


Planning reform must be backed by more resources and streamlined processes

30 August 2024  Ben Standing

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Sweeping changes to the National Planning Policy Framework are on the way but more planning officers will be needed to execute Labour's housebuilding mission, writes Ben Standing.

After plenty of pre and post-election rhetoric about “getting Britain building again”, the new government has now shown its hand in the game of planning poker.

Labour knows it will live or die by its ability to make the necessary structural changes that will lead to more than 300,000 homes being built every year, equating to 1.5 million homes over the five years of this parliament.

To put the scale of this challenge into context, the number of new units delivered each year on average has been under 190,000 over the past two decades, with a peak of 243,000 units in 2019/20.

There is plenty to do and an overhaul of the planning system at large has been identified as the remedy for tackling chronic housing undersupply, with concerns raised by housebuilders about the time and expense needed to process applications.

But to make any significant difference, structural reform must be supplemented by a drive to bolster planning authorities' resources. For high-quality decision to be made, it is not just the system, but high-quality planners who are required.

What's in the planning reform proposals?

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government published its proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on 30 July, with a consultation open until 24 September.

Headline changes include the reintroduction of mandatory housing targets, as new wording states that local planning authorities (LPAs) must meet the identified housing need in their areas, rather than “as much as possible”.

New calculations of how an LPA meets housing need, including the proportion of stock made affordable, are proposed to better reflect growth in the North of England and Midlands.

A definition of the so-called “grey belt” is also introduced to help LPAs identify land beyond brownfield sites, which should be prioritised for housing. The grey belt comprises previously-developed land and any other parcels of the green belt that “make a limited contribution” to the purpose of protecting such land.

Should there not be sufficient brownfield and grey belt land, however, the guidance suggests that an LPA may need to release green belt land for development.

Meanwhile, a strengthened “duty to co-operate” between councils is imposed to ensure local plans are consistent and help neighbouring areas to accommodate unmet development needs.

Bolstering planning resource is vital

The government must consider whether any system can function effectively without the necessary people and skills, which are in high demand in local government due to insufficient funding over a prolonged period.

The LPAs we work with often say they are having to consider the merits of large, complex developments that require specific expertise to handle a wide range of planning and legal issues.

Developer clients have said the existing system largely works if councils are equipped with sufficient resource. Without it, navigating the system becomes an arduous task that costs time and expense.

Labour's manifesto committed to recruiting 300 planning officers, but this works out to about one new officer for every LPA.

Therefore, a revision of the NPPF requires a co-ordinated and funded strategy to help LPAs recruit additional officers and provide necessary training to existing staff. A dedicated central resource of specific skills could also support councils on the most complex planning applications.

Loosening red tape that's strangling local plan updates

One of the big issues holding back housebuilding is the ongoing development of local plans. The government cites how only a third of councils have a plan that's under five years old.

This means that not only are the majority are out of date, but they're also at risk of being torn up again under short political cycles.

A lack of resource prevents local plans being updated, but so too does process. Local plans are subject to a very high level of scrutiny before they're considered sound by the Secretary of State.

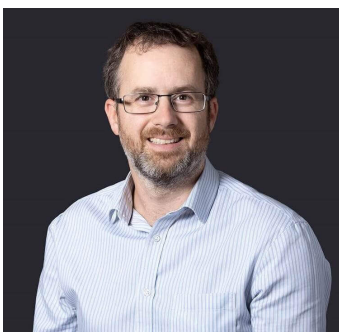
Labour may wish to borrow from the Conservatives' aborted planning reform proposed by Boris Johnson's government in 2020. A revised "test for soundness" would have reduced the amount of evidence required to develop a plan and defend it at examination, but still ensure high-quality plans were delivered.

This would have been achieved by increasing the standardisation of key evidence and data, freezing data or evidence at particular points of plan-making, streamlining new-style plans to focus on local issues, and support on building the evidence base through new formalised gateway assessments.

Loosening some of the red tape around local plans, while acknowledging they haven't passed as robust measures, would enable overarching blueprints to be published quicker and provide certainty to developers bringing forward proposals.

Combining a streamlined local plan process with additional resource and an NPPF that clearly sets priorities for specific issues should allow the planning system to be quicker and more consistent in its outcomes.

Key contact



Ben Standing

Partner

ben.standing@brownejacobson.com

+44 0330 045 2400

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