through state bank

Investment in infrastructure has been boosted by public investment bank the Caisse des Dépôts which, along with its equivalents across Europe, provides a model for how the UK

could get development moving again.

The Caisse des Dépôts has 33,000 staff and employs experts who understand local circumstances in assessing development projects and financing upfront infrastructure. The bank funded 133,000 social homes last year and provides 35-year loans to municipalities, focused on areas the private sector would not invest in.

4

Use public firms to reduce risk

Programmes of investment are spearheaded by public development firms that commission plans, install infrastructure and provide long-term support. These companies not only take some risk out of complex projects, but also raise funds at low enough rates of interest to make large schemes viable.

5

Free planners from procurement red tape

Progress is faster, easier, and often looks better too, because of the greater freedom that architects and planners have to procure development that meets their own specification within an agreed framework. An architect told us that firms are selected from those that share a similar philosophy, not through protracted check box procurement processes.

Mistakes are of course made, with notorious social exclusion in city suburbs. But, French experience shows how spatial planning and urbanism can boost local economies. So instead of dismissing French planning, we might better consider how their cities are achieving smarter growth.

A longer version of this article is available at PlanningResource.co.uk/go/opinion

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Hand provincial cities control over destiny

When power was devolved from the central government in 1982, provincial cities started to take control of their destinies and elected mayors wanted visible results.

The classic example is the “metropolitan compromise” forged by the then mayor of Lille. This ensured that the poorer neighbouring towns of Roubaix and Tourcoing also benefit-



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