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ARCHITECTURE

Following a previous article that cast doubt on the effectiveness of the government's proposed efficiency drive with the planning system, we are still waiting for improvements in reduced submission requirements and removing the need for permission altogether for some smaller-scale developments as recommended by the Killian Pretty Review – its suggestions being increasingly relevant in our continuing economic difficulties.

At the recent East of England Energy Group summer conference, delegates heard that planning delays formed the biggest single stumbling block to the major initiatives that are needed to provide for our future energy supplies.

Important decisions that were planned to be handled by the new Infrastructure Planning Committee based on new national policy statements are yet to be finalised.

One local area where the government has acted is with the decision a fortnight ago to give the go-ahead for an eco-town at Rackheath.

If done properly, this will be a great opportunity to create a well designed sustainable community, but much detail remains to be defined in relation to joined up employment, services and transport infrastructure.

The government's headline-focus on eco-towns should not distract from the urgent need to bring into use thousands of empty properties and regenerate existing urban areas with energy-saving housing improvements where the vast supply of existing housing exceeds the new-build proportion on which the government's energy drive is concentrated.

A great opportunity to incentivise this large work element in a time of increasing unemployment would be to reduce the burgeoning rate of VAT on the renovation of existing properties of 15pc (reverting in January to 17.5pc or more) down to 5pc to activate this work and bring it more into line with the zero rate attracted for the new-build sector.

Local emphasis on new-build housing is suggested by the current joint core strategy of the Greater Norwich Development Partnership to be finalised in 2011, suggesting a need for 36,000 new homes in the Norwich policy area by 2026, with 14,000 in the Norwich City Council area.

I trust that the emphasis here will be on the proportional expansion of existing sustainable settlements, with attendant increases in appropriate employment, education and other essential services rather than an ill-considered mass imposition of large-scale housing development divorced from connected facilities.

The move in April's budget to support UK energy products was boosted last week with the announcement that, in conjunction with three UK banks, the European Investment Bank is planning an additional £4bn of loans over the next three years.

I hope this will not represent a similar miscalculation following the previous announcement by the Learning & Skills Council that it had allocated £2.7bn more than it could afford to rebuild the country's further education colleges.

John Clarke is president of the Norfolk Association of Architects.

Inspire's success is all in the mind

A desire to improve staff performance in tough economic times has been fuelling success for a training body that specialises in getting the best out of people through psychological training.

Inspire International has seen a 47pc increase in bookings for its flagship Peak Performance Mind training programme this year.

The figures stack up to make the best start to a year since Inspire started trading 10 years ago, despite cuts in training budgets.

Managing director Gavin Drake attributes the high level of business to people and organisations wanting to be attached to something positive.

He said Inspire's training emphasis was different from most, because it is based on the psychology of performance. The focus is on the funda-

By ED FOSS

mentals of thinking, mindset and attitude.

The business has worked for customers including Suffolk Wildlife Trust, the Home Office, Volvo Construction Equipment and Leicestershire police.

Inspire has worked with 40 businesses over the last 18 months.

Mr Drake, who is a resident sports psychologist at a tennis academy in Norwich and has been asked to run peak performance sessions for sport students at the University of East Anglia, runs his business from Shotesham, south of Norwich.

"Our clients are really seeing the benefits of our peak performance training and we're particularly pleased that we are living and breath-

ing what we share with them," he said.

"Our courses are based on performance psychology and our services are having a positive impact on our customers' individual and business performances, despite these difficult times.

"Despite a general downturn in training budgets, we have seen our clients show a strong desire to improve their individual and business performance through training."

Volvo Construction Equipment was an example of a business that had committed to more training despite large numbers of redundancies, said Mr Drake.

"Their commitment will help them emerge as a stronger organisation when the economy starts to pick up again," he added.



PICK UP A TINNY: Marston's, the 'official' beer of England cricket, has been given a boost by the Ashes.

Howzat! Ashes sales help Marston profits

Brewer and pubs chain Marston's revealed an Ashes boost yesterday after seeing shop sales of bottled beer Pedigree surge since the start of the season.

With Pedigree branded the official beer of England cricket, off-trade volumes have more than doubled since the end of the company's first half in April.

Across the group, Marston's said trading continued to be resilient with

sales trends showing further improvement since April, despite the wet weather.

Like-for-like sales in its managed pubs division declined by 1.2pc in the 43 weeks to August 1, but in the last six weeks of the period the downward trend was reversed with growth of 2.3pc. Food business, which represents 38pc of total sales, achieved an improvement of 6pc in the same period.

An easing of food cost inflation and tight management of promotional offers meant margins were in line with those seen in the first half.

In its tenanted pubs operation, Marston's said profits from the bulk of the estate continued to be in line with last year. It said it was committed to long-term solutions for the rest of the portfolio, with a variable rent agreement launched earlier this year being well received by tenants.

UK tourism hit by fall in business trips

A big dip in the number of business trips taken in the UK this year has hit local tourism, figures out yesterday showed.

UK executives took 5.5 million trips involving at least one overnight stay in the UK in the first four months of this year – 13pc fewer than in January-April 2008, the VisitEngland organisation said.

The number of trips made by UK residents visiting friends and relatives (VFR) in their own country also fell – dipping 7pc to 12.7 million in the first four months of this year.

These declines effectively wiped out the positive effect of the holiday trips of more than one night which rose 15pc to 13.4 million in January-April 2009 compared with last year.

In all, UK residents made 32.5 million trips in the UK of more than one night in the first four months of this year – a 1pc fall on the January-April 2008 total.

Although the amount spent on the holiday trips in the UK in the first four months of this year rose 4pc to £2.57bn, business-trip spending dipped 12pc and VFR was down 11pc.

Profits plunge is not so bad in comparison

Price comparison website Moneysupermarket.com softened news of plunging profits yesterday by announcing a £25m payout to shareholders.

Pre-tax profits for the six months to June 30 dived to £1.9m from £14.4m a year earlier as the firm continued to suffer from dwindling revenues at its loans and mortgages arm.

However, Moneysupermarket pledged to pay a 4.93p-a-share special dividend in an attempt to underline confidence in its ability to generate cash.

Including an interim dividend of 1.3p a share, the move will land founder and former chief executive Simon Nixon – who owns 53pc of the business – a £16.8m windfall.

Nixon, who has a fortune estimated at £140m, stood down from the helm of the business in December last year.

Despite announcing a 31pc drop in revenues to £68.5m, Moneysupermarket, which cut more than a quarter of its workforce in a year to take its overall headcount to 476, said trading has stabilised.

Revenues from its money division, which generates income from loans and mortgages, as well as savings, plummeted 54pc to £18.6m after the credit crunch squeezed the supply of loans while consumers also became more cautious about taking on debt.

The closure of Barclays loan subsidiary First Plus, which had been the site's biggest income provider, also hit revenues.

Commissions earned from loan and mortgage brokerage fell significantly, it added, although revenues from savings and current accounts remained solid.

Chief executive Peter Plumb said: "Moneysupermarket has made a solid start to the year. Trading levels have stabilised over the past six months and we remain a profitable and highly cash-generative business."

Lawyer helps colleges merge

A lawyer from Norwich has helped broker a merger between two London further education colleges.

Harry Scott, of Mills & Reeve, was part of a team from the firm's Norwich, Cambridge and Birmingham offices that acted for the Tottenham-based College of North East London during its tie-up with Enfield College.

The new College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London – which has 20,000 students – will serve the whole of the Upper Lea Valley, with significant investment to rebuild and develop both centres.

Weekend course will offer advice

Norwich Law School and law firm Birketts are running an intensive two-day weekend course providing practical advice on a range of employment issues for practitioners, line managers and HR specialists.

The practical employment law event will be held over the weekend of September 12 and 13 at the University of East Anglia.

Places cost £750 (although the fourth attendee from each organisation goes free). To book, call Rachel Flaxman at the UEA school of law on 01603 592427 or e-mail r.flaxman@uea.ac.uk by September 4.