

Planning for a Better Future

Our planning manifesto for the next government



It has been attributed to people as far apart in time as Benjamin Franklin and Winston Churchill, but “if you fail to plan you plan to fail” is as true today as it was then. Harnessing the opportunities provided by the planning system to achieve a better future for our children will be vital over the coming decade. By nurturing the conditions needed to achieve sustainable economic growth and meeting the needs of our growing population, the next government has the opportunity to create a real legacy for future generations.

The Planning Officers Society is the single credible voice for public sector planning practitioners, pursuing good quality and effective planning practice. The Society's aim is to ensure that planning makes a major contribution to achieving sustainable development in ways which are fair and equitable and achieve the social, economic and environmental aspirations of all sectors of the community. It is within this context that we have set out our advice to the new Government so we can plan together for a better future.

With a population of 64 million, which is forecast to grow by over 4 million over the next decade, the UK is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe with the 8th largest economy in the world. Planning provides essential tools to achieve sustainable economic growth and vibrant and healthy communities, whilst maintaining and enhancing our rich legacy of natural, built and historic assets. The planning system provides a clear and stable platform for investment in a congested island where there is intense pressure on land. The system has proved to be remarkably adaptable over the past 60 years as it has responded to economic circumstances and changing demands. It remains our best means of managing change with residents and communities playing a key role in shaping their area's future.

The last decade has seen a myriad of changes to the planning system. This paper does not call for a raft of further changes but rather a series of targeted refinements to ensure that the system we have is optimised to do its job as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Meeting our nation's needs

The major challenge facing the incoming government will be delivering sustained economic growth. Positive and proactive spatial planning can play a vital role in this work in a way that respects the need for localism and local accountability.

Infrastructure is vital to the success of any modern economy; it drives growth, creates jobs and generates the networks that allow businesses and organisations to thrive. Already the National Infrastructure Plan sets out Government priorities for transport, energy, communications and environmental systems. Homes and jobs are equally vital to achieving economic growth. Accelerating delivery can most effectively be achieved through designation of areas for major growth at national level. These could take the form of new sustainable settlements based on the principles of good urban design, linked to national infrastructure investments and delivered through private public partnerships. The Society would welcome the opportunity to work with the new Government on the introduction of a National Policy Statement to designate new major growth areas.

As planners working in the public interest, the Planning Officers Society clearly supports the necessity to ensure that a community's needs, particularly for housing, are met through the planning system. We accept that this is not always achieved. Whilst there are many reasons for this, we do consider that there are features of the current system that need refinement to ensure that they work better and serve our communities well.

The current system of development plans, as introduced in 2004 and subsequently refined, is essentially sound but there are a number of areas where it could be improved:

- The Duty to Cooperate is challenging and too many plans are failing because of shortcomings in this area, particularly in terms of establishing cross boundary objectively assessed housing need and cooperating with authorities at different stages in their plan production.
- Agreeing the overall strategy in an area can be politically difficult, particularly with the Duty to Cooperate, and this is leading to a two plan process persisting in many areas, rather than a single Local Plan as desired by the National Planning Policy Framework.
- Despite the National Planning Policy Framework advice that a plan should receive increased weight as it progresses through the system, the soundness test towards the end of the process does undermine the potential weight that could be awarded to an emerging Plan.
- The Strategic Environmental Assessment requirements and Issues and Options stage could be applied in a more targeted way to speed up the process, perhaps focussed on strategic planning matters and matters necessary to be considered under the Duty to Cooperate.

The Planning Officers Society believes that these challenges can be addressed by adjusting the system so it operates in a more logical way:

- The vision or strategic heart of a plan is the foundation stone on which the rest of the plan is built. It should only be necessary to subject this part of the plan to Strategic Environmental Assessment. The detailed policies that are delivering this strategy should not be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment as is generally the case with Neighbourhood Plans.
- Similarly the Issues and Options stage only really makes sense in the context of the strategic matters in the plan. Issues and Options on detailed policies are often contrived, especially where there is a clear strategic direction.
- It is recognised that one size will not fit all circumstances, but the requirement for local authorities to work together across Housing Market Areas, Local Enterprise Partnership boundaries or other strategically defined areas to prepare and agree the required strategic overview of cross boundary issues, particularly housing need, must be tackled. This overview should complement other strategies for the area concerned. Clear direction, guidance and support are needed so that this vital area of planning is delivered more effectively. Without a clear understanding and agreement on the resolution of the cross boundary issues that underpin plan preparation, and the creation of suitable governance arrangements to support preparation, implementation and monitoring, future stages of plan preparation will be undermined.
- Strategic matters (as defined by the Localism Act) should be considered first and, in the context of the Duty to Cooperate, be subject to sign off by The Planning Inspectorate and fixed at an early stage in the process. This would endorse the soundness of the plan's strategy in advance of the final part of the process. This could form part of the Duty to Cooperate process.
- Recognise that the Duty to Cooperate is an on-going process and so development plan reviews will become more frequent. Indeed it is inevitable that strategic matters will emerge during plan preparation and may necessitate an early review of the plan. This should be formally recognised by DCLG and The Planning Inspectorate and so assist currently emerging plans proceed through examination to adoption.
- This would leave the drafting of the detailed policies for the delivery of the strategy as a much clearer and simpler process as it will be done in the context of a clear, agreed and sound strategy. The Planning Inspectorate role at this stage would be to hear objections to the detailed policies.
- The carrying out of the soundness test at stage 1 and limiting future involvement of The Planning Inspectorate to considering objections to detailed policies re-establishes a clear process for the plan to gain weight in decision making as it progresses through the system to final adoption.

It is considered that this restructuring and refocusing of the existing plan-making system could save time in the process overall because it ensures that resources by all parties are put into the process only where it is needed and it is done in a logical sequence thereby avoiding wasted effort. It is also felt that this approach could create a better environment for Neighbourhood Plans to flourish as the clarity it gives to the strategic vision enables parish councils and neighbourhood forums to be clear about what they need to plan for.

Making great places

The Society welcomes the importance attached in National Planning Policy Framework to the design of the built environment. With an expected improvement in the economy it is likely that there will be a step change in the rate of new development. However, it is important that in the resultant boom, design standards are not compromised and a lasting legacy is left for future generations. Therefore the planning system should continue to be enabled to promote, facilitate, manage and ensure good design.

However prospective developers need to play their part too. The Society believes that the Government should work with major developers and the volume house builders to help ensure that the expectations of National Planning Policy Framework & NPPG are recognised and delivered by all concerned. Planning Officers Society would be happy to participate in such work.

Simpler planning

Recent years have seen several initiatives that have simplified key parts of the planning system:

- The 47 pages of the National Planning Policy Framework represent a clear and succinct statement of government planning policy which can be applied as a whole in plan making and decision taking.
- The heroic work of Lord Taylor and his group in distilling the library of government guidance into an accessible web resource in the NPPG is equally welcomed.
- The Red Tape Challenge has identified the opportunity to reduce the statutory instruments that operate in our sector by 57%.

The next challenge is to repeat the Red Tape Challenge approach on the planning statutes. The planning acts have grown over the years and cover an increasing range of areas and result in a variety of processes and consent regimes. There are some 45 Acts dealing in whole or part with planning. Consolidation and simplification of these statutes is the missing part of the recent raft of reforms and Planning Officers Society is well placed to assist in this process alongside our colleagues in the Planning and Environmental Bar Association.

The planning system is often judged by the public on the effectiveness of its enforcement regime. When people experience harm from unauthorised developments, they expect us to put things right in a timely manner. Whilst there have been isolated changes and improvements over the years, the view of the Society is that more can be done. There are a range of areas where changes can easily be put in place to make the system swifter and more effective. We would be very keen to work with the next government to develop these proposals.

Tools for the job

Planners in local authorities have embraced the new world of spatial planning and have been equipping themselves with the skills and knowledge needed to take on these challenging roles. The development of skills and expertise particularly in new areas such as land economics, development viability and infrastructure provision is still on-going but must continue to be fully supported by sufficient funding and training.

Currently planning fees cover only 60% of the costs of providing an effective and efficient planning system. In 2010, in response to a government consultation, the Society strongly supported the introduction of local fee setting to enable full cost recovery. The Society would urge the introduction of full cost recovery at the earliest practical opportunity, either through individual local planning authority fee setting or a resetting of national fees so they represent true average costs. PAS has all the necessary data to do this.

Planning is the key to meeting housing needs and delivering economic growth through the creation of sustainable development

The Planning Officers Society invites the new Government to work with us on our approach to building a more efficient and effective planning system which we believe will:

- Support the development of sustained economic prosperity;
- Designate at national level areas for major growth;
- Ensure all areas have appropriate and effective strategic planning arrangements in place;
- Provide for the growing needs for jobs, homes and leisure;
- Ensure that the infrastructure necessary to support development is funded;
- Create safe and secure communities;
- Deliver sustainable development; and
- Leave a positive legacy for future generations.

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