



The planning white paper *Planning for the future* was, last week, released by the government which set out Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government's proposals on how to fundamentally reform the planning system in England. The paper is underpinned by three pillars: planning for development, planning for beautiful and sustainable places, and planning for infrastructure and connected places. As part of the paper the government has issued a consultation which seeks views on the reforms suggested and lasts until early November. In this paper the government pledges to create a simpler, faster system which facilitates a diverse and competitive housing industry. This should align with the CLA's Rural Powerhouse campaign which calls for a planning system designed for rural communities. However, the paper overlooks the potential of the countryside by not including it in its section on growth and so risks further exacerbating the divide between urban and rural areas.

### **Background**

The need for the paper is that the current system is too complex, shaped by the Town and Country Planning Act 1947. Since then, piecemeal reform has led to uncertainty and complexity in the system which favours large companies. Clearly, England has changed hugely since three quarters of a century ago and exponential growth in cities has led to disproportionate pressures on urban areas and not enough focus on rural areas, who have suffered from a lack of infrastructure investment. This paper aims to modernise the planning system and better reflect today's needs but ultimately does not focus enough on the potential of rural areas.

In order to assess what needs to change, the paper identifies the myriad problems with the current system. At present, there is not enough take up of Local Plans by local authorities, assessments of housing needs and environmental impacts are too complex, the planning process is reliant on documents and not data and too little focus on design. These weaknesses in the system have contributed to the persistent undersupply of housing across England. However, when identifying weaknesses there should have been more emphasis of the urban-rural divide with a focus on alleviating pressures in urban areas by opening up rural areas to sustainable growth. This would ensure that, going forward, there is a balanced approach to housebuilding that taps into the potential of the countryside. The government's wish to 'promote the stewardship and improvement of our precious countryside and environment' does not go far enough.

### **The new policy ideas**

The first pillar in the paper, planning for development aims to streamline the planning process with greater democracy at the plan-making phase. In order to achieve this the government will simplify the role of Local Plans and identify land under three categories: growth, renewal and protected. What this means in practice is that growth areas would be deemed suitable for substantial development with outline approval automatically secured; renewal areas would be suitable for some forms of development e.g. gentle densification; and protected areas would have development restricted. Local Plans would have clear rules instead of general policies and be subject to a 'sustainable development' test with a timetable of no more than 30 months for key stages of the process. The standardisation of Local Plans is welcome as it should remove the lottery effect based on the subjectivity of local authorities however there needs to be flexibility among the three categories as growth is constantly evolving and some places risk being left behind. The absence of rural areas in the growth category is a missed opportunity and, by allowing local authorities to declare protected zone, the concern is that might take the easy option and put all or the majority of the rural hinterland into the protected zone. If this were to happen it would be a big blow for the rural economy and may also mean that the CLA has to lobby many different local authorities in order to ensure this does not happen, which would take up a lot of resources and sustained pressure. Zoning is the key to the future of rural housing, and it is vital that rural areas are put into renewal zones. The wording in white paper is all about proportionate development in villages so there is no reason why they can't be in



renewal zones. This pillar also includes proposals to digitise the planning process. Local Plans are to be driven by new technology with interactive web-based systems, which, if it simplifies and expedites the planning process is a welcome move.

Pillar two is about planning for beautiful and sustainable places, following on from an early government report *Building Better, Building Beautiful*. This includes creating a national design framework to provide detailed parameters for development, factoring in contextual differences. There will also be a fast-track for proposals which comply with pre-established principles of good design. Until now the onus on developers has not been strong enough so illustrating a set of requirements and providing an incentive to build better is a good step forward which could alleviate pressures on local authorities. Pillar two also includes a policy on effective stewardship which is in line with the 25 year environment plan, and seeks to conserve and enhance historic buildings and areas, and improve energy efficiency standards. The CLA is supportive of fostering better design, particularly in tandem with energy efficiency measures as well as preserving England's heritage and it is a positive that these have been included in the paper.

Pillar three looks at planning for infrastructure and connected places and looks at reforming developer contributions. Instead of local authorities working out charging schedules the government is to set a national value-based charge. This infrastructure levy aims to raise more revenue than the current system and should, in turn, deliver more affordable housing. However, development must be viable and has to be competitive in order to bring land forward. Previously many schemes did not get anywhere as the levy was unaffordable so it will be important for the government to strike the right balance. Pillar three talks about the role of innovators, entrepreneurs and businesses in adapting to the changing needs of the economy though and delivering a boost to the economy through housebuilding. However, the economy does not just rely on housebuilders and this risks only delivering for those in urban areas or the renewal zones. Many CLA members with potential for development are based in remote rural areas and, in line with the government's levelling up agenda, more should be done to level up the rural economy.

In releasing this white paper, the government should be applauded for trying to make changes to the system which have long been called for by the CLA. Fundamental reform is needed and so this step is welcome, but it remains unclear whether the changes will work in reality and, especially, in rural areas.

If you would like to feed in to the CLA's response to the consultation, please email [ruralpowerhouse@cla.org.uk](mailto:ruralpowerhouse@cla.org.uk) and consider the following questions:

**Planning for the future** – what is your overall view of the government's aims and ambitions for the future of the planning system?

**Pillar 1-Planning for development** - What do you think if of the proposals under Pillar 1?

What do you think the **Protected Area** proposal, which may include tracts of undesignated open countryside, will mean for your business?

**Pillar 2 – Planning for beautiful and sustainable places** Will better design of new development make it more acceptable to local people?

**Pillar 3 – Planning for infrastructure and connected places** Do you have any comments to make about the proposed Infrastructure levy set out in Pillar 3?