



The
countryside
charity

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Chief Executive
Roger Mortlock

Dear Local Plan Reforms Consultation Team,

Thank you for providing the opportunity to respond to the consultation on Local Plan reforms. We have responded to the questions set out in the consultation online and provided the salient points in our response below.

About CPRE

CPRE is the countryside charity that campaigns to promote, enhance and protect the countryside for everyone's benefit, wherever they live.

With a local CPRE in every county, we work with communities, businesses, and government, nationally and locally, to find positive and lasting ways to help the countryside thrive.

This response has been prepared collating feedback from local CPRE groups across the Country as well as expert input from planning staff and volunteers. A summary of the feedback received is provided below under each key heading through selected questions relevant to the work of CPRE.

Summary Response

CPRE has long since campaigned for a strong, effective, and transparent planning system that is genuinely plan-led and takes account of local views. Local plans are meant to set a long-term strategy for the development of an area. They also provide a statutory basis for determining planning applications and are critical to protecting the countryside; vital to tackling the twin climate and biodiversity crises.

We are pleased that the Government also recognises the importance of Local Plans in protecting and enhancing the countryside, including securing jobs and affordable homes for the people who live there, and are continuing to support a Plan-led approach. However, we remained concerned about the scope and primacy of proposed National Development Management Policies (hereafter NDMPs) and the impact they will have on local democratic decision-making. As there is no further detail provided on NDMPs in this consultation we have not been able to fully comment on the proposed framework for local development management policies.

We are also concerned that despite the Government's announcement around the establishment of ATLAS 2.0, and £13.5 million of funding to support the new team of 'leading planners and other experts', Local Planning

Authorities remain heavily underfunded and under-resourced and without additional substantial support the proposed reforms will fail to ‘speed up’ or ‘simplify’ the planning process. The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) published research on ‘resourcing the planning service’ in 2019¹ which, amongst other conclusions found that *‘reductions in budgets have forced local planning authorities to focus on development management and income generation, whilst proactive policymaking has lost out’*. We urge the Government to provide the resources Local Planning Departments desperately need to implement these proposed reforms, along with other proposed reforms, and work with local government to ensure future planning departments have the staff and funding necessary to carry out a vital public service.

Local Plan Content

We commend the Government’s commitment to a plan-led approach and agree that Local Plans must be area specific and should champion local distinctiveness. We are also broadly supportive of the proposed core principles, in particular greater emphasis being given to the importance of design of new developments in keeping with local context and vernacular.

It is, however, important to note the significant skills gap that exists in local planning departments, particularly in key technical areas such as design, conservation, energy etc. It is difficult to see how Planning Authorities will be able to produce area-wide design codes for new Local Plans without the in-house expertise and resource. Design codes will need to be flexible enough to respond to changes over the Plan period, but not weak enough that they can be exploited by developers. Research published by CPRE and UCL found that the design of new housing developments in England is overwhelmingly ‘mediocre’ or ‘poor’, with less-affluent communities the worst affected (bit.ly/PA-Research_HousingAudit2020). The research recommended an increase in the use of local design codes and design review process (including Design Review Panels) for all major developments. Schemes that fail to meet the requisite standards should be refused. However, without additional funding and expertise Local Planning Authorities (hereafter LPAs) will not be able to secure a higher standard of design for new development. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Councils currently find it difficult to defend planning refusals on design grounds, so policies and design codes must set clear parameters that new developments have to meet. The Government needs to commit to providing adequate funding to LPAs (and other important public bodies such as the Design Council/CABE) in order to enable them to upskill and hire officers with the relevant expertise to implement the proposed changes and champion high quality design.

We would like to reiterate our position that NDMPs should not take precedence over Local Plans. We are supportive of any efforts to make the planning system more accessible and clear for members of the public and acknowledge that Local Plans can sometimes be lengthy and reiterate National Planning Policy Framework (hereafter NPPF) wording verbatim. As such, it makes sense to consolidate those replicated policies in national policy and remove them from Local Plans. Notwithstanding this, we continue to raise concerns that an over-reliance on NDMPs could critically undermine local planning policies and remove the local democratic element of the planning process (plan-making and decision-taking). Whilst we accept NDMPs could set minimum standards in areas where there is not a Local Plan or specific policy in place, for example; Biodiversity Net Gain (hereafter BNG) ensures that a minimum net gain is delivered, Councils should be able to ‘ask for more’ than national targets and should not be stifled by them. There is a clear need for Councils to be able to set ambitious targets, particularly around carbon reduction and promoting renewables and they must have the ability ‘to go beyond’ national standards or apply a ‘NDMP+’ policy position.

¹ *Royal Town Planning Institute Research Paper, Resourcing Public Planning, Five Stories about local authority planning in England and recommendations for the next chapter, July 2019 (found at: [RTPI | Resourcing Public Planning](#))*

Proposed 30 month Timetable

The timetable as currently proposed provides an unrealistic view of resources and should, therefore, be reconsidered.

We accept that there have been considerable delays to adoption across the board however, the fault for this lies primarily with Central Government. LPAs are under a lot of pressure, with teams having had substantial budget cuts leading to staff churn, a lack of in-house expertise (coupled with a greater reliance on private sector agencies) and an increasing focus on targets for permissions rather than quality of decision-making. Adding to this, national reforms have made it even more difficult to adopt Plans in a timely fashion as the national planning policy context has been unsettled for several years, with Plans put on hold as a result. We disagree with the approach that LPAs should be penalised for slow or non-adoption, but should, instead, be incentivised and assisted to prepare and adopt well-evidenced and ambitious Local Plans.

The one-size-fits-all approach treats all Councils alike and does not take account of locally specific circumstances. Streamlining provides a disincentive for Councils to produce joint plans as they tend to be more difficult to produce and take longer to adopt. Duty-to-co-operate is likely to be revoked (via the Levelling Up Bill), and the increased pressure to standardise and streamline will mean less authorities opt to work together to meet housing need etc. This would be to the detriment of housing delivery as joint Plans have potential to better address need alongside other key issues such as climate change.

We are supportive of any attempt to improve transparency and public involvement in the plan-making process. Requirements for Councils to prepare a Project Initiation Document (hereafter PID) at the start of the process outlining feedback from initial public engagement activities and using this to define the vision for the Local Plan appears to be a sensible approach. However, as outlined above, Councils need to be supported and equipped to produce new documentation. It is also likely that the initial engagement, evidence gathering and PID production stage will be longer than 4 months and sufficient time should be built into the plan-making programme to allow for this.

Digitalisation

We are supportive of proposed moves towards digital planning, BUT traditional methods (site notices on lampposts etc.) remain important, particularly in rural areas. A hybrid approach should be promoted where the best aspects of current 'real world' engagement methods are not lost, whilst utilising new technologies such as; interactive whiteboards, online meeting tools and GIS mapping to assist with conveying pertinent information and engaging the public. This is particularly relevant in rural/remote areas. Social media may be a good tool to use to engage younger people, but may alienate older participants or those less tech savvy or without access to a mobile phone or computer. What is a suitable engagement tool for one demographic, will not be for another, and this should be robustly considered to ensure that all groups are reached, particularly those that may not necessarily readily engage with the planning system.

Alongside public engagement, there is a need for the suite of Local Plan documents to be available in hybrid online formats to improve and ensure accessibility. A good example of this is the Lake District Local Plan where site users can access individual policies without having to read the whole plan but are also able to access the document in full if necessary. All policy maps should be interactive and enable user to find out all of the relevant planning policies and designations to a site just by clicking on it. A good example of interactive policy mapping is the Greater Manchester policies map that could be used as a template for other authorities.

We are supportive of templates and a standardised approach to digitalisation and formatting of online documents. There should be consistency across planning departments – currently a lot of websites are not very user friendly.

Evidence

We do not agree with the proposal to remove the justified requirement - Plans should be continue to be justified as currently set out in the NPPF (paragraph 35). This requirement ensures that LPA's explore alternative strategies as part of the plan-making process, ensuring that the eventual outcome is appropriately evidenced and evaluated.

Further, proper evidence gathering takes time and must be properly built into the plan-making process. Too much streamlining will reduce or could remove the important evidence gathering stage altogether. The current reforms include a 4 month 'notice' period where LPA's must gather evidence, undertake initial public engagement and produce a PID. This is not enough time - technical evidence can take 6 months or more to compile, and therefore this proposal should be re-thought.

Consultation and Engagement

We are supportive of a new approach for early participation, however, people do not tend to engage when the process drags on. We agree that greater effort should be given to engaging communities at site selection/Local Plan consultation stages so that people are aware of potential developments and allocated sites prior to planning applications coming forward - if digital is to be used an effective method of communicating these consultation approaches need to be developed and properly understood before being trialed. As such, it may help to have a shorter defined process as people need to give less time, but LPA's should ensure that a reduced consultation period does not become tokenistic.

The type of consultation methods chosen are incredibly important. In fact, it is more important to think about the method of consultation rather than the number of consultations offered. Public trust in the planning process is low and people often feel ignored and/or left out of the conversation. There are also issues with technical understanding and ability to access and scrutinise evidence. Therefore, all of the proposed gateways need to be clearly communicated with the opportunity to engage in a 'meaningful way'. It's important to ensure that regular, clear and accurate information is provided via a reliable source e.g. Council website and community liaison group/officer.

We remain concerned that the 'issues & options' stage will be lost as a result of the new 30 month timeframe, which is a key point for active and meaningful participation. Best practice issues and options stages should take 9 months, which would not fit into the new timetable.

As with the other proposed reforms, resourcing in LPAs remains an issue – how will Councils be able to process and evaluate consultation responses in a meaningful way within a 30-month timeframe? We question whether those responses will genuinely input into the process and eventual Local Plan as a result of this.

Monitoring

Frequent and genuine monitoring and evaluation of plan policies is important, particularly in light of the fast rate of change we are currently experiencing in terms of the climate, housing markets, retail habits etc. However, LPAs need to be adequately equipped to be able to undertake these processes and additional support and funding should be provided to enable them to do so.

Supplementary Plans

We agree that supplementary plans should hold the same weight, however, the overarching strategic and development management (DM) policies should remain in the main Local Plan.

We do not agree that Supplementary Planning Documents (hereafter SPDs) or Supplementary Planning Guidance (hereafter SPGs) should be discarded as they contain useful, specific guidance particularly around technical areas such as; sustainable design, conservation, arboricultural impacts etc. Instead SPDs and SPGs should be better utilised.

Minerals and Waste Plans

Minerals and Waste Plans should be kept separate from the Local Plan as they are complex and cover specific issues. However, they should be updated regularly on a concurrent basis to ensure that policies within both documents are aligned and are not contradictory.

We agree that it is useful to integrate the preparation and adoption process with Local Plans for consistency. However, sufficient time should be allowed for new authorities/joint authorities to produce them. For example, Lincolnshire have a joint Local Plan across 3 authorities. The draft policies on climate change adaption and carbon reduction were removed at examination due to an out-of-date minerals and waste plan, despite the proposed policies being aspirational and helping to combat climate change. (NB: The removal of ambitious climate change policies could be resolved through the introduction of a minimum carbon reduction NDMP.)

Community Land Auctions

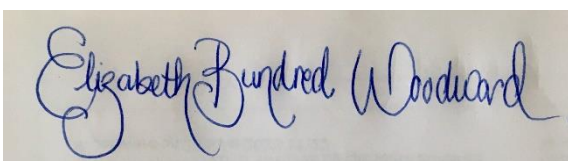
In line with the recently published CPRE Manifesto (General-Election-Manifesto-Booklet-2023_Online.pdf (cpre.org.uk)) we are supportive of moves to enable Councils to abolish hope value or at least capture land value uplift in order to deliver greater numbers of social rented homes across the country. Council-led development encourages faster build-out rates and therefore would deliver more housing, including affordable housing.

Saving Existing Plans and Transition Stages

Areas with new boundaries, such as Cumbria will likely need longer than 30 months for their first plan at least. This must be factored into the process.

Thank you again for inviting CPRE to contribute to the Government's proposals for Local Plan reform. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any aspect of the response further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Elizabeth Bundred Woodward". The signature is written in a cursive style on a light-colored background.

Elizabeth Bundred Woodward, MRTPI
Planning Policy Lead on behalf of CPRE