

# The future of the planning system in England

## Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee – Call for Evidence

Consultation response, by Planning Oxfordshire's  
Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS)

October 2020

POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) are a small group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focussed primarily on planning and transport in Oxfordshire.

(For more information go to [www.poetsplanningoxon.uk](http://www.poetsplanningoxon.uk)).

*Question 1: Is the current planning system working as it should do? What changes might need to be made? Are the Government's proposals the right approach?*

We do not consider that the current planning system is fulfilling its potential. It has become too focused on process, at the expense of losing its essential and valuable role of promoting sustainable development which focuses on the health and well-being of all. Both the Raynsford review of the planning system and the UK2070 Commission reports contain a raft of evidence that is lacking from the White Paper, and propose reforms which we would support.

Important improvements would include the introduction of national and regional spatial planning, such as exist in Scotland and Wales; in the interim, enabling the Duty to Co-operate to cover more than housing allocations, and creating some form of democratically accountable strategic cross-boundary planning.

Restoring funding and powers to LPAs is also a key part of a revitalised planning system.

In response to the Select Committee's last sub-question, we strongly believe that the government's proposals are not the right approach, and lack an evidence base. The proposals will not enable planning to play its key role in addressing the climate emergency, or in supporting people's health and well-being. For instance, the White Paper contains no clear proposals to coordinate land use and transport planning so as to reduce the need to travel and encourage active modes for necessary trips.

Further details of our concerns are set out in our response to the White Paper which can be found here: <https://www.poetsplanningoxon.uk/poets-planning-white-paper-centralising-power-while-decentralising-blame-010920.pdf>

*Question 2: In seeking to build 300,000 homes a year, is the greatest obstacle the planning system or the subsequent build-out of properties with permission?*

We refer the Committee to the Letwin Report, which concludes problems lie in the build-out. The issues mainly lie in a combination of volume house-builders' business model (to maximise shareholder benefit, by eking out supply to keep up prices), together with a lack of social/public and genuinely affordable housing.

Provision of additional social housing provision would increase choice, and paradoxically brings increased competition into the housing market. This was the case in the '50s and '60s when c 300,000 dwellings pa were achieved by both Labour and Conservative governments – with Council housing providing roughly half.

*Question 3: How can the planning system ensure that buildings are beautiful and fit for purpose?*

The recent extensions of Permitted Development rights should be withdrawn: all new buildings, including houses, should meet decent space, accessibility, energy,

cooling, thermal and water-efficiency etc standards, and be fit for purpose and adaptable for the medium-long term.

To some extent, the Committee's question fails to address the point that the White Paper also misses, which is that "beauty" is about much more than individual buildings – it involves urban design, accessibility and transport planning, and provision of green space, sustainable drainage, biodiversity and ecosystems, etc.

*Question 4: What approach should be used to determine the housing need and requirement of a local authority?*

We would support a proper democratically-accountable level of strategic planning. Housing figures should be the outcome, not the determinant, of the plan-making process.

*Question 5: What is the best approach to ensure public engagement in the planning system? What role should modern technology and data play in this?*

It is important to enable all to engage both in development plan-making, and in development decisions affecting the local area. Locally-elected councillors have a key role to play. It is also crucial that the Planning Inspectorate remains demonstrably independent, to give public confidence in the plan-making and development decision-making processes. The shift to newer technologies, such as enabling the visualisation of developments and proposals, offers many opportunities, but it must ensure equitable opportunities for participation, and not reinforce any digital, time or other resource divides (for instance, amongst different socio-economic or age groups).

We oppose the White Paper's proposal to reduce people's right to be heard at plan-making and development decision stages.

*Question 6: How can the planning system ensure adequate and reasonable protection for areas and buildings of environmental, historical, and architectural importance?*

Areas of environmental importance need protecting at different scales: for instance, chalk streams, and upland natural flood management, require catchment-scale planning. In many ways, the existing protections for such buildings and areas are reasonably fit for purpose: however, a key problem is lack of funding. For example, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have received significant government funding over the last decade, while Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) have received none. The White Paper proposals, by designating large areas for growth, are likely to threaten areas which should be protected: for instance, it is entirely unclear what protection will be afforded to Nature Recovery Networks, on which work is currently taking place around the country.

*Question 7: What changes, if any, are needed to the green belt?*

More needs to be done to emphasise and implement the Green Belt's positive purposes (public access, recreation, biodiversity, and perhaps additionally local food production, etc). Whatever change to boundaries does take place should be based on a democratic and strategic approach in which the public can have reasonable faith.

*Question 8: What progress has been made since the Committee's 2018 report on capturing land value and how might the proposals improve outcomes? What further steps might also be needed?*

We regard the issue of Land Value Capture (LVC) as critical, and refer you to our paper of April 2020 which can be found here:

<https://www.poetsplanningoxon.uk/poets-land-value-capture-300420.pdf>.

We oppose the White Paper's proposals for centralising LVC arrangements.