

OPINION PIECE

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Planning for the Future

The 'Planning for the Future' White Paper was released on 6th August. Prepared by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government it promises a radical reform of England's planning system, citing the current system as an *'inefficient, opaque process with poor outcomes*. Of course, we have been promised overhauls of the planning system before. So, what are the details, and do they deliver on their promise?

Set out in an 84-page document the paper targets a simpler, faster, and more predictable planning system. In short, an overhaul of the current system is proposed founded upon three-pillars; Planning for development, Planning for beautiful and sustainable places, and Planning for infrastructure and connected places. All of which is to be underpinned by digitalisation across the board and standardised interactive mapping.

Pillar One: Planning for Development.

Perhaps the most widely reported area of the paper, in order to foster increased development, it is suggested that binding housing targets will be dispensed by National Government with the aim of delivering 300,000 dwellings a year. Centralism is dead, long live centralism! Individual authorities will be set targets, with local constraints having first been taken into account. A process which yes, you would imagine will come under some pretty fierce scrutiny.

Local plans are to be pared back to avoid restating National Policy and their primary use will be to identify 'zones' for Growth, Renewal and Protection. A strict deadline of 30 months will be set to prepare and adopt new Local Plan Documents with penalties for failing to do so. As many headlines have alluded to development in identified growth zones will benefit from permission in principle, requiring an application to approve the finer, design focussed details. We await details on the level of assessment required to identify these 'growth' areas. Where an application is not determined within the statutory time limit planning fees may be automatically refunded.

Housing Delivery Tests will remain, in order to safeguard land supply, as will the presumption in favour of sustainable development. Indeed, a statutory sustainable development test is proposed to reinforce this objective. It will be interesting to understand what weight sustainable development might carry when set against expectations for growth, renewal, or protection.

Pillar Two: Planning for Beautiful and Sustainable Places.

Not just development at any cost, the second tranche of the proposals places emphasis on the need for great design with the intention to reward those that deliver on this with a fast-track pass through the planning system.

Neighbourhood plans will hold a small candle to localism, with the document reimagined to guide the design of new developments to reflect local character and community preferences. A new statutory body will support the delivery of new design codes and each local authority is to appoint a chief officer for design and place making. The extent to which the neighbourhood plans might continue to influence spatial strategy and thus guide, or even challenge, centrally identified housing targets is again, perhaps unsurprisingly, unclear.

As per the Environment Bill Net Biodiversity gain is to remain a requirement of all development. Alongside this, ambitious improvements to energy efficiency standards are to be set with the aim of meeting a world-leading target of net-zero emissions by 2050. Whether these targets are again to be set centrally remains to be seen.

Pillar Three: Planning for Infrastructure and Connecting Places.

The Paper proposes to scrap the existing Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 payments, consolidating them instead into one Infrastructure Levy. This new levy will be a threshold based flat rate that is set nationally, either as a single rate or an area specific rate. It will be charged on the proportion of value that exceeds the threshold at the point of sale, presumably removing existing negotiations over viability. It is intended that the Levy will encourage the provision of on-site affordable housing by off setting the final cash liability against the reduction in sales price relative to market value.

From the developer's point of view payments will come later in the process and be informed by market conditions at the time, allowing them greater flexibility. In theory Local Authorities will be able to borrow against these future revenues to forward fund infrastructure projects.

In summary then some interesting ideas are proposed and clearly you cannot expect improvements without some upheaval. As ever the devil is in the detail and to this end, and as has been cited elsewhere, this White Paper resembles a more introductory Green Paper in places.

A key area of interest obviously is to what extent this will be a centralised or a locally lead system. Similarly, to what extent will suggested heightened expectations in terms of design, sustainability and ecology play out in a system where the principle of development is pre-assigned specifically to expediate development.

There are a number of questions to answer and we eagerly await further detail, but even then, will we get an answer to the biggest question of all – timeframes. With new legislation taking a possible 16 – 18 months to adopt and revised Local Plans (and presumably design guides and neighbourhood plans) taking a further 30 months, will these changes gain sufficient traction ahead of a change in the political landscape or will it be next to sit atop the pile of suggested overhauls that have failed to deliver quite in the manner initially promised.