

“Friends of the Earth believes that the land use planning system is the best way in which communities make decisions, to deliver sustainable development”

The planning system is the principal means of delivering sustainable development through fair and participative decision-making. The system emerged from an understanding that uncontrolled private sector development led to a wide range of social, environmental and economic problems.

Sustainable development is a vital concept that encompasses key values, such as community participation and the integration of social, environmental and economic objectives. This concept should form the basis of our planning system.

THE SUCCESS OF PLANNING

Planning has delivered a wide range of benefits to our society that are often underestimated, particularly in terms of community participation and creating places where people want to live.

THE CURRENT REFORM AGENDA

The forthcoming White Paper on land use planning is based on a series of reviews commissioned by the Treasury. In this report we will discuss the recommendations from the Barker report, since they undermine the core statutory purpose of planning – which is to promote sustainable development.

Friends of the Earth is calling for a considered review of the land use planning system that gives people a real voice in decision-making

HOW TO IMPROVE PLANNING

- Adopt a robust vision of a sustainable community that delivers social justice within environmental limits.
- Use a higher standard of sustainable development, by placing emphasis on integration of social, economic and environmental objectives.
- Put a statutory obligation on local authorities to reduce carbon emissions.
- Improve the quality of public participation.

The Barker report recommends
streamlining the process of approving
major infrastructure projects

IN WHOSE INTEREST?

“The moral question is the most important. Seeking to rush through major infrastructure projects by reducing public involvement in the decision-making process will cause conflict, does not address the reasons for delay, and will bring the Government into disrepute”

The Barker report proposes a process that substantially reduces the opportunities for members of the public to participate meaningfully in decisions that will have a fundamental impact on their lives. This is not worthy of a democratic society.


Reducing public involvement in inquiries by preventing people from discussing issues, such as the need for nuclear power stations, will not deliver decisions in the public interest. By formulating national statements of policy, the Government and a few select unaccountable experts will be in the position of proposing site specific projects, which are not properly tested or assessed by the public.

Attempts to limit people from questioning national statements at public inquiries will be controversial and bring the process into disrepute, further distancing people from Government decisions and increasing the risk of conflict.

The Government needs to examine the real reasons for delay in delivering major infrastructure projects – including the role of the private sector in bringing forward better and more appropriate applications

HOW TO MAKE BETTER DECISIONS

- Ensure that major projects are decided with local input, democratic accountability, within the framework of sustainable development.
- Provide more guidance for developers on the criteria that major infrastructure projects need to meet.
- Include major infrastructure needs in the strategic planning process, securing an existing means of independent testing and public scrutiny.



The Barker report recommends
removing the needs test
for retailing facilities

LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

“The needs test for new supermarket development is a vital way of defending our existing town centres. Its removal would be a major set back”

The Barker report claims that business does not have sufficient influence in the planning system and that the removal of planning regulation will give private sector needs greater weight in the process. The removal of the needs test for retail development is one example of giving the private sector too much influence over the needs of communities.

Town centres and local shops are increasingly affected by the domination of supermarkets and there is a need for more community control. The removal of the needs test for applications outside the local plan would have a severe and immediate impact of undermining planning for retail development. The needs test protects vital and diverse town centres. Without it there would be a free for all between the big retailers, resulting in less choice for the local consumer.

In practice, the needs test is a vital way of understanding how an out-of-town location will affect the retail vibrancy of the existing town centre. It is an important tool in safeguarding distinctiveness in town centres and promoting sustainable local economies.

Without understanding need and the impact of a development on meeting that need, it is impossible to have a full picture. Making blind choices in order to benefit Asda Wal-Mart¹ rather than local communities is a clear statement of private sector over public interest

HOW TO PROMOTE LOCAL SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIES

- Support local shops and producers by retaining and strengthening the needs test.
- Review local competition and diversity as part of the test, in order to provide choice and safeguard local suppliers, producers and shopkeepers.
- Ensure the national planning policy statement on economic development and town centres recognises the value of local economies .

¹ The recommendation in the Barker Report on Land-Use Planning is based upon almost identical evidence given to the Competition Commission by Asda Wal-Mart.

The Barker report

recommends reducing the

voice of local people

PLAYING A PART

“Community involvement is essential to the credibility and purpose of the land use planning system. It validates decision-making in the public interest, and provides essential local input for

The recommendations of the report have not been informed by research on public participation. There is a brief mention of the importance of people in the process, but the recommendations systematically remove effective involvement.

THE ABOLITION OF THE ISSUES AND OPTIONS STAGE OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The removal of the issues and options stage has a big impact on the voice of local people. It is here that participation works best – before decisions have been set in stone. The removal of this stage increases conflict because it only allows people to object to draft plans in which they have had no previous input.

THE ABOLITION OF INDEPENDENT TESTING OF STATEMENTS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT (SCI)

SCIs are a vital way of ensuring that people know what standards they can expect from the planning process. At the moment, these are independently tested by the Planning Inspectorate. The recommendation to abolish this process would result in reduced quality and engagement with the planning process.

The Government must carry out an effective review of planning in order to understand how blockages to greater community participation can be removed. Effective action on this will further the development of citizenship, understanding and inclusion

HOW TO BUILD ENGAGED COMMUNITIES

- Recognise the role of participation in delivering sustainable development.
- Build capacity and training on community engagement and communication techniques into the planning service.
- Focus the planning service delivery grant on involving the community in plan-making, and raising its profile as a delivery mechanism for sustainable development.
- Require minimum standards of participation to be enshrined in SCIs, which must be independently tested.

DEVELOPMENT AT ANY COST?

“Presuming in favour of development would completely undermine our ability to deliver sustainable development and address climate change”

The presumption in favour of development would come into effect when the local plan is imprecise, out-of-date or vague. This is an incredibly damaging proposal which will undermine the objectives of the land use planning system and marginalise communities further.

A presumption in favour of development undermines the neutrality of a system designed to deliver sustainable development and not just economic growth.

It will also encourage speculative behaviour by developers to produce proposals, which have not been tested on sustainable development criteria or by participative processes.

The Government is proposing to undermine the planning system in favour of developers. The recommendation will put huge pressure on the planning services by forcing them to operate a dual system; one for developments within the local plan and one for those outside.

The Government must demonstrate its commitment to realising sustainable development. Through the local plan process private interests are set within a framework of sustainable development, public interest, and the need to address climate change. This does not reduce economic activity, but directs it to benefit the community as a whole

HOW TO IMPLEMENT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

- Create a strong and accessible planning system, which integrates environmental, social and economic issues, and has a duty to deliver sustainable development.
- Ensure decisions on land use are subject to democratic accountability and local community involvement, as well as national planning policy.
- Introduce third party rights of appeal on speculative developments outside of local plans to ensure a balanced process.

The Barker report recommends
minimising the strategic
environmental assessment process

ENVIRONMENTAL LIMITS

“Threats to wildlife, habitats and greenbelt because of the removal of safeguards will be disastrous for environmental quality and biodiversity in the UK”

The recommendation to streamline the sustainability appraisal process will remove important environmental safeguards in the testing of future development. It will also undermine the Government's attempts to reduce carbon emissions.

The strategic environmental assessment process is the only way to assess the impact of policies and proposals in order to make improvements and to deliver sustainable development.

The recommendation to reduce the detail of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) has no systematic evidence base. Environmental statements are a vital way of understanding the impact of major developments. Attempts to restrict the application of EIAs are likely to result in a greater number of legal challenges and increased uncertainty.

The Government should strengthen and clarify the requirements of the EIA to enable better decision-making. The assessments should be independent and built on an expertly researched evidence base. Local figures on air, soil and water quality must be included to provide more detailed assessments

HOW TO IMPROVE IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

- Require the independent commission of EIAs to ensure quality and standardisation.
- Provide training and sharing of best practice on the production of strategic environmental assessments to improve the quality of plans and policies.
- Require better and standardised environmental information across the country as demanded by the evidence base required to make better decisions.

The planning system cannot survive an ill-considered reform package which fails to deal with the central issue of fairness and equity.

Friends of the Earth is committed to a reformed planning system which works for everyone.

We believe that with reform, land use planning has the potential to deliver a social policy agenda of inclusion, community empowerment, democratic renewal, and the delivery of sustainable development.

Friends of the Earth is:

- the UK's most influential national environmental campaigning organisation
- the most extensive environmental network in the world, with around one million supporters across five continents, and more than 70 national organisations worldwide
- a unique network of campaigning local groups, working in more than 200 communities throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- dependent on individuals for over 90 per cent of its income.

Making life better for people by inspiring solutions to environmental problems

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