

Local authority town planning: planning for prosperous communities

Good morning, I really am delighted to be here.

It's certainly a very interesting time to be meeting!

I would like to start by thanking you, our committed, talented planning professionals who are working hard on the ground to deliver the homes this country needs.

While Brexit dominates the headlines, our mission to drive housing supply across the country continues.

And as you know your work is central to realising this ambition.

So, a big thanks for all of your efforts – efforts that are paying off.

Recent figures show that the number of homes being built has hit an 11-year high.

But you know, more than most, that there's much more to do to deliver the homes we need.

Our planning system is a vital lever in making this happen – in helping us reach our goal of delivering 300,000 new homes a year by the middle of the next decade.

In shaping the places we – and generations to come – call home.

This is a big ambition that can only be achieved with your help – with the planning system firing on all cylinders, acting not as a bottleneck, but turbocharging supply.

With the planning system helping you do the best job you can.

Planning reforms and revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

That's why we've made planning reform a priority; to speed up and simplify the process for everyone involved, to plan for the homes we need, to not just protect but enhance the environment.

To fundamentally transform how we build and what we build, so that it's much more in tune with the local context and what people want.

In doing so, we've worked with you to radically overhaul the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF); making it much simpler and easier to use.

And what a journey it's been.

When it was first published in 2012, the NPPF reduced over 1000 pages of individual policy statements into just 60.

We consolidated tons of different planning guidance which was impossible to find and put it all in one place.

The framework is now more accessible than ever before.

We've moved away from a clunky online portal to an easy-to-find web page which has been accessed over 480,000 times in the last year alone.

And my department's IT team tell me that there are four times more people viewing the NPPF online today than there were in 2013! Who would have known that planning was so fascinating?!

The latest changes; to further streamline planning and establish a standard method for assessing housing need, take this drive for clarity, simplicity and accessibility up another gear.

And I'm pleased to see that these important reforms have been welcomed by the sector along with other measures to cut red tape and clarify wording to avoid lengthy legal challenges that hold up developments.

But the NPPF can't be viewed in isolation.

The wide-ranging reforms we've made to simplify the planning process are having a massive impact:

- 90% of councils now have an adopted Local Plan compared to just 17% in 2010.
- More communities are now having a direct role in place-making for their local area with over 2,600 different groups having started the neighbourhood planning process since 2012.
- That means millions of people have been able to take a leading role in setting a clear plan for the future of their community – making sure there's a clear vision in place for housing in their local area.

It's also right that councils and communities feel the full benefits of the development and regeneration which is taking place around them.

The Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 contributions – bringing in over £6 billion a year to planning authorities – have a vital role to play in supporting the creation of new roads, parks, play areas and facilities that should accompany new housing developments.

And our new approach to viability in the NPPF reduces delays in negotiating these vital developer contributions.

We've amended the Community Infrastructure Legislation regulations too – removing the restriction on pooling section 106 planning obligations on big infrastructure projects.

This gives local authorities much needed flexibility to deliver the infrastructure residents want while making sure that section 106 planning obligations do not delay housing delivery.

Protecting the environment for future generations

The revised NPPF also takes a long view; recognising the role that smart planning and good design plays to not just protect, but enhance, our environment and tackle climate change.

As such, it asks local authorities to seek net gains for biodiversity when granting planning permissions.

It encourages the provision of green infrastructure, recognises the important status of Local Wildlife Sites, ancient and veteran trees and woodland and prevents unacceptable development in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding National Beauty.

But we know we have to do more.

Which is why my department is working with Defra (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) and Natural England on the once-in-a-generation Environment Bill which will establish a comprehensive legal framework for environmental improvement and make net gains for biodiversity mandatory for new development.

Of course, one of the important environmental safeguards we have is the Green Belt.

And I want to be clear that our commitment to this is as strong as ever, with any changes only happening in exceptional circumstances – and, even then, development only being able to go ahead with improvements to access and environmental quality in the remaining Green Belt.

Protecting the Green Belt goes beyond protection against development.

It's also about cracking down on illegal encampments which do untold damage to our open spaces and blight communities.

That's why we've given just under £2 million to planning authorities across the country to improve their enforcement capacity and deal with unauthorised developments and encampments.

And we're teaming up with the Royal Town Planning Institute to overhaul the national enforcement handbook to provide the latest best practice and expertise on shutting down illegal building whilst ensuring developers obtain full planning permission before a shovel hits the ground.

Because we recognise the serious responsibility we all have for the future of

our most beautiful places and for future generations who should be able to enjoy them in all their glory.

And this is where the planning system can really come into its own; ensuring that we deliver homes where they're needed most whilst protecting the Green Belt and our most precious green spaces.

Building on brownfield

That means making the most of our country's brownfield land – or previously developed land which is not in use – which offers so much untapped potential.

Only last month I visited a fantastic example of using brownfield land to benefit communities, out in Northstowe, where land which previously lay neglected and abandoned, will now become a home for hundreds of families.

Many more areas could benefit from a similar approach.

Which is why we're championing the take-up of brownfield land by encouraging the remediation of degraded or contaminated spaces, promoting the development of under-utilised land and opening up opportunities to build upward and use space above residential and commercial properties.

And, building on the challenge we issued to local authorities in 2015 to prioritise brownfield land for redevelopment, all local planning authorities now have a brownfield register.

These brownfield registers are published locally – providing residents with easily accessible information on the development that can take place in their neighbourhoods while providing valuable information to support planning and investment decisions.

And I'd like to see the planning system continue getting behind this work by giving significant weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements for new development.

We can see that this resourceful, imaginative approach is paying dividends with 53% of new residential addresses registered last year on brownfield.

I'd like to see that figure go up again. And it needs to continue going up in the years ahead.

The “Planning A Team”

This all adds up to a bold and ambitious vision for the future of house building in England.

And I'm aware that we're asking a lot of you to help us make this a reality, especially given the pressures and financial constraints that local authorities face.

The message you've sent us is clear.

You need central government to give you the tools and resources to deliver on your local plans and drive the development, regeneration and new neighbourhoods that your residents want.

And we've responded to that call for more support with over £22 million from our Planning Delivery Fund to:

- improve design,
- drive digital innovation,
- implement enforcement and spatial planning initiatives.

We've also provided the Royal Town Planning Institute with funding to grant bursaries for new planners – attracting the best and the brightest into the sector and creating a new generation of highly skilled, knowledgeable professionals to help build a Britain that's fit for the 21st Century.

As you will know, planning application fees were also increased by 20 per cent last year – providing in the region of £50 million of income revenue annually for local planning authorities – helping to fund new staff and new technology to meet long-term challenges.

But I want to go further to boost our planning departments – to help you fast-track projects, accelerate regeneration and provide the advice and technical know-how that's needed.

To help, we're exploring the creation of a "Planning A Team" – a group of experts in a range of skills that can support planning and help councils where they need it the most.

We will shortly set out further details on how this "Planning A Team" will work with councils who want and need them.

We will also consult on measures to speed up and simplify the planning process and ramp up supply – delivering on our ambition to reduce planning conditions by a third and freeing up developers so they can get on and build. And if anyone here today can offer any thoughts on what you would like to see from the 'A-team' that would be very helpful feedback for us.

We'll be building on the range of permitted development rights we have already introduced.

And we are looking at reforms in rural as well as urban communities.

Last year, we amended the permitted development right to allow change of use for up to five new homes on each farm to further support farmers and rural workers.

We're also allowing offices, shops and barns to be converted to residential

use – an approach that's created 46,000 new homes in the last three years.

We are taking this literally to the next level by introducing rights to allow homes to be built above existing freestanding blocks of flats and commercial premises.

The government is also looking at extending the permission in principle approach to support demolishing old commercial buildings and their replacement with new homes.

This will be a powerful tool to help councils clear the way for new development and revitalised high streets.

Conclusion: working together

So, we're entering a new and exciting era for planning, development and regeneration in this country.

An era which will put local authorities and local residents in the driving seat.

Because we know that no-one is better placed to take decisions on the planning issues that affect them on a daily basis.

We therefore want to empower you to deliver that. To make these great places to live, work and be happy not just now, but for generations to come.

In the knowledge that the best developments are coming forward, and we can see these coming forward with new designs, a sense of place, a new sense of purpose – building strong communities.

300,000 homes in the mid-2020s is a lot, so we need to get it right.

Those buildings have to be beautiful, we've talked about Building Better, Building Beautiful.

They have to be safe, they have to accommodate all ages in all areas and you are at the very forefront of making that happen.

Thank you very much.