

Christopher Pincher's speech to the District Councils' Network

The first thing on my mind, of course, is the COVID emergency.

Councillors, local government officials, national government officials and MPs – everybody has had a pretty torrid time over the past eight or nine months trying to grapple with this emergency and serve the people as we were elected to do.

I am profoundly conscious that it has been a challenge for everyone both professionally and personally so I want to say, first of all, thank you to everybody for everything that you are doing and will continue to do to support your local communities.

There has been a huge amount of collaboration between national government and local government and it's resulted in some fantastic services to local people.

There's an essay by George Orwell which he wrote in 1941 called The Lion and the Unicorn in which he said that the country is coming together to face a deadly foe. And that's effectively what we had to do over the last eight or nine months during this unique emergency.

I hope you'll agree that government has done as much as it can to support local government through these trials, with £4.3 billion made available to local government to deal with the emergency.

If you take the local government, local businesses, local community funding in total, we've spent £27 billion to support local government.

Building

In the years that come we need to rebuild our economy, we need to rebuild our communities, and we need to build back better.

We need to transform what we build. We've been pretty successful over the last 10 years with respect to housing.

We've built 1.5 million new homes – 240,000 of them last year.

The government's manifesto aim is to build 300,000 new homes each year by the middle of the decade to give people the opportunity to own their own home, as I said in the House of Commons just a few days ago, and also to protect an enhanced environment, increase biodiversity, and to protect our green spaces.

These are all crucial items on our agenda and we need your help to deliver them as you have been doing over the last ten or so years. Because the agenda is ambitious and the present planning system, we do not feel, can meet it.

That is why we're consulting on the local housing need and our white paper on planning reform.

They are two separate consultations. Let me give you a little bit of background as to why we're doing the first and then talk some more about why we're doing the second.

Local plans do not provide for the ambition we have – 300,000 new homes each year – nor enough to meet the demands of organisations and such as KPMG and Shelter, both of which say we need to be building north of 250,000 homes a year to deal with the housing challenges that we have.

So we have commissioned a consultation on the local housing need methodology.

It is a real consultation that closed just under two weeks ago on the 1st of October we will reflect very carefully on the feedback that we have received.

Fundamentally the initial driver, the first driver of need, must be affordability because there are parts of our country, not just in the south and the south east, where the affordability is low and people who want and need to live in a certain place and work in that place cannot afford to do so – cannot afford to buy or to rent – and we need to find ways of dealing with that.

We also need to make sure that we are building homes in the right places to meet our wider aspirations to level up the country.

Planning reform

The longer-term proposals that we have tabled are for our planning reform.

Anybody that's been engaged in the planning process, and you have been more closely engaged than most, will recognise the present system is essentially opaque, very difficult to navigate, is slow, and is analogue.

There is a lot of bumph to work your way through and we can improve on that massively in the digital age.

And that's why we've proposed a much more simple, straightforward approach to digitalised planning where we have map-based systems that local communities can see and get much more engaged with, so that they can feel more empowered about the design of their communities.

We want a system which is more productive and strategic and upfront rather than one which is rear-guard.

We want one as well which delivers infrastructure where it is needed upfront and in a way that local communities can really buy into.

Crucially, we want to make sure that the new system of planning engenders beautiful design where local communities have a real say in what their built environment is going to look like.

Right now, something like 3% of the local populations engage in the planning process. That can fall to something like 1% when it comes to the design of local plans.

So you we want a system which is much more engaging much more democratically empowering and gives communities a real opportunity to play a role in the design of their environments with the right infrastructure to support it, so we're not building estate after estate after estate, but we are place making.

It's a real challenge. I welcome and value the input that you and your colleagues will provide because to get this right we cannot simply, from Westminster, snap our fingers, legislate and say 'we have said so, make it so.'

The 1947 act, when it was introduced, took something like 15 to 18 years to fully roll out. The 1990 act took a similar amount of time. 4 in 11 changes still haven't been fully rolled out.

If we're going to make this work, we're not talking about legislative change. We're talking about systemic and cultural change about the way we do planning.

And I say all that because the consultation on our white paper is not the end of the process, it's the start.

There will be lots of opportunities for people to get involved, for stakeholders to provide their thoughts on how we can make the new planning system work well and be rolled out quickly.

I invite you and your colleagues to get involved in that challenge, support us, and keep doing what you do so well, which is build out for the 21st century.

So we've got a country we can be proud of – so that we've got better and more sustainable homes in which people and communities can live and enjoy.