



Report on Performance of the Planning System

Introduction

The Chair of the APPG for Housing Market & Housing Delivery, Ben Everitt MP, recently hosted a meeting with leading practitioners in the housing market to discuss the performance of the planning system.

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Executive Summary

The planning system plays a crucial role in the delivery of new homes and other development, but it is not without its challenges. Leading practitioners in the housing market recently gathered to discuss the performance of the planning system and identify ways to improve its efficiency and effectiveness.

During the meeting, a number of issues were identified that contribute to delays in the delivery of new development. These included problems with the plan-making and site allocation process, a lack of resources in local authority planning departments, and the value of community consultation. In order to address these issues and improve the performance of the planning system, the contributors made a number of recommendations.

One recommendation was to adopt a more proactive approach to plan-making and site allocation, particularly for strategic locations and sites. By identifying key sites and locations in advance and developing policies to support their development, it may be possible to speed up delivery and gain community buy-in to development. Another recommendation was to increase fees substantially and ring-fence them within planning departments, in order to provide the necessary resources for planning departments to adopt a more proactive approach and deal with applications in a timely manner.

The contributors also recommended encouraging a variety of routes into the planning profession, including apprenticeships, "sandwich" degree courses with work placement opportunities, and postgraduate "conversion" courses. By increasing the pool of qualified planners and ensuring that there are sufficient resources of the right grade to deal with the various types and stages of applications and policy-making, the planning system could be better equipped to deliver new development.

In addition to these recommendations, the contributors suggested reforming the pre-planning application advice process to provide applicants with clear advice on policies for specific sites, and considering different matters at different stages in the planning process based on clear guidance from central government.

Overall, the goal of the meeting was to identify ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system in order to support the delivery of new homes and other development. By addressing the issues raised and implementing the recommendations made, it is hoped that the planning system can better support the needs of communities and contribute to the delivery of new development.

Recommendations

- Increasing fees for planning services and using the additional funds to provide resources and support for planning departments. This will enable them to adopt a more positive approach to planning and deal with applications in a timely manner.
- Expanding the routes into the planning profession, including apprenticeships, degree programs with work placement opportunities, and postgraduate conversion courses. This will ensure that there are sufficient qualified planners to meet the demand for development projects.
- Reforming the pre-planning application advice process to provide applicants with clear guidance on the policies applicable to specific sites, rather than qualitative decisions on specific proposals. This will streamline the planning process and provide greater clarity for developers.
- Increasing the use of Planning Performance Agreements to improve the quality of service provided by local planning authorities (LPAs). These agreements can help to set clear goals and expectations for the planning process, ensuring that projects are delivered efficiently and effectively.
- Re-introducing Planning Delivery Grants based on the quality of service provided by LPAs. This will provide additional incentives for LPAs to deliver high-quality planning services and support the development of strategic locations and sites.
- Implementing a national campaign or Planning Charter to address issues such as staff morale and respect within LPAs. This will foster a positive and supportive work environment, promoting collaboration and teamwork within the planning profession.
- Encouraging a return to office working for LPA staff, particularly junior officers who can benefit from the support and experience of more senior colleagues. This will improve the quality of planning services and support the development of strategic locations and sites.
- Allowing skilled, overseas planners to practice in the UK in order to address shortages in the profession. This will ensure that we have the necessary resources and expertise to deliver development projects effectively and efficiently.

Context

The planning system encompasses every aspect of the process by which land is developed, from plan-making in its various forms, through the consideration of proposals for development, and then through the approval of various conditions and reserved matters which are required before, or during the actual building phase of a project.

Legislation in the area is supported by various guidance and other regulation which is a factor in the preparation of plans and the consideration of applications for consent.

Main issues

The planning system in the United Kingdom is experiencing a range of issues that can cause delays in the delivery of new development projects. One significant problem is the complex and time-consuming nature of the planning process, which requires multiple stages and a large amount of documentation. This can make it difficult for developers to navigate and can result in delays. Another issue is a lack of transparency and consistency at the plan-making and site allocation stage, which can lead to increased resistance to development at the application stage. This can also result in "political" decisions being made at the committee stage.

A lack of resources in local authority planning departments is also contributing to delays, as well as the loss of projects. This creates a cycle of inefficiency that hinders the delivery of new development. To address these issues, some recommendations include adopting a more proactive approach to setting policy for strategic locations and sites, increasing fees for planning departments and using the fees to increase resources, and encouraging a variety of routes into the planning profession. The pre-planning application advice process should also be reformed to give applicants clear advice on policies for specific sites.

In addition, the planning system in the UK is often impacted by changing policy and local politics, which can lead to a lack of consistency in policy across different areas. This can create uncertainty for developers and contribute to delays in the planning process. Contributors to the meeting were asked to consider the timing of public consultation, the volume of information required at the application stage, the resources of planning departments, and the effectiveness of alternative approaches.

Overall, the planning system in the UK is facing challenges that can delay the delivery of new development and hinder the ability to build enough homes, as well as keep housing prices and rents at reasonable levels. It is important to address these issues in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning process and support the development of new homes and other projects in the UK.

Evidence

Aster Group is a UK developer that is seeking to deliver 11,200 homes through a variety of methods including land acquisitions, joint ventures and partnerships, the regeneration of existing properties, Section 106 agreements, and Community Land Trust schemes. Aster is currently running five applications for over 200 affordable homes, with 160+ of these having acquired outline planning consent but facing delays in the planning process for over 18 months.

There are several challenges that Aster has encountered in the planning process, including a lack of transparency and consistency in the allocation of sites, a lack of consistency in the approach to securing planning consent, and underfunded and understaffed planning departments. Aster has also noted issues with pre-commencement conditions bogging down planning officers and a lack of guidance from the government on the "Call for Sites" process.

They believe that increasing application fees and using a tiered approach with "apprentice" planners for administrative and consultation roles could help improve the delivery of affordable homes. The company also advocates for planning performance agreements, which can help expedite the decision-making process, although they recognize that this approach could potentially lead to neglect of other applications. Aster sees Community Land Trusts as a successful land-led approach, particularly for smaller sites, but wonders if it would be effective for larger sites and allocations.

Rehoboth, a UK company specializing in town centre regeneration projects, gave the example of the Dartford Magistrates Court and Police Station as an example of the challenges it has faced in the planning process. Despite the property being on the Brownfield Register and identified as a priority for regeneration, Rehoboth has encountered delays in securing planning consent for residential use after three pre-application submissions and two planning applications.

Rehoboth believes that the planning process is hindered by a lack of communication and collaboration between developers and local authorities, as well as a lack of consistency in the application of planning policy. The company also notes that the high costs of the planning process, including application fees and the use of consultants, can be a barrier to the delivery of affordable homes.

In line with the aforementioned concerns, Get Living purchased the Globe Road site in 2017, a prime city centre brownfield regeneration site that had been derelict for decades. In 2019, Get Living submitted a planning application for 783 rental homes to Leeds City Council (LCC). However, the process of obtaining final consent and S106 agreements was delayed for four years due to various factors, including disagreement over affordable housing levels, issues with LCC's highways department and wind concerns, and a lack of resources and ambition from LCC to move the planning application forward.

These delays resulted in a £40 million increase in the cost of development and missed opportunities for housing delivery and investment in Leeds. Get Living argues that the government needs to take action to address the slow and complex planning system, which hinders economic growth and makes the UK housing market hostile to investment. This includes supporting Local Authority champions for growth and investment, creating a policy environment that supports the growth of build-to-rent (BTR) housing, and reforming the planning system to streamline the development process.

The Land Promoters and Developers Federation (LPDF) also highlights the importance of the planning system in driving economic growth and the need for reform. LPDF notes that only 39% of local authorities (LAs) have up-to-date local plans and that 2022 has seen a historic low in the adoption of new local plans. The delay in planning reform has further delayed or paused local plans, and the Secretary of State's recent Written Ministerial Statement has further exacerbated the issue. LPDF argues that the lack of up-to-date local plans and policies hinders the determination process and leads to a lack of resources and suggestions for amendment from Local Planning Authorities (LPAs).

The volume of information required to support even small-scale planning applications has also increased significantly in recent years, further straining the already under-resourced LPAs. LPDF suggests that digitising the planning system and increasing participation in consultation exercises, particularly from those who support development, could help to streamline the process and improve decision-making.

All in all, the respondents have identified a number of challenges in the UK planning process, including a lack of transparency and consistency in site allocations, difficulties in securing planning consent, and underfunded and understaffed planning departments. The respondents have suggested ways in which the planning process could be improved, including increasing application fees, using a tiered approach with "apprentice" planners, and implementing planning performance agreements. In addition, they highlight the importance of delivering affordable homes and the role that the planning process plays in this effort.

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support

