

10 AUGUST 2020

PC11-20 | WHITE PAPER: PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Summary

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has issued a new consultation on planning for the future. This consultation seeks any views on each part of a package of proposals for reform of the planning system in England to streamline and modernise the planning process, improve outcomes on design and sustainability, reform developer contributions and ensure more land is available for development where it is needed. The main consultation document can be found [here](#).

First, we will streamline the planning process with more democracy taking place more effectively at the plan-making stage, and will replace the entire corpus of plan-making law in England to achieve this:

- Simplifying the role of Local Plans, to focus on identifying land under three categories
- Growth areas suitable for substantial development, and where outline approval for development would be automatically secured for forms and types of development specified in the Plan
- Renewal areas suitable for some development, such as gentle densification; and Protected areas where – as the name suggests – development is restricted. This could halve the time it takes to secure planning permission on larger sites identified in plans. We also want to allow local planning authorities to identify sub-areas in their Growth areas for self- and custom-build homes, so that more people can build their own homes.

Local Plans should set clear rules rather than general policies for development. We will set out general development management policies nationally, with a more focused role for Local Plans in identifying site- and area-specific requirements, alongside locally produced design codes. This would scale back the detail and duplication contained in Local Plans, while encouraging a much greater focus on design quality at the local level. Plans will be significantly shorter in length (we expect a reduction in size of at least two thirds), as they will no longer contain a long list of “policies” of varying specificity – just a core set of standards and requirements for development.

Local councils should radically and profoundly re-invent the ambition, depth and breadth with which they engage with communities as they consult on Local Plans. Our reforms will democratise the planning process by putting a new emphasis on engagement at the plan-making stage. At the same time, we will streamline the opportunity for consultation at the planning application stage, because this adds delay to the process and allows a small minority of voices, some from the local area and

often some not, to shape outcomes. We want to hear the views of a wide range of people and groups through this consultation on our proposed reforms.

- Local Plans should be subject to a single statutory “sustainable development” test, and unnecessary assessments and requirements that cause delay and challenge in the current system should be abolished. This would mean replacing the existing tests of soundness, updating requirements for assessments (including on the environment and viability) and abolishing the Duty to Cooperate.
- Local Plans should be visual and map-based, standardised, based on the latest digital technology, and supported by a new standard template. Plans should be significantly shorter in length, and limited to no more than setting out site- or area-specific parameters and opportunities.
- Local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate will be required through legislation to meet a statutory timetable (of no more than 30 months in total) for key stages of the process, and there will be sanctions for those who fail to do so. • Decision-making should be faster and more certain, within firm deadlines, and should make greater use of data and digital technology.

We will seek to strengthen enforcement powers and sanctions so that as we move towards a rules-based system, communities can have confidence those rules will be upheld.

- We will develop a comprehensive resources and skills strategy for the planning sector to support the implementation of our reforms – so that, as we bring in our reforms, local planning authorities are equipped to create great communities through world-class civic engagement and proactive plan-making.

Second, we will take a radical, digital-first approach to modernise the planning process. This means moving from a process based on documents to a process driven by data. We will:

- Support local planning authorities to use digital tools to support a new civic engagement process for Local Plans and decision-making, making it easier for people to understand what is being proposed and its likely impact on them through visualisations and other digital approaches. We will make it much easier for people to feed in their views into the system through social networks and via their phones.
- Insist local plans are built on standardised, digitally consumable rules and data, enabling accessible interactive maps that show what can be built where. The data will be accessed by software used across the public sector and also by external PropTech entrepreneurs to improve transparency, decision-making and productivity in the sector.
- Standardise, and make openly and digitally accessible, other critical datasets that the planning system relies on, including planning decisions and developer contributions. Approaches for fixing the

underlying data are already being tested and developed by innovative local planning authorities and we are exploring options for how these could be scaled nationally.

- Work with tech companies and local authorities to modernise the software used for making and case-managing a planning application, improving the user-experience for those applying and reducing the errors and costs currently experienced by planning authorities. A new more modular software landscape will encourage digital innovation and will consume and provide access to underlying data. This will help automate routine processes, such as knowing whether new applications are within the rules, making decision-making faster and more certain.

- Engage with the UK PropTech sector through a PropTech Innovation Council to make the most of innovative new approaches to meet public policy objectives, help this emerging sector to boost productivity in the wider planning and housing sectors, and ensure government data and decisions support the sector's growth in the UK and internationally.

Third, to bring a new focus on design and sustainability, we will:

- Ensure the planning system supports our efforts to combat climate change and maximises environmental benefits, by ensuring the National Planning Policy Framework targets those areas where a reformed planning system can most effectively address climate change mitigation and adaptation and facilitate environmental improvements.

- Facilitate ambitious improvements in the energy efficiency standards for buildings to help deliver our world-leading commitment to net-zero by 2050.

- Ask for beauty and be far more ambitious for the places we create, expecting new development to be beautiful, and to create a 'net gain' not just 'no net harm', with a greater focus on 'placemaking' and 'the creation of beautiful places' within the National Planning Policy Framework.

Make it easier for those who want to build beautifully through the introduction of a fast-track for beauty through changes to national policy and legislation, to automatically permit proposals for high-quality developments where they reflect local character and preferences.

- Introduce a quicker, simpler framework for assessing environmental impacts and enhancement opportunities, that speeds up the process while protecting and enhancing England's unique ecosystems.

- Expect design guidance and codes – which will set the rules for the design of new development – to be prepared locally and to be based on genuine community involvement rather than meaningless consultation, so that local residents have a genuine say in the design of new development, and ensure that codes have real 'bite' by making them more binding on planning decisions.

- Establish a new body to support the delivery of design codes in every part of the country, and give permanence to the campaigning work of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission and the life of its co-chairman the late Sir Roger Scruton.
- Ensure that each local planning authority has a chief officer for design and place-making, to help ensure there is the capacity and capability locally to raise design standards and the quality of development.
- Lead by example by updating Homes England's strategic objectives to give greater emphasis to delivering beautiful places.
- Protect our historic buildings and areas while ensuring the consent framework is fit for the 21st century.

Fourth, we will improve infrastructure delivery in all parts of the country and ensure developers play their part, through reform of developer contributions. We propose:

- The Community Infrastructure Levy and the current system of planning obligations will be reformed as a nationally set, value-based flat rate charge (the 'Infrastructure Levy'). A single rate or varied rates could be set. We will aim for the new Levy to raise more revenue than under the current system of developer contributions, and deliver at least as much – if not more – on-site affordable housing as at present. This reform will enable us to sweep away months of negotiation of Section 106 agreements and the need to consider site viability. We will deliver more of the infrastructure existing and new communities require by capturing a greater share of the uplift in land value that comes with development.
- We will be more ambitious for affordable housing provided through planning gain, and we will ensure that the new Infrastructure Levy allows local planning authorities to secure more on-site housing provision.
- We will give local authorities greater powers to determine how developer contributions are used, including by expanding the scope of the Levy to cover affordable housing provision to allow local planning authorities to drive up the provision of affordable homes. We will ensure that affordable housing provision supported through developer contributions is kept at least at current levels, and that it is still delivered on-site to ensure that new development continues to support mixed communities. Local authorities will have the flexibility to use this funding to support both existing communities as well as new communities.
- We will also look to extend the scope of the consolidated Infrastructure Levy and remove exemptions from it to capture changes of use through permitted development rights, so that additional homes delivered through this route bring with them support for new infrastructure

Fifth, to ensure more land is available for the homes and development people and communities need, and to support renewal of our town and city centres, we propose:

- A new nationally determined, binding housing requirement that local planning authorities would have to deliver through their Local Plans. This would be focused on areas where affordability pressure is highest to stop land supply being a barrier to enough homes being built. We propose that this would factor in land constraints, including the Green Belt, and would be consistent with our aspirations of creating a housing market that is capable of delivering 300,000 homes annually, and one million homes over this Parliament.
- To speed up construction where development has been permitted, we propose to make it clear in the revised National Planning Policy Framework that the masterplans and design codes for sites prepared for substantial development should seek to include a variety of development types from different builders which allow more phases to come forward together. We will explore further options to support faster build out as we develop our proposals for the new planning system.
- To provide better information to local communities, to promote competition amongst developers, and to assist SMEs and new entrants to the sector, we will consult on options for improving the data held on contractual arrangements used to control land.
- To make sure publicly owned land and public investment in development supports thriving places, we will: – ensure decisions on the locations of new public buildings – such as government offices and further education colleges – support renewal and regeneration of town centres; and – explore how publicly owned land disposal can support the SME and self-build sectors.

Proposal 9:

Neighbourhood Plans should be retained as an important means of community input, and we will support communities to make better use of digital tools. Since statutory Neighbourhood Plans became part of the system in 2011, over 2,600 communities have started the process of neighbourhood planning to take advantage of the opportunity to prepare a plan for their own areas – and over 1,000 plans have been successfully passed at referendum. They have become an important tool in helping to ‘bring the democracy forward’ in planning, by allowing communities to think proactively about how they would like their areas to develop. Therefore, we think Neighbourhood Plans should be retained in the reformed planning system, but we will want to consider whether their content should become more focused to reflect our proposals for Local Plans, as well as the opportunities which digital tools and data offer to support their development and improve accessibility for users. By making it easier to develop Neighbourhood Plans we wish to encourage their continued use and indeed to help spread their use further, particularly in towns and cities.

We are also interested in whether there is scope to extend and adapt the concept so that very small areas – such as individual streets – can set their own rules for the form of development which they are happy to see. Digital tools have significant potential to assist the process of Neighbourhood Plan production, including through new digital co-creation platforms and 3D visualisation technologies to explore proposals within the local context. We will develop pilot projects and data standards which help neighbourhood planning groups make the most of this potential.

Your evidence

Please email your responses to this consultation to policycomms@nalc.gov.uk by 17.00 on 15 October 2020. County associations are asked to forward this briefing on to all member councils in their area.

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