

Planning for the Future:

Delivering planning reform

Introduction

The United Kingdom has enjoyed one of the most progressive spatial planning frameworks anywhere in the world. Our planning system helps foster cohesive communities, retain open green spaces and provide for economic activity.

While this framework benefits from well-informed reforms, future UK sustainable development ambitions will be undermined by rushed proposals motivated by single issue agendas. It is of great concern that current pressures to improve the performance of this system may mistakenly strip away the democratic and accountable safeguards that benefit wider society.

This paper makes the case for the importance of spatial planning as a democratic, inclusive and progressive system able to integrate the varying demands of development such as social, environmental and economic progress. Sustainable development is the practical outcome that the land-use planning system aims to achieve, and is enshrined at the heart of Planning Policy Statement 1. This paper sets out this context, explores a possible 'New vision for planning' and lists a series of alternative reforms entitled 'How do we get there'.

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What is planning and should we care?

Planning is often seen solely in the context of the statutory system: regional and local plans that have become key arenas for the mediation of change. But planning goes beyond these legal boundaries; it has unique participative and democratic components as well.

The ideals of planning are about social equity and access to high quality natural and urban environments. Yet successive reforms of the system have emphasised technocratic measures which have often lost sight of the purpose of planning. The recent debates on the social value of planning have been dominated by economic rationale. Any reforms however should be balanced with the wider benefits of planning, such as its role in protecting the environment as well as creating a context for rational private sector investment decisions.

Reform needs to be balanced

Government has reviewed and reformed the planning system on a continual basis in recent years. The 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act rewrote the planning system in England and Wales. It was followed almost immediately by a series of debates dominated by deregulation pressures. Two Treasury-commissioned reports by Kate Barker have formed the basis of the 2007 Planning White Paper. It is important to recognise that these reviews focussed purely on market constraints, concluding recommendations for the entire planning system without considering social and environmental concerns in any meaningful way.

The latest round of reforms lack clarity about the broad purpose of planning. This could be very damaging for UK societies and the environment. Rather than addressing how we achieve development in ways that provide lasting solutions, to social exclusion or climate change for example, the approach has been piecemeal. It has lacked a clear evidence base and any sense of the core values that might shape the planning system.

If planning is not grounded in these core values, there is a risk that it will become little more than a bureaucratic shell. There is a danger that the current narrow economic analysis will progress almost entirely unchallenged to form the basis of the future system.

The Barker reports have led to a new round of reforms focused on reducing public participation in planning. The planning system aims to deliver a range of social, economic and environmental policy goals through the reshaping of land use decisions. Yet far from using planning as a contributor to the well being of society recent reform has been driven by just one central idea: that the planning system holds back the market.

This paper sets out a blueprint for planning that seeks not to exclude economic arguments but rather to promote them as part of an integrated vision of sustainable development. Social and environmental justice and respect for critical environmental limits must not be undermined by simple economic accounting, as the current direction of reforms suggest.

The current challenges

Many of the founding values of the planning system are relevant today. The central ideal of ensuring the way we live reflects the public interest rather than the needs of individuals or the private sector is perhaps more relevant than ever before. Other pressures on the system include the globalised economic context, increased demands of citizen participation and the goal of delivering social, economic and environmental justice in an integrated manner.

All of these ideas require new skills and cultures, and a dynamism that has often been lacking from private and public sector planning practitioners. The current proposals contain no measures to open up planning decisions and deliver a genuine dialogue with the communities that planners are meant to plan for.

Public participation is vital to the future of planning. Government has signalled its desire for greater community empowerment yet the proposed reforms marginalise local voices. The reform of Major Infrastructure Projects is a clear example of the proposed process precipitating a substantial loss of meaningful community engagement.

Sustainable development

The strategic goal of planning is to deliver sustainable development and specifically to give spatial expression to the mission and values of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy. Economic progress, social justice and living within environmental limits are vital components of this goal. Sustainable development remains a largely unmet aspiration in many parts of the UK because decisions continue to be characterised by crude trade-offs between people and the environment rather than proper integration of social, economic and environmental goals.

The environmental and social crisis of house building has begun to demonstrate that integrating all three aspects of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental – can be done through carbon-zero homes that are highly resource-efficient. The embryonic sustainable construction and renewable energy industries show how the challenge of good regulation to protect the environment and the development of vibrant markets and industries can be met.

A new vision for planning

If sustainable development remains the goal of planning then we have to be clear about the key guiding values which help us to achieve this. The planning system must be:

- **Interventionist**
- **Comprehensive**
- **Democratic**
- **Participative**
- **Efficient**

Interventionist

The planning system must be strongly interventionist and regulate economic development for the wider benefit of society and the environment. Spatial planning is fundamental to achieving this benefit. Good spatial guidelines not only ensure development is as good as possible, but also create certainty for business and investment and as such should be perceived as benefit rather than burden. And specific goals, for example in tackling climate change, are necessarily interventionist.

Barker has examined a number of ways of using price signals to control the development of land but all these measures are crude accounting mechanisms that fail to account for either environmental costs or for community aspirations. Assumptions underpinned simply by cost-benefit analysis may be theoretically attractive but are of limited use in the real world of plan making in which decisions are contested and must ultimately account for the full complexities of society.

Comprehensive

The recent 2007 Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP) report on the urban environment highlighted the need to consider more holistically the urban environment and issues of place, quality of life and health. While planning alone cannot deal with all these issues, it can make an important contribution to key factors that influence urban impacts such as travel patterns. This report was preceded by the 2002 RCEP report recommending that planning be given a wider remit to deal with agriculture and forestry in order that it could shape sustainable development.

Rather than restricting the purpose of planning, as the new proposals would do, we should be exploring how to expand its role so as to better shape strategic change. Most importantly is the missing national tier of planning in England. Many of the most pressing issues of resource consumption and infrastructure provision require national integration.

The Government decision to commission eight separate national statements on infrastructure rather than one strategic plan not only misses the need for an integrated approach but also condemns us to the silo mentality of inter-departmental working which has proved so problematic in the past.

Democratic and Participative

The so-called people problem is characterised, usually incorrectly, as the irresponsible action of local people or elected members when they depart from what others regard as legitimate development, so adding to delay and uncertainty. In fact the democratic and participative aspects of planning are vital to the legitimacy of the system in order to build consent.

The planning system provides a vital arena for mediation of change and this must be secured in two ways. The first way is through the promotion of participative democracy in which communities have real power to shape decisions. Participative democracy is challenging and educative and not in any way a “nimby’s charter”. It is a vital way for democratically elected representatives and officers to learn about people’s aspirations. The second way is by reinforcing democratic accountability so that elected politicians remain the arbiters of decisions and accountable for them to their electorate.

Efficient

All sectors have an interest in a responsive and efficient planning system with high standards of professionalism. While current reforms cast regulation as harmful to efficiency, it must be acknowledged that the private sector benefits from a framework of certainty to aid development decisions and provide for long-term investment stability. Current proposals do not focus enough on integrated sustainable development outcomes, reviews and the assessment of progress.

How do we get there?

Planning reform should bring fresh thinking to the future of the system. It should set out the powerful case for planning based on a balanced evaluation of current practice and the core principles that form the basis of the planning system. There are a number of direct measures Government should urgently consider:

A duty for sustainable development

The current sustainable development duty enshrined in the 2004 Act is the weakest of all possible duties requiring only that decision makers “*exercise the function with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development*” (Section 39 (2) 2004 Act). There is no definition of sustainable development in the Act or any link with the UK Sustainable Development Strategy. The duty does not apply to the new regime for the approval of Major Infrastructure Projects (MIPs).

This issue can be urgently addressed by having a meaningful legal obligation on delivering sustainable development at all tiers of planning decision-making. This would be easy to achieve by amending Section 39 of the 2004 Act and ensuring any new legislation on Major Infrastructure Projects has a parallel sustainable development duty.

A duty to reduce climate change emissions

The Planning White Paper contains no new commitments on climate change despite the pressing need to address this issue. The reform of planning should be a legal duty binding decision makers to ensure decisions serve to reduce emissions in line with Government’s established targets and the process set out in the draft Climate Change Bill. This would require the amendments of the 2004 Act and the insertion of such a duty into any new legislation on major infrastructure. Such a duty should help reshape decisions to ensure they support and not undermine the Government’s overarching climate change obligations and reshape the nature of development to achieve a low carbon economy.

A national spatial strategy for sustainable development and MIPs

The publication of separate national statements for different infrastructure requirements, each produced by separate government departments, will lead to fragmentation and lack of integration.

The answer is one unified strategic document which amounts to a national spatial framework. The framework could assist in streamlining aspects of Planning Policy Statements by directly expressing these in a spatial context. The case for such an approach is now overwhelming and such a framework should be the major strategic spatial expression of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy. This approach has been promoted and has the support of many organisations. There could be significant benefits in, for example, the integration of development and of inter-regional issues such as transport and climate change.

A duty for public participation

A duty to secure public participation is a vital part of building the legitimacy of the system. Intrinsic to this general obligation is the need to create specific legal rights that develop those laid out in section 19 of the 2004 Act. This Act guarantees a qualified right to be heard at the preparation of local plans. This right must be extended into all major Public Inquiries and particularly those for MIPs. In addition there should be a specific right to be heard based on the section 19 formulation of the 2004 Act, in the preparation of National Policy Statements.

Reform of the local planning system process

The Planning White Paper proposes reform of the Local Development Framework system through the removal of two stages of public consultation, replaced with a vaguely defined general duty to consult. This is likely to lead to less public confidence in the system.

We believe that a better route would have been not to remove public involvement but instead to simplify the number of planning documents required. The more efficient planning system in Wales would be a better model in this respect. This model could deliver increased community engagement and a lower administrative burden.

Culture change

Policy and structural change needs to go hand in hand with changing the culture of the planning service both in the private and public sectors, including within Government. Increasing skills on issues such as community engagement and climate change are vital to produce planners who are expert communicators with high professional standards. We should be looking to reshape the profession as a positive force for change and not as a set of technocratic functionaries. This requires a change in planning education to incorporate a higher standard of learning on community engagement.

It is also vital that Ministers begin to promote the importance of planning as a powerful and inclusive positive force for change and not as a barrier and blockage to action.

Conclusion

The Planning White Paper fails to grasp the opportunities of reform. The current proposals would diminish our ability to deliver sustainable development in ways that command legitimacy and the trust of the public. Planning reform could and should have been conducted in ways that build a strong consensus around key desired changes for the benefit of the economy, society and the environment jointly. Such a consensus is possible and would be much more likely to deliver lasting positive change and restore confidence in the system.

Further information on Friends of the Earth's planning resources can be found by;

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