



KING'S LYNN CIVIC SOCIETY

Member of Civic Voice

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Attn Robert Jenrick – Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

CC: James Wild, MP for King's Lynn and West Norfolk

Comments on Government Planning White Paper

Dear Minister

Kings Lynn Civic Society are very concerned about aspects of the proposed changes to the planning system. We fail to see how the proposals can achieve their stated goal of creating a more democratic process; we don't recognise aspects of the analysis of the existing system; and we are wholly unconvinced that the proposals will achieve a faster and more efficient planning process.

Overall View

- Any system requires review. Changes which allow policy guidance to 'move with the times', and which can improve existing processes, should be welcomed. However, we are extremely sceptical of the extent of the changes being promoted in the **Planning for the Future** White Paper. They are bound to take years to 'bed in', seem certain to create new problems and issues that don't presently exist and are therefore effectively a punt into the unknown. It simply cannot be ensured that they will achieve the stated goal of a faster, more efficient planning system. In our view, it would be much better to propose smaller, targeted, incremental changes over time.
- In our opinion the principal problems that have beset planning and development delivery in recent years include: cuts in local authority budgets that have impacted on the number and quality (experience) of Local Planning Authority (LPA) planning teams; previous changes in Government directives regarding policy and housing supply which have seen many planning authorities having to restart/review and re-consult on their Local Plan processes; a volatile economy, which had hardly recovered from the banking crisis before the uncertainties of Brexit and now Covid 19 were introduced. Effectively a whole planning cycle has been greatly disrupted.
- We question the emphasis on delivering new housing. Surely the greatest crisis we need to meet is climate change. The planning system could and should be laying the 'road

plan' to a *green recovery* and a carbon neutral economy. There is too little emphasis on this in these White Paper proposals. Some of the proposals would appear to run contrary to these important goals.

- We even question the Government estimates for required new housing – certainly on 'greenfield' land. A case could perhaps be made for targeted replacement of existing housing stock where it would prove too expensive to bring it up to 21st-century energy efficiency standards. But is it not the case that population growth is slowing (in the UK and around the world)? Life expectancies are not expected to greatly alter from current demographics? The 'baby boomers' are reaching the end of their lives? Immigration is being restricted? Do we really need to deliver 250,000 new houses a year? In King's Lynn, we have allocated land for new housing and sufficient consents for housing delivery targets to be met. The number of new build completions appears to relate to the economy and demand. Can potential house buyers (e.g. young adults) afford to buy? Can developers viably build new houses that potential buyers can afford?
- Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, **we fail to see how the proposals can support or grow local community engagement in planning.** They seem likely to reduce opportunities for active involvement, further distance local planning authorities from their communities and undermine or replace neighbourhood planning. If there is a lack of trust in planning now, it is because of a democratic deficit – where too much 'consultation' has become a 'tick-box' exercise and too many decisions are centralised. Ironically, the part of the planning system where communities can have most influence is the site-by-site development control process. This is what the White Paper now seeks to abolish!

A zonal approach to streamlining the development management process

To a large extent we think the current planning system already provides for a 'zonal' approach. For 'Growth Areas' read 'allocated sites'; for 'Renewal Sites', most Local Plans have general policies giving a presumption of consent for appropriate development – e.g. infill in villages; Local Development Orders are seemingly underutilised, but have been around for 15 years. As we understand it 'Protected Areas' will still need 'normal' planning applications.

However, we are very concerned about the proposals in respect of:

- a 'one size fits all' approach that we feel would come from a national approach to zoning. How will it support local distinctiveness or unique, 'evolution' of existing settlements?
- If outline consent is to be automatic, when will issues such as tree protection, ecological surveys, drainage and access be assessed? These are site-specific issues. If consent is already given for a number of houses on a site, how will reserved matters issues allow for the fact that the permitted development cannot be fitted on site unless valued site assets are lost?
- The notion that the only opportunity for community comment would be at the Local Plan making stage. The great majority of people simply do not get involved in this level of 'strategic planning' and without an extensive, national 'planning education' drive, we don't see how that will change. It is difficult to identify more than general aspirations from a community when discussing wide areas. However, most residents know how

they can respond to specific site applications (most probably for sites near where they live and that they know well). They understand the broadly 'support' or 'object' approach and many people have an understanding of the common 'planning reasons'. Most people find it much harder to articulate broader aspirations for wider areas that they may not know as well.

- Zoning seems likely to involve arbitrary lines on plans at a medium or large scale – something that many aspects of planning have been trying to move away from. Landscape character assessment, historical characterisation, green infrastructure planning and biodiversity enhancement strategies all strive to work with the intricacies of our landscapes and avoid the confines of administrative and political boundaries. In this respect, zoning seems like a retrograde step and is unlikely to be able to assist environmental planning goals.

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects

- It is our view that exclusion of communities from the existing regime is undemocratic and we would not support the regime expanding to include large housing and urban expansion schemes.

Reforming Local Plans / Faster Decision Making

- Whereas shorter, simpler and more quickly compiled Local Plans may save cost, we don't see how they will create locally appropriate and distinctive development that local communities can help shape and can ultimately support. The proposed goal of 30 months to prepare a plan seems an extremely short time frame – especially if this process will be the only opportunity for communities to review, comment on and shape plans for their area.
- We are not entirely clear how much more of the planning system can be digitised. Most information is available online now. Some authorities have not yet digitised all supplementary information (e.g. the location of TPOs), but this usually relates to a lack of resources at the LPA. In fact, it is impressive how quickly the planning system has moved into the digital age.
- Even people who are happy to utilise computers or other devices to access planning documents are unlikely to constantly scan LPA websites for updates and information. It is easy for even statutory consultees to miss new online information. Many people simply don't or cannot easily access online material. Online 'consultation' is frequently a maddening process that doesn't allow consultees to fully articulate their concerns. We feel it will remain necessary and important to engage people in a range of media – else there will be a growing disconnect between planners and the people **they work for.**
- It is ironic that the practice of putting a notice on a lamppost is belittled. We would think that this is one of the cheapest, easiest and best understood ways of alerting interested parties to a proposed planning process.

Neighbourhood Plans

- In general, we support neighbourhood planning. The NP process is potentially a very good way to engage a wider cross section of residents in community development; encourage communities to learn more about the planning system; and develop a clear vision and some local consensus on how an area might change over time.
- However, Neighbourhood Plans have not been widely adopted in unparished (generally urban) areas as it is complicated to establish a 'qualifying body'. In a large town like

King's Lynn, which has no Town Council, it has proved too daunting for any community group to take on the process. Neighbourhood Plans take a lot of time and a level of expertise to prepare – which perhaps favours communities with better initial 'civic resources'; and it is becoming clear that many Neighbourhood Plans have limited value, often repeating existing NPPF and Local Plan policy.

- A zonal system would seem to likely to undermine the potential spatial planning aspects of Neighbourhood Plans and it is not clear if NPs would be allowed to add locally specific policy in a planning system that wished to reduce the length and detail of Local Plans. Design Guides could also potentially clash with or duplicate Neighbourhood Plan policy.
- One 'incentive' of preparing a Neighbourhood Plan is that the local community then receives a larger portion of any CIL money. Would this community benefit be retained if the new single 'infrastructure levy' was introduced?

Duty to Cooperate and Sustainability Appraisal System

- Whereas it is admirable to plan to avoid unnecessary meetings between planning authorities, it is a fact that a lot of planning decisions can and do have implications for more than one LPA. It makes absolute sense for authorities to cooperate – not only in relation to housing numbers, transport and facilities planning, but also green infrastructure, flood planning and cultural issues. What would the 'duty to cooperate' be replaced by?
- Whereas 'sustainable planning' continues to be a vaguely defined concept, it is a principle at the heart of the National Planning Policy framework – and rightly so. How will communities plan to achieve carbon neutrality without a central commitment to achieving sustainable outcomes? Whereas we suspect the great majority of people find 'Sustainability Appraisals' largely unfathomable, surely the need for a third party to assess whether proposed urban growth can achieve environmentally acceptable outcomes has never been more important? (This would become even more important with a simplified 'automatic outline consent' system? Local Plans must be appropriate and deliverable.)

A new system for funding infrastructure and affordable housing

- We understand that Section 106 negotiations can be extremely protracted processes – but that is because they are typically unique to the site. As we understand it, Section 106 is meant to help enable development of a particular site and, in the past, authorities have been reprimanded for accumulating Section 106 monies for infrastructure elsewhere. We are not clear how a flat rate infrastructure levy will work across a single local planning authority – let alone the whole country.
- As promoted on its introduction, we think the CIL tax makes good sense and can directly benefit communities. CIL is not mandatory. We are unclear why some authorities have not adopted it. It is somewhat frustrating that there are many CIL exclusions (e.g. self-build) where development that will require community infrastructure, ultimately doesn't have to contribute to it. This seems like a tax loophole.

A new standard method for establishing housing requirement figures

- As noted in the overall view, we query the housing requirement figures in general. Overlay this with the objective of 'levelling up' the country by encouraging investment and growth away from the south-east, and current trends that will affect central urban

areas (shrinking retail and office need) and it could be concluded that more targeted, negotiated, regionalised development objectives for specific cities and districts would be more appropriate than a standard approach for the whole country.

- We fail to see how the ‘constraints’ planning proposed can work in a standard way over the whole country. ‘Landscape capacity assessment’ is a very subjective ‘art’ at the best of times.

Planning for beautiful places

- Whereas we entirely support the goal of improving the design quality of development, in our view, it is previous Government decisions to ‘cut red tape’ by restricting supposedly overly prescriptive planning guidance that have reduced the ability of LPAs to define clear design guidance in the first place. Funding cuts have also led many local authorities to shed technical officers (e.g. urban designers and landscape architects). It is widely accepted that having more expertise in-house ensures an authority is a ‘better client’ for external design consultants and developers. Conversely, limited in-house design expertise seems bound to impede good design policy making and even the setting of clear design briefs for external consultants.
- Nevertheless, many local authorities still retain design guides as supplementary planning documents and these can be very useful for officers, developers and the community. There may be a good case to make such guides mandatory for all authorities and to provide national guidance on what such design guidance documents should contain – but they clearly must also have regional and local diversity and detail. Design codes seem a good idea – especially for specific areas – e.g. a neighbourhood covered by a Local Development Order.
- We are sceptical of the idea of having one expert body to steer design standards for the whole country. It seems likely to centralise and homogenise design thinking – which is unlikely to be a good thing. We have previously had CABE (which the Government abolished) and we still have the Design Council (which has only managed to survive as an independent charity). We are uncomfortable with the ‘build beautiful’ mantra, as ‘beauty’ is obviously entirely subjective – even amongst trained designers.
- In general, we support the idea of the Government supporting the growth of in-house design expertise in all planning authorities and insisting on design codes – but we doubt that this ‘fits’ with the other White Paper goals of reduced planning time and creating simplified planning policy.

Energy Efficiency

- We would support high energy efficiency standards and the ‘Future Homes Standard’ sounds potentially promising. We have been there before of course, with the *Code for Sustainable Homes* – which was withdrawn by central Government. We are therefore at least 20 years late in introducing strict requirements for these building standards.

In summary, we feel that there are aspects of the White Paper that indicate that a logical analysis of some existing problems has resulted in worthwhile ideas to resolve them – even if they may throw up new problems.

However, rather too much of this document seems to be proposing to change things that do work and that we doubt very much are causing the problems attributed to them. Throwing

the whole planning system up in the air and seeing it how it lands will not help anyone for many years.

Yours sincerely

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