

The background of the page features a collection of architectural blueprints and rolled-up plans. One prominent roll in the foreground is labeled 'FLOOR PLAN' and shows a detailed floor plan with various rooms and dimensions. Other rolls in the background are labeled 'FRONT ELEVATION' and 'SIDE ELEVATION'. The plans are spread out on a surface, with some showing grid lines and technical drawings. The overall scene is brightly lit, with a soft, diffused light source from the top left, creating a professional and technical atmosphere.

# Planning – Problem or Solution?

Views and suggestions from key commentators;  
collated by the LGiU for the Liberal Democrats'  
CLG Parliamentary Committee

**The LGiU is a think tank and local authority membership organisation. Our mission is to strengthen local democracy to put citizens in control of their own lives, communities and local services. We work with local councils and other public services providers, along with a wider network of public, private and third sector organisations.**

**The Federation of Master Builders (FMB) is the UK's largest trade association in the building industry. Established in 1941 to protect the interests of small and medium-sized building firms, the FMB is independent and non-profit-making. The FMB is a source of knowledge, professional advice and support for building firms right across the UK. The FMB also offers practical advice and support to the general public on choosing and working with the right builder.**



# Contents

**Preface** *Dr Jonathan Carr-West,  
Chief Executive LGiU*

**Foreword** *Annette Brooke MP, Lord Tope*

## The planning challenge

If planning were easy...  
*Sir Andrew Stunell OBE MP 7*

Let's get building *Brian Berry, CEO,  
Federation of Master Builders 9*

## What level – national, regional or local?

Achieving localism, and delivering growth  
*Cllr Keith House, Leader, Eastleigh 12*

Leave us alone to get on with what we were  
elected to do *Cllr Terry Stacy MBE, Liberal  
Democrat Political Advisor,  
London Councils 13*

Trusting local government – trusting local  
people *Cllr Ruth Dombey, Leader,  
LB Sutton 16*

We do still need 'top down'! *Cllr Peter  
Thornton, Leader, South Lakeland 18*

Localism is failing: we need radical  
solutions *Andy Boddington, freelance  
planning writer 19*

## Planning for growth

A continuous conversation  
*Lord Shipley OBE 23*

Significant scope for improvement  
*Cllr Tim Ward, Exec Councillor for Planning  
and Climate Change, Cambridge 24*

Planning to help innovation and growth  
*Cllr Liz Green, Leader, RB Kingston upon  
Thames 26*

## People, place, planning

Place first, planning second  
*Antonia Layard, Professor of Law and  
Geography, University of Birmingham 30*

Agreeing a shared vision  
*Cllr Adele Morris, Shadow Cabinet Member  
for Regeneration, Jobs and Affordable  
Homes, LB Southwark 32*

Creating places communities can be proud of  
*Stephen R Hodder MBE, President, Royal  
Institute of British Architects 34*

Please let's plan for intermediate housing  
*Marc Vlessing, CEO, Pocket 36*

Bargain booze, banks and betting  
*Carl Quilliam, local government  
policy officer 38*

# Preface

For thirty years LGiU has worked to strengthen local democracy as a non-aligned think tank and membership association, run by councils for councils. We believe that local democracy is both a moral good and a practical one: that all things being equal giving local people power over the places they live in and the services they use will lead to better results.

We work to achieve this with councils of all sizes, types and political affiliations and with a range of other partners in the public, voluntary and private sectors.

We work cross-party, and with specific parties, in this case the Liberal Democrats, where we think this will broaden the debate and drive innovation on important issues.

No issue is more important than planning. At the heart of our engagement with local democracy is our sense of place and our vision, often barely articulated, of the type of places we want to live in.

Places that are safe, vibrant and sustainable; places that provide us with good decent homes and jobs; places that allow us to provide effective public services and that nurture supportive, resilient communities.

Planning is crucial both as a crucible of democratic engagement and as a way of shaping our physical, social and economic environment.

The essays in this collection will inform Liberal Democrat policy on planning, but innovation is not the province of any one part of the political spectrum and we hope that they will also inspire debate and provide inspiration in councils across the country.

We're pleased to have collaborated on this publication with the CLG Parliamentary Committee and we're grateful to the Federation of Master Builders for contributing to the costs of the project.

**Dr Jonathan Carr-West**

**Chief Executive,  
Local Government Information Unit**

# Foreword

We hope this exciting and provocative set of observations and recommendations about planning policy will stimulate thought and debate in the development of the Liberal Democrats' 2015 Manifesto.

As co-chairs of the Liberal Democrats' CLG Parliamentary Committee – meeting weekly with Ministers, parliamentarians, and local government colleagues – we wanted to focus attention on this policy area, which matters so much to us.

We are very grateful to the contributors and to the Local Government Information Unit for collating this booklet.

Key highlights in what follows include:

- the importance of local engagement, local knowledge, local buy-in – evident where Neighbourhood planning is progressing – to informing and reconciling challenges of planning and growth;
- the value of planning and design to place-shaping and home-making, and so to quality of life;
- the importance of joined-up thinking by LEPs, local government and business to agree a planning context which facilitates growth – including working with local authorities and other organisations to release public land and facilitate brownfield development;
- the role – or not – of the national, the regional, the local in setting parameters and making planning decisions and, in particular, on the one hand the possible need for a national framework, and, on the other, the challenge to the roles of the Secretary of State, the London Mayor, and of the Planning Inspectorate to intervene in local issues.

We do hope you enjoy the contributions which follow, and that they help inform your own thinking and your own contribution to policy development.

**Annette Brooke MP and Lord Tope**

**Co-chairs**

**Liberal Democrats' CLG Parliamentary Committee**

**“Of course the whole purpose of the system has been inverted in the last sixty years. What was originally seen as deeply socialist state interference with property owners’ rights has now become the middle classes’ weapon of choice for defending their privileged environment.”**

# The planning challenge

## If planning were easy...

**The Rt Hon Sir Andrew Stunell OBE MP**  
*Former Parliamentary Under-Secretary  
(Department for Communities and Local  
Government)*

If planning were easy you'd think someone would have got it right by now. Instead the operation of the planning system remains stubbornly contentious and contested, a battleground for competing ideologies and pressure groups, a recipe for delivering delayed and second best projects, a cost and not a benefit to the economy and to society.

Or does it? Aren't we glad Britain's urban landscape doesn't look like the US, complete with poles, wires and billboards, and that our rural areas don't look like Ireland, with a half-built house in every field? And our National Parks and Conservation Areas, Milton Keynes, Terminal Four... what's not to like about our planning system?

One fundamental problem is that nearly everyone wants to achieve at least two conflicting outcomes at the same time. They believe that preserving and enhancing our environment (particularly near them) is a vital sign of a civilised society. As a result Green Belt, green fields, back gardens, playing fields, brownfields (if containing any pond, tree or nest), urban densification, suburban sprawl or rural intrusion, are all deemed unacceptable for development.

And we insist that the housing we do build should not be high-rise, or bungalows, or flats. It should always be mixed socially and demographically, except that it should exactly match any existing adjoining development. It

must be within walking distance of all facilities, shops, and transport modes, yet quiet with plenty of recreation space and a view of the countryside.

That conundrum is bad enough but on top of it there is a desperate housing shortage to overcome. To even begin to tackle it we need to build at least an extra quarter of a million homes each year just to keep up with household formation.

Having worked hard as a Minister on drafting the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) – which in its final form actually found favour with nearly every interest group – it was sometimes hard to keep a straight face as 'key stakeholders' explained that we had a deep housing crisis that needed at least a doubling of output each year, whilst also setting out their view that every unbuilt site was or should be protected from any future development.

At least that experience highlighted what a good policy option it is to spend money bringing empty homes back into use. Maybe that way you never have to build any new ones.

Of course the whole purpose of the system has been inverted in the last sixty years. What was originally seen as deeply socialist state interference with property owners' rights has now become the middle classes' weapon of choice for defending their privileged environment.

So there certainly is a problem, but it isn't the planning system. It's the entirely unrealistic view that lies unchallenged in our

subconscious that we can have lots of new development without using any land, linked to the often-spoken thought that it should all go somewhere else.

As a Liberal Democrat and a community politician I am as conflicted as anyone else, so I cast no stones. But we have to face reality or we shall face failure. We are going to have to use some precious land somewhere to house people, to give them places to work, to go to school, to get their groceries, and to travel and generate their energy.

So the key question is what model of land-take works best? What is best for the health of those new communities and neighbourhoods, and best for the health of existing settlements; best for long-term sustainability, and best for quick results? We need all four outcomes.

Reconfiguring or abolishing 'planning' is most unlikely to produce them, and extremely likely to make things worse. Instead we need to get to the heart of the problem and completely re-shape the political debate at three different levels.

First, we need to re-shape the small 'p' political discourse. During the passage of the NPPF bodies like the National Trust (NT) and Shelter mobilised forces on either side of battle lines where no quarter was given or taken. It was seen almost entirely as a zero sum game of winners and losers, with politicians cast as the Evil Ones who would decide the fate of millions. Great drama, but no way to run a whelk stall. And most members of the NT do want their children and grand-children to live in a decent home. And most supporters of Shelter hugely value Britain's green spaces. I'd have dearly liked to see the NT's plans for

a million new homes, and Shelter's plans to expand the Green Belt. A narrow focus on a desirable outcome leads to polarisation and polemic when what is needed is wide-angle vision and less shouting.

Second, we need to re-shape the 'community' political discourse. We need to end the existing two-stage planning process: the developer proposes then the community opposes. The introduction of Neighbourhood Plans and the 'community rights' introduced by the Localism Act are valiant attempts to do that. They aim to give local people the tools to debate and to shape their community, to build consensus, and to 'take ownership' of future development in the area, becoming movers and shakers rather than victims of the development process.

Third, we need to re-shape the big 'P' political discourse. Politicians always want to be re-elected. At present that means supporting established communities to maintain the status quo.

Of course we should be braver. But it will be much easier to be brave when at least some progress has been made on the others. Then the politicians would find that there were big NGOs and pressure groups out there prepared to honestly and maturely explain the big issues to their membership. And their local communities would be advising them that they've already agreed which development should go where, so there's no need to protest.

Not easy, of course, but it still looks a better option than just staring at the train crash hoping a couple more tweaks of the planning system will put it all back together again.

# Let's get building

**Brian Berry**

*Chief Executive, Federation of Master Builders*

**M**ost people, at some point or another, will have noticed close to where they live a relatively small piece of land laying empty or unused, perhaps looking derelict, or perhaps just looking as though it could be put to better use. They may well have connected this with the chronic under-supply of new homes, which we read about almost daily in our newspapers, and they may well have thought: 'well, why not there?'

This will be most people's everyday experience of the issues of planning and commercial viability that surround small sites, though they will probably not have thought about them in these terms. For local developers and house builders however, these issues represent their daily bread. There may in fact be a whole range of reasons why an apparently good site may be laying unused. Development of previously-used land for instance can involve significant cost and complexity – demolition work, sometimes contamination issues, utilities diversion, the list goes on – which for smaller local builders may mean the buying in of expensive expertise and long delays which hit cash flow.

The Federation of Master Builders (FMB) represents small and medium-sized building companies, including many small, locally-based house builders. These are firms that, depending on the company, might build anything from two or three to 100 houses a year. The number of these firms has seen a dramatic decline over the last two and a half decades.

Figures released by the National House-Building Council (NHBC), which has just over 80 per cent of market coverage, show that the number of firms registering between one and 10 new units a year has fallen from 10,112 in 1988 to 2,481 in 2012. The industry is now

structured such that nearly 50 per cent of all new homes are now being delivered by just a handful of companies.

But the problem is not a shortage of builders for small sites. In fact, the opposite; there is a severe and long-term shortage of suitable smaller sites on which small builders can build commercially viable new homes.

The planning system doesn't help in this regard. Sites identified and allocated for housing in Local Plans tend overwhelmingly to be larger sites. This leaves local house builders largely reliant on windfall sites which carry a higher degree of uncertainty in bringing forward applications. Both of the major reviews of house building conducted in the last ten years, the Barker Review and the Callcutt Review, have recommended that local planning authorities be encouraged or required to allocate more small sites. This has yet to happen.

At the same time the infrastructure contributions demanded of developers have increased significantly over time. Affordable housing contributions typically used to be levied only on schemes of say 25 units or more, but as the need for affordable housing has become more pressing, local authorities have pushed down these thresholds and now it is not uncommon to see affordable housing requirements even on a site for one or two new homes. The introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) will add further complications. Once the levels of CIL charges applied to different types of sites have been set, it is non-negotiable. This will reduce the flexibility which may be necessary to ensure that some of the more 'difficult' small brownfield sites are commercially viable to develop.

Central government may be forced to make some big policy calls in these areas in the near future. The FMB believes that, in order to continue to maintain capacity in the local

house-building sector, and to boost the supply and viability of small sites, the government now needs to consider an exemption from CIL and Section 106 agreements for all developments of less than 10 units.

However, many of the issues surrounding small sites still remain by their nature area-specific and site-specific, requiring micro as much as macro solutions. What is called for here is much closer partnership working between local authorities, local house-builders and other relevant stakeholders.

One example of good practice here is an initiative which has been developed by the Modern Masonry Alliance and is set to be piloted by Birmingham City Council, with support from Coventry University. Here local 'house-builder clubs' are to be set up to enable greater engagement between the council and small builders as it seeks delivery partners in the development of, among other things, a large number of small garage sites.

There are other examples, like local housing development forums, which serve to improve channels of communication between local house-builders, public sector bodies and

social landlords. These can enable a better understanding of the industry, including thorny questions of viability, on the part of the public sector, and for smaller builders, often lacking in-house expertise, they can provide an invaluable means of finding out about the latest changes in legislation and policy. They could also provide a means of improving service levels and reducing friction around the planning applications process.

When releasing land, local authorities might also want to start looking at more innovative financing solutions. This could include the 'build now, pay later' model, or shared-equity type schemes, whereby the local authority gets behind the development but retains ownership of the land, allowing them to make a higher long-run return.

These things will require political will and sometimes extra resources. But far too much resource is already wasted on adversarial planning processes. Increasing the availability of suitable smaller sites will increase diversity and choice in the housing sector and will assist policy makers in meeting the population's housing needs. In the long run that can only be a net benefit.

**“A National Plan, to run alongside Local Plans, is the only solution to truly national planning issues. Decades of delay on major national infrastructure projects, stifling growth and producing fear and uncertainty in communities, is not what ‘planning’ is about.”**

# What level – national, regional or local?

## Achieving localism, and delivering growth

**Cllr Keith House, Leader, Eastleigh Borough Council**

*Liberal Democrats' Planning Lead, Local Government Association*

**L**ocalism in planning has become the mantra of central and local government since 2010. Is it being delivered, and are there any constraints needed at the national level to help achieve genuine localism?

Radical change, and clarity on the roles of national and local planning, is needed to achieve localism.

Freedom from Regional Spatial Strategies, and putting responsibility for planning at the district/unitary tier of local government has superficially increased transparency and localism.

Yet the hand of the centre remains strong, if not stronger than before. The Department of Communities and Local Government issues directions almost at whim. Local Plans are influenced by opaque housing needs' assessments.

The Planning Inspectorate can, and does, overrule strategic planning decisions and day-to-day development control processes that otherwise appear to be in the hands of locally elected politicians. 90 per cent of planning decisions are taken by council staff with little if any democratic input.

At the same time, those planning applications that are determined by councillors are usually

made by little more than handful of councillors on a planning committee. It is hardly any wonder that planning has got itself a bad name. What should be an opportunity for positive development has become a zero-sum game of thwarting change, with local and national in opposition to each other and passing blame. Change is needed.

For localism to be achieved requires clear guidance at a national level on what planning is for, the centre to let go with more enthusiasm, and the council tier to be more responsive to local input. That is change at three levels.

At the national 'England' tier, guidance and prescription has been stripped back to the extent that what government wants is often hidden, if it exists at all. A National Plan, to run alongside Local Plans, is the only solution to truly national planning issues. Decades of delay on major national infrastructure projects, stifling growth and producing fear and uncertainty in communities, is not what 'planning' is about.

Parliament is the place for this Plan. It should cover genuinely-national transport and energy issues. It should set the framework for limited national guidance, including methodology for Local Plans to determine housing and employment allocations.

Even the most committed Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) objector understands there is a need for development. Removing the argument about methodology helps rather than hinders localism.

With a National Plan in place, the need for further central intervention is removed. The Planning Inspectorate could be abolished empowering local communities to take planning decisions and to be held to account for them.

Objectors have no recourse to challenge planning approvals. Why should applicants have a benefit denied to objectors? If decisions are taken contrary to National and Local Plans, all parties would retain the right to legal challenge. A reasonableness threshold would limit frivolous challenges. The Secretary of State would have no greater input to local planning than any other individual. Neither would national or local quangos, from government agencies that would be stripped of powers of delay, to LEPs that have no democratic mandate.

Limiting national direction implies an end to one size fits all. Urban and rural, large and small, communities have differing needs and differing aspirations. A polycentric area with a network of smaller towns and villages will approach policy from a perspective that is not the same as a large city. Removing national standards that limit development of new ideas and approaches allows experimentation. Competition and diversity are rewarded.

Just as it is not for the centre to take local decisions, it is not for the centre to be prescriptive on how councils should conduct their planning processes. Good practice comes from learning. Innovation is encouraged by freedoms.

Those local authorities that have developed Area Committee arrangements making every councillor a planner have tended to keep them. They are locally liked where linked with full opportunity for participation. Transparent inclusive processes that give accountability as well as decision-making work. Models that encourage Parish Councils and neighbourhood forums to have real involvement provide for better informed decisions that are not always liked, but are more likely to be respected.

Localism requires freedom, but freedom within agreed and understood boundaries. That is a worthy objective for a planning system that is not just a confrontation between for and againsts, but weighs competing ideas and reaches objective conclusions, measured by those impacted by those conclusions. That's pretty close to a definition of subsidiarity.

## Leave us alone to get on with what we were elected to do

### **Cllr Terry Stacy MBE**

*Liberal Democrat Political Adviser, London Councils, Former Leader, LB Islington*

**W**ho can forget those heady months after the May 2010 election, when all the talk from the government was about how the era of top-down decision making under Labour would come to end? Instead we could all look forward to a new buzz word 'localism', where councils would be handed back powers, there would be a bonfire of the quangos and communities would get

a new voice. Even local government's best friend, Eric Pickles, was signed up for it and sang the praises of localism.

Localism, community politics, bottom-up politics – call it what you want, but we Liberal Democrats have been talking about it and doing it for decades now in our communities. But, sadly, the reality of 'localism' as practised by Conservative ministers has often turned out very differently from how we imagined in 2010. Setting limits for council tax increases, free schools and academies agreed and funded directly by Whitehall, bin collection

schedules and business rates retention have hardly shown the government's commitment to localism.

Nowhere is this more true than in London where we also have the added complication of an elected mayor – one Boris de Pfeffel Johnson – the Conservative's new pin-up boy, who is constantly looking to expand his power base in the capital, possibly with an eye on his future political ambitions.

Now, don't get me wrong. Of course we as Liberal Democrats believe in regional government. We supported the idea of a new elected assembly to replace the old Greater London Council abolished by Mrs Thatcher. And there's no denying, whatever your views on directly-elected mayors, that both Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson have raised the capital's profile nationally and internationally. (Who will ever forget those images beamed around the world of the Mayor of London stuck on a zip wire during the Olympics last year?)

In a city as massive as London, with 33 different boroughs and a rapidly growing population, planning is one of the key ways of managing its future development as the UK's capital and economic powerhouse and as a leading world city. But life under both mayors has shown that the current planning system is riddled with tensions and that localism is not always proving what we Liberal Democrats thought it would be.

### **Is it working?**

In theory, the system in London is clear. Boroughs decide on local planning applications and the Mayor decides on London-wide schemes. Simple.

But problems occur when the Mayor is required to sign off some planning decisions made by councils and there is confusion as to what exactly are the city-wide planning decisions that need to be made only by the Mayor.

Such decisions clearly impact on local communities too, yet London's boroughs get

little or no say. There is a feeling that the Mayor places developers' needs above the needs of London's different communities, and that leads to frustration and a feeling of powerlessness. There is also a sense that the Mayor's political ambitions lead him to pronounce on planning topics that are nothing to do with him.

For example, conservative ministers seem to believe that shale gas extraction ('fracking') is the new gold rush and they want to see it developed as quickly as possible. Yet, despite London being unsuitable geologically for fracking, the Mayor has declared that London is open for the energy companies to explore. This consultation-light approach to planning policy-making is not healthy and needs to change.

Likewise with new skyscraper developments. Ken Livingstone was obsessed with seeing new high-rise developments at key locations around the capital as if this somehow ensured that London was a proper world city.

This trend has been continued by Boris Johnson. So now we are seeing huge new blocks being built in residential or sensitive areas in the face of opposition from residents and democratically-elected local councils: because the Mayor has the power to override or ignore these objections.

There is also the usual problem of politicians promising too much. The Mayor's record of building homes on London Development Agency (LDA) land has been exposed as a total failure over the years and his affordable/social home-building record has been a huge disappointment, despite him talking it up. Using the planning system to tackle the very real housing crisis in London needs real concerted action and commitment, not just sound bites and photo opportunities.

The government also sends out contradictory signals on planning. While it talks about localism, it has launched a consultation on micro-managing local councils' planning department performance without taking any local circumstances into account.

The recent debacle over permitted developments also shows that the government seems to want a free-for-all on planning use with residents and councils having no say. Removing councils from the equation by allowing direct applications to the Secretary of State for major developments also goes directly against localism.

### **Can it be different?**

Diversity is key. While building more homes is of course vital, in London especially, allowing developers free rein to convert empty retail or office units into expensive rabbit-hutches is not the solution we need.

Councils should be given additional powers to ensure that more balanced and appropriate development takes place, which would in turn allow them to help build town centres that are more attractive to both work and live in. Councils should also be able to charge full cost to applicants for the planning service that they receive, rather than having to subsidise costs from the council taxpayer. This would allow them real teeth to ensure and enforce balanced communities and protection of local areas.

Similarly the Mayor can promote balanced and appropriate development in the large amount of public land that he now owns. He is in a unique position to use his planning powers to align transport and housing investment better and will only be really effective when this works alongside local priorities.

However, the Mayor also needs to intervene less. In the London Planning Statement the Mayor promised to use his formal planning powers 'sparingly'. There needs to be much clearer guidance on what constitutes a

'strategic development', of the kind the Mayor has said he will still intervene on. And, just as it is proper that councils should not allow any financial gain from a development to influence planning permission, equally the London Planning Statement should state up front that the financial gain from approving a development will not be a consideration for the Mayor.

Resolving planning issues by discussion between boroughs, developers and the GLA is a better and quicker way of ensuring that the best development takes place than the formal exercise of the Mayor's planning powers. London Liberal Democrats would like to see planning decisions taken at the lowest possible level by local councillors for the area concerned. That will increase accountability and transparency.

In London we also really need to tackle the criminal misuse of 'landbanking' through a competition review of the major builders and developers, 'community land auctions' and 'use it or lose it' planning permissions. It is not acceptable when so many are waiting for a home in London that developers are just waiting for the most profitable moment to build.

A properly joined-up approach to regeneration, housing and planning in London with the Mayor and boroughs working together as equal partners is the challenge that must be seized. If together we rise to the challenge, it could deliver real improvements to the quality of life across the capital and new economic opportunities for disadvantaged Londoners. That's a challenge we Liberal Democrats must be up for in London and regionally.

# Trusting local government – trusting local people

**Cllr Ruth Dombey**

*Leader, LB Sutton*

**A**lmost immediately after the 2010 General Election the government announced its intention to scrap the Standards Board for England, with Minister Bob Neill MP hailing the ‘death knell’ for the unpopular, unelected body and looking forward to a new era of locally set standards.

In this instance Ministers were clear that a remote ‘national’ body of democratically unaccountable officials making decisions on local cases did not produce consistent and equitable results. Instead local areas were deemed sufficiently capable and trustworthy to establish a process where they judge for themselves the cases brought forward in their area. New boards were set up with specially trained, experienced and skilled community representatives and local councillors. A good start for the coalition government’s commitment to localism.

Yet when it comes to planning appeals this principle and precedent is no longer applicable – suddenly local communities cannot be trusted to develop a system that can arbitrate between developers, residents, and elected councillors who grant or reject the majority of planning applications.

So instead we continue with a Planning Inspectorate, based in Bristol, reviewing and re-examining even the most basic of applications. In Sutton for example, the majority of planning applications are minor – 10 dwellings or less; nationally nearly two thirds of these type of appeals are turned down by the Inspectorate.

Indeed with the government’s new permitted development rights many of those smaller scale applications would not come to any

planning committee, refocusing the arbitration process on those ‘mid-scale’ applications that still require permission.

Of course there has to be some way of arbitrating between developers and communities for large-scale developments that isn’t vulnerable to the pressures of the election cycle. Major infrastructure projects currently reviewed by a separate unit in the Planning Inspectorate and decided by the Secretary of State should remain at a level outside of one individual authority. But for the majority of mid and smaller scale developments that require planning permission, the question remains – why can a local area not be entrusted to develop a system of arbitration able to independently evaluate appeals?

In its 2010 planning paper – ‘Open Source Planning’ – the Conservative party expressed the same sentiment:

“The government’s approach of retaining strong central control over planning means that, in many cases, people feel that they have no say over development taking place in their areas. The result is an inherently adversarial system with opposing parties spending large amounts of time and money fighting each other, rather than seeking an agreed solution.”

So we are agreed on the problem – agreeing the solution is far more complex.

There are those who call for the abolition of the Planning Inspectorate – just as the Standards Board for England was scrapped and replaced with a local structure. But it is clear that the Inspectorate has a role where major developments require consideration at a higher level.

At LB Sutton we continue to support the reinstatement of proposals mooted in the drafting of the Planning Act 2008. Those

applications that are appealed – instead of being referred to the Planning Inspectorate – would be reviewed by a local appeals panel. The panel would take a similar form to the appointed local Standards Board, with the appointment of independent, qualified and trained members of the local community.

Councillors would also sit on the panel, but, as with the local Standards Board, they would be in the minority and in contrast to the Planning Inspectorate, these panels would meet in public and hear appeals locally on applications that are of a 'mid-scale' size.

Upon starting the local appeal process a Planning Performance Agreement (PPA) would be negotiated, so that the authority does not suffer a performance penalty for seeking a locally-mediated solution – this would be an important element of the process given current proposals to penalise those authorities considered to be underperforming in reaching timely decisions.

We would also seek to introduce an element of a third party right of appeal so that applications decided by the authority can be taken to a local panel if either applicant OR objectors express dissatisfaction with the decision. The third party right of appeal has also been subject to much debate – and the arguments on the impact of additional delay, particularly on projects of regional or national significance, are well rehearsed.

Our proposal to include such an element in applications under a local system would minimise the level of delay in the planning system as a whole while strengthening the involvement of local people in effectively arbitrating the most local of applications. It will also be a constructive counterbalance to the government's recent planning reforms which

allow far more development without permission or consultation with the local community.

This proposal will move us away from a target-driven, technocratic and confusing process towards a model that enhances the involvement of local people – strengthening local decision-making and improving accountability. It will ensure local people are able to fully participate in the appeals process, resulting in better decisions, higher informed ratings and increased satisfaction.

In Sutton we know that expressing an opinion on planning matters is one of the most frequent ways a resident engages with the council – it is a source not only of interest but of great frustration, not least because so many decisions made by local councillors are then reviewed by a faceless inspector in another part of the country. The government's objective to free up the planning system to encourage growth is one we support, and their desire to involve the community in shaping their own area through neighbourhood planning, is one we are actively pursuing through our own Neighbourhood Plans.

But more work is needed to empower local communities and ensure those piecemeal applications that subtly change the character of our local areas, are decided in our local areas.

As Liberal Democrats we strongly believe that decisions should be made as close as possible to the people they impact on. In Sutton we believe local appeals panels have the potential to fundamentally change the way planning operates in local areas and while government shied away in 2008, it is time now to trust local government to rise to the challenge. We are ready for it. Are they?

# We do still need 'top-down'!

**Cllr Peter Thornton**

*Leader, South Lakeland District Council*

**T**imes change, and old men dream of past times with nostalgia. I haven't quite got there yet but I do fondly remember a time when the need for new housing was accepted by most of the population. Our family lived at the edge of town surrounded by green fields, and when these fields became a housing estate I don't recall any protest groups being formed.

But now, the world does seem to be very different. Housing is up there with Windfarms, Fracking and Nuclear Dumps (sorry, Repositories) in provoking the knee-jerk response of NO, not here. Our District of South Lakeland seems overrun with the 'AGs' – or Action Groups. Sometimes it seems as if membership of an 'AG' is a necessary qualification to be a middle-class retiree in South Lakeland.

Some would say that neighbourhood planning is the answer. Surely this will allow each neighbourhood to choose its own level of housing development and solve all our problems? Would that it did, would that it did, as Robert Robinson might have said.

Let's just accept one simple fact, leaving housing numbers up to local communities will not produce the number of houses that we need. It will produce SOME houses, but not as many as we need.

Producing the houses that we need requires pressure from Westminster and co-operation from local councils. Nothing else really works.

Lets look at the pressure. What does this mean?

It means that we need a return to some element of top down Structure Plan. Hang on, is this man talking about 'top down'? Is he

really a Liberal? Well, yes, we do need some element of 'top down' otherwise we will just leave it all to parish councils, or each street, to decide what housing goes next to them. Planning is all about 'top-down' control – but the policies must be produced from the bottom up. That's how democratic accountability really works.

It's both unfair and unproductive to expect district councillors with small majorities to push forward unpopular planning policies. Yes, we should all listen, engage and debate but our experience is that there comes a point when decisions have to be made – if our youngsters are to have somewhere to live. There's lots of evidence of local councils backing away from providing sufficient housing land, and the consequences are dire.

Of course, we do currently have pressure from the top. "Produce a five year land supply or you'll start losing appeals." The big cosh approach. However, it's not the right way to do this, we need proper planning from Westminster and from the regions, planning with real numbers – not just veiled, and not so veiled, threats. Does that sound a little like the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) targets? Well, yes it does – and were they really such a bad thing?

Start with the numbers, coming down to the district and county councils, and these councils can then have proper conversations with their communities about where the housing is going and the type and design of such housing. Now that's real neighbourhood planning!

We need to see an end to the pretence that councils and communities are free to do whatever they want. A pretence that leads to developers and planning inspectors actually running the show. Give our councils and our communities real freedom to act within a proper framework of development. We need a National Development Framework cascading down to a Regional Development Framework

and then a Local Development Framework. Nothing else really works.

So where does this leave our current neighbourhood planning policies? Are they of any relevance, given that they have to nest within Local Plans? The plans produced so far are, in all honesty, fairly small affairs although very relevant to some of the people living in those areas.

We do need some way in which local residents can create something with more weight than

a simple parish plan, but neighbourhood planning is very complex and time-consuming for the benefits it produces.

Most important is a National Development Framework, cascaded down; but I'd also like to see more emphasis on properly produced parish (or community) plans, and a properly-constituted enhanced input into the planning system for those communities with such plans. Neighbourhood planning doesn't do much harm but I'd need to be convinced that the current system does much good.

## Localism is failing – we need radical solutions

**Andy Boddington**

*Freelance planning writer*

England's planning system is riddled with contradictions. It is localised, yet nationalised. It listens, yet it's autocratic. At times its complexity seems unfathomable, yet in my experience community groups rarely fail to master it. It is rarely loved, but people's quality of life depends on it. It is a planning system that is not broken but it certainly needs fixing.

And where it needs fixing most is localism.

Around 500 community groups and parish councils around the country are developing Neighbourhood Plans. But their passion and commitment is continually undermined by decisions made by central government. I've lost count of the number of communities and campaigners who have contacted me over the last year to complain about the Planning Inspectorate and Secretary of State interfering in local planning decisions.

Last summer, the Secretary of State approved 100 homes in Cheshire despite his inspector warning they would be "intensely damaging" to the parish council's intention to develop a Neighbourhood Plan. He has also intervened

to approve small numbers of gypsy and traveller pitches – hardly the job of an elite politician.

It happens that Eric Pickles is naturally interventionist. But planning, which is so vital to people's quality of life, should not be left to the whims and indulgences of the Secretary of State or planning minister of the day.

At the heart of the problem is the blurred relationship between central and local government. We must redefine the relationship between the four main players in the planning system; communities, local government, the Planning Inspectorate and the Secretary of State. This means introducing:

- a new localism duty
- a redefinition of the role and governance of the Planning Inspectorate
- new rules to clarify the distinction between planning policy and guidance
- a right of appeal against planning consent.

### **A duty of localism**

A new localism duty should instruct the Secretary of State to ensure that decisions are made at the most local level practical. He will only be able to call-in planning applications

for decision where they have a demonstrable national importance.

This duty recognises that the Secretary of State and his advisers have no greater wisdom on planning matters than local councillors. It will bring an end to the pettifogging interventions by Whitehall in matters that should be decided locally.

### **A reformed Planning Inspectorate**

The Planning Inspectorate has earned a well-deserved reputation for undermining its robust decision-making with high profile maverick judgements.

Whatever could have been in the mind of the Planning Inspector who approved 465 Caledonian Road in central London, the building that won the 2013 Carbuncle Cup for its “prison-like experience for student residents”? Or in the mind of the inspector that decided that the setting of the unique Lyveden New Bield in Northamptonshire should be desecrated by wind turbines, a ruling that was summarily dismissed by the High Court?

Some planning inspectors are autocratic and high handed. Recently, an exhausted campaigner told me after a gruelling day at an examination in public: “I’m not going back tomorrow. The inspector is a bully.”

Two reforms must be made to the Inspectorate:

First, it must be distanced from central government and owned by all stakeholders in the planning process. It should be overseen by a board drawn equally from local government; Whitehall; the planning professions; developers; and, not least, communities.

Second, this new board should be given the same duty to protect localism as ministers.

Decisions on national infrastructure projects should remain with the Secretary of State or parliament, advised by the current National Infrastructure Planning Unit.

### **Planning policy and guidance**

Decisions by the Planning Inspectorate continue to be made in line with contemporary planning guidance. But there is a growing problem with that guidance.

The reduction of thousands of pages of planning policy to the brief National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) has been one of the major achievements of the coalition government. There are flaws in the document, but its very brevity has highlighted the most important issues in planning.

The NPPF is due to be reviewed and it needs it, especially in the way it undermines local plans wherever a five-year land supply has not been identified.

Constrained by the brevity of the NPPF, ministers are increasingly trying to deliver policy through the back door, through planning guidance. This guidance should be advisory but ministers talk of it as though it is obligatory.

The recent guidance on shale gas extraction – fracking – was not subject to public consultation and reads more like a directive than planning advice. When announcing the new ‘affordability rules’, Nick Boles said they would place a “legal obligation” on councils to provide affordable housing.

That’s wrong. Local authorities must be able to treat planning guidance as advice and interpret it as best fits their localities. Policy statements should only be made through revisions to the NPPF.

The government has also undermined localism by expanding permitted development rights. These must be localised.

### **Right of appeal against consent**

It has long been a bone of contention that once a planning application has been approved, it can only be overturned in the High Court and then only if procedural errors have occurred.

Communities and the national guardians of the natural and historic environment should be given a right to appeal planning consent.

The right would be restricted to cases where: the local plan has been breached; the decision is in substantial conflict with the NPPF or other national or European policies; or where a council will itself derive significant financial benefits from a scheme.

### **It's time for localism to thrive**

In an age of purported localism, planning still fails to be consensual. Consensus

can only be developed through a radical redefinition of the roles of the different parties, especially between the Planning Inspectorate, the Secretary of State, and councils and communities. If localism is to survive and thrive, central government intervention must be restricted to matters of national importance and communities allowed to plan for their own needs.

**“It is still early days but LEPs are revealing their potential to add significant value. They can identify the barriers to growth in their areas and recommend solutions. They can identify SMEs that are not realising their growth potential and help them to do so...They can ensure that investment in skills is effective...”**

# Planning for growth

## A continuous conversation

### Lord Shipley OBE

*Government Cities Advisor; Former Leader,  
Newcastle City Council*

I want to look at LEPs, and their relationship to local authorities, and to planning. Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) exist to drive local growth. The recent spending round confirmed the government's commitment to them by giving them greater power and influence to lead that growth.

In the absence of government offices and regional development agencies in England, the LEP structure matters because it represents a functional economic area from which to regenerate local economies and inform local planning.

LEPs can transcend council boundaries and provide a direct role for private sector leaders to be involved in identifying how to increase jobs and exports, close the skills gap and get an improved infrastructure in place.

Over the next few months, LEP Boards across the country will be putting together strategic economic plans that will form the basis of their bids into the Local Growth Fund which will operate from April 2015.

The big challenge for LEPs is to deliver real outcomes from this responsibility. As part of the development of their strategic economic plans, LEPs will no doubt assess whether the areas they cover and their governance arrangements are appropriate. In so doing, they must show they can work together with local councils to set the strategic direction for an area, and contribute to the Local Plan.

This isn't about 39 LEPs competing with each other. Rather, it is about local leadership driving faster growth than can be achieved by centralised planning and delivery out of Whitehall. That will be the test of a LEP's success. There is no point in devolving power if it doesn't make a difference. Councils have long argued that if only the government gave them more power, more would be achieved. The Localism Act has established the direction. City Deals, LEPs and local growth funding are all evidence that the government is determined to move further and faster with that agenda.

It is still early days but LEPs are revealing their potential to add significant value. They can identify the barriers to growth in their areas and recommend solutions. They can identify SMEs that are not realising their growth potential and help them to do so, particularly those with a capacity to export more. They can ensure that investment in skills is effective by scrutinising providers to ensure that their provision meets employer demand.

A crucial question then is who should lead strategic planning of infrastructure and regeneration. Should it be the LEP or local government? Local councils have much expertise, most of the power and most of the responsibility for delivery but the LEP gives them an extra capacity they may be missing. Councils should of course maintain their regulatory responsibilities in the planning process but the LEP gives them a focus across council boundaries and tiers. Councils must beware demanding extra powers from Whitehall without having sorted out their own relationships with their neighbours. Transport, skills, housing and regeneration are rarely neatly boxed in individual local authorities.

The government rightly wants to see structures created which enable legitimacy in decision-making. LEPs are unelected though councils have representation on them. I like the concept of the 'double-lock' on decisions so that both the LEP and a council can keep abreast of what the other is doing in a continuous conversation. I am impressed by the determination which some councils are showing in moving forward with transport bodies and combined authorities as in Greater Manchester. It shares prioritisation and risk and demonstrates a sense of common purpose working with the LEP and across boundaries.

I want LEPs to set out the strategic economic plan for their area much as RDAs did for their regions though at a more local level. I want them to intervene to remove the barriers that get in the way of employers expanding their businesses and employing more people. I want them to eliminate the skills deficit by making FE and training providers much more publicly accountable for what they do. I want them to be pro-active with UKTI and, above all, I want them to promote enterprise.

I don't want them to replicate local authorities or the existing planning system, suffer mission creep, spread themselves too thinly or create large bureaucracies. I don't want them to come up with undeliverable strategic plans in which the output is the plan rather than the action.

This isn't going to be easy. I hear often from councils that all the government has to do is to give them the tools and they'll get on with the job. I hear less often what the job actually is. Some have complained that the local growth funding in 2015 is inadequate. My response is to say at £2bn it is not. Rather, councils and LEPs need to make of success of what they have and could have, devise investment plans with substance and demonstrate what else they need to drive growth and jobs.

All this represents quite a culture shift for many. No longer will it be enough to bid for a share of a departmental national budget and then complain to the media when the bid fails. Instead an evidence-based plan will need to be produced locally which demonstrates that the LEP and the councils know their area and know what needs to be done. Councils and LEPs which can do this will inevitably gain ground. Councils will also come to realise that their role is changing from one largely of service delivery (often as the agent of central government) to one leading regeneration, growth and jobs in partnership with others.

As someone who has long championed devolution in England, I am encouraged that progress is being made. The opportunity is there to make a deep, lasting change to the way England is planned and governed to the benefit of our economy.

## Significant scope for improvement

### **Cllr Tim Ward**

*Executive Councillor, Planning and Climate Change, Cambridge City Council*

**C**ambridge City Council is a small district council, surrounded by South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC), both being part of the Cambridgeshire County Council area. The planning context is thus one in which, with the county being the transport authority, the three councils have been working together

for some years, well before the 'duty to co-operate'.

Cambridge is well known for its historic university, Addenbrooke's Hospital, and the Cambridge Science Park, but these are just the best known examples of the three pillars of the local economy. The education sector contains other educational establishments, the biomedical sector contains Cambridge Biomedical Campus and a number of other biotech companies around Cambridge and SCDC together with Papworth Hospital,

and the hi-tech sector contains many more companies than will fit on the Science Park, established in various locations around the city and SCDC. The *Cambridge Cluster at 50* report<sup>1</sup> contains a description of the evolution of the Cambridge economy (Cambridge Phenomenon / Silicon Fen) over the last half century and an analysis of the challenges for the future.

The 2006 local plan, following on from the 2003 structure plan, planned for considerable housing growth in the city, with a significant Green Belt take, to address one of the main constraints on the local economy, the lack of sufficient housing. Another significant constraint on growth, transport infrastructure, was however not adequately addressed at the same time, which was in part due to the separation of the planning and transport functions between district and county council, and the way in which central government funding for transport appeared to be unconnected to the way in which local economies were planning for growth.

This time around, working towards the council's 2014 Local Plan, Cambridge has had a number of challenges to face.

Local businesses have grown up and have different needs. Some of the policies relating to selective management of the economy, which were appropriate in 2006, are now constraining the growth of local world-class companies, such as those policies seeking to discourage international HQs and significant manufacturing facilities. So we are now dropping these policies, and will be relying instead on the market to choose to locate activities of low land-use value elsewhere than in and around Cambridge.

We have faced considerable pressure, largely from developers, to release further vast swathes of Green Belt for housing development. However we have, through the local plan review process, formed the view that to promote high quality economic development we have to maintain the quality of life, and

<sup>1</sup> <http://bit.ly/1iGYDN2>

hence the quality of place, of Cambridge. It's quality of life that attracts the high value people here to work in the high value jobs: destroying the setting and nature of the city by building all over the Green Belt would certainly be a choice that would make the provision of housing easier, but if that would result in sending the high value jobs to the Riviera, to Silicon Valley or to Bangalore (places like these, rather than other regions of the UK, being our competitors) it would be a clear mistake.

Transport (and other) infrastructure remains a major challenge. S106 and CIL cannot provide all the funding necessary, and central government funding appears to come in dribs and drabs with random funds to bid into against ludicrously short deadlines. The worst was receiving a text from my MP saying "have you got any shovel-ready transport projects that can go in next Tuesday's budget?", but there have been several other invitations to bid for funds that weren't an awful lot better.

This time around there is a transport plan being drawn up by the county council to the same timescale as, and taking account of, the two Local Plans, which is a definite improvement over the last cycle. However, as we will still be reliant on unpredictable contributions from central government over the plan period, this simply means that instead of being accused of "having no transport planning to go with the land-use planning" we're being accused of "publishing a transport plan which is little more than an unfunded wish list".

Last time around we had a democratically unaccountable quango, 'Cambridgeshire Horizons', which was supposed to help deliver infrastructure, including transport, but it's not clear that it achieved anything other than soak up money for its bureaucracy and produce some glossy reports. (The actual infrastructure built during this time could, it is believed, have been delivered by the councils in the usual way.)

However we only had a very short time to celebrate the demise of this democratically

unaccountable quango before it was replaced by another one, the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The LEP seemed harmless enough to start with when it didn't have any money, but now we gather that a large chunk of our New Homes Bonus (NHB), which we are spending on things like planning officers and urban designers and infrastructure to support local growth, is going to be taken away from us and given to the LEP.

We don't think this will help deliver growth in Cambridge – even if we do succeed in bidding into the LEP to get our own money back, some of it will have been wasted on bureaucracy on the way. And we'd still have no answer to the question from constituents: "if I don't like what the LEP has done with my money, whom do I vote against to change it?"

Another brake on progress with delivering growth is the continually changing planning landscape. We were just starting to get used to the NPPF when along came a whole bunch of changes, which means that senior planning professionals are spending their time researching and writing responses to government consultations rather than getting on with their day jobs and delivering growth.

As a couple of examples, allowing developers yet another avenue of appeal to wriggle out

of their affordable housing commitment was not helpful; allowing change of use from office to residential with no planning permission, and hence no s106 contribution towards infrastructure provision for the additional residents, was not helpful; allowing anti-social extensions without planning permission was not helpful. Just keeping the goalposts stationary for even a few months would be a significant help!

Having said which, and just to be inconsistent, it would be helpful to have some tweaks, perhaps to the use classes order, to give planning authorities some options to deal with specific local issues. Two that are relevant to us would be some ability to control the replacement of local independent shops by a clone-town high street, and the ability to control the change of use and demolition of pubs without the hassle of an Article 4 Direction.

Of course the legislative and regulatory context for planning and the funding mechanisms for transport infrastructure are never going to be perfect (and if they were perfect for us they would no doubt be a poor fit for someone else), but we do believe that on the whole there is significant scope for improvement to the current regime.

## Planning to help innovation and growth

### **Cllr Liz Green**

*Leader, Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames*

**K**ingston's economy provides around 72,000 jobs and there are 12,000 self-employed people here. The council's core strategy stresses the importance of promoting a diverse and flourishing economy by setting out a number of measures. For example, ensuring that land and premises are available for businesses and other employers, such as the health services and social enterprises; promoting appropriate

infrastructure that supports economic growth; protecting existing employment land and premises in named locations, whenever possible; promoting jobs and skills initiatives for local people.

Kingston town centre plays a major role in the local economy. It is one of London's top shopping destinations. It is a major draw for visitors and spend in the Borough, and as such, a major economic driver. The revitalisation of Kingston town centre is a top priority for the council. Parts of it are in need of rejuvenation; it lacks suitable space to meet retailers' needs; and there is a gap in the

high-end retail offer suited to its catchment. A recent retail capacity study shows that there is substantial comparison goods capacity in Kingston town centre and a case for expansion of the primary shopping area.

The council itself has agreed to make upfront investments to revitalise Kingston town centre, at a time when budgets are under significant pressure. It understands that the returns on this investment will not be realised in the short term. A detailed cost benefit analysis looked at how those returns might be represented, such as CIL contributions from developments; increase in rateable values; private sector investment leveraged; jobs created or retained and new business opportunities. With these, of course, comes the economic multiplier effect. These 'outputs' will be monitored on an ongoing basis as the town centre revitalisation programme – 'Kingston Futures' – is taken forward.

Having adopted the core strategy, the council has turned its attention to how it can realise its objectives on the ground. Its 'Shaping Kingston' programme puts planning policy at the heart of its efforts to boost the economic fortunes of the borough. Not only in terms of having a clear policy framework for opportunity sites that have been earmarked for development, but in terms of taking a robust leadership role and building effective policies and partnership models to deliver a step change in the transformation of the borough's infrastructure and economic prospects.

The council has now set about organising the full range of professional disciplines in the council to sharpen RBK's focus on regeneration delivery. A particular focus is a shift in emphasis from plan making to place shaping. The council is now building capacity with a refocused planning policy team which it has re-labelled the Development Planning team, adding to it the commercial and regeneration expertise required to deliver its spatial objectives.

Furthermore, the council is committed to promoting Kingston as a place to do business

and providing the highest quality and responsive service to investors wishing to or who already invest in the borough. We have brought together the key landowners and stakeholders to form the Kingston Futures Group who meet regularly with the leader of the council and the chief executive to help drive development.

In addition, the council has stipulated that any regeneration or development schemes must directly benefit local people by way of employment and training opportunities and securing benefits for local businesses through supply chain initiatives. A borough investment plan will also be drawn up, so that there is a clear plan of action in respect of economic development and regeneration in the borough. We see this as important from the point of view of investors and regional policy makers, as they seek to understand local priorities and to ensure an alignment of objectives.

There have been some obstacles to overcome. Kingston is a prosperous area and it is difficult to get some key policy makers to understand that Kingston, as a major destination in London, requires their attention and, where possible, resources. There is an Area Action Plan for Kingston town centre, which was adopted in 2008. It is out of date. The process for reviewing it is long, so we are drawing up development briefs or SPDs on priority sites to try to secure the outcomes we want on them, and not just outcomes that are only good for developers. The Mayoral CIL for Cross Rail does not benefit Kingston, taking much needed resources out of the borough.

### **Kingston Business Improvement District – Kingstonfirst**

From 1985 to 2000 Kingston town centre experienced phenomenal growth. Developments such as The Bentall Centre, with new Bentalls and John Lewis department stores, and the pedestrianisation of the main high street helped to make it the second biggest centre for shopping, leisure and entertainment in the south-east, attracting over 18 million visitors every year.

But in 2000 the year-on-year growth stopped. Daytime visitor numbers declined, despite new developments such as Charter Quay and The Rotunda. At the end of 2004, Kingston had fallen from 12th to 17th place in the Experian UK town centre superleague and had lost over one million daytime visitors since 1998.

Research showed that services did not meet the expectations of visitors, residents, staff and the business community. It was in response to this that a Business Improvement District was proposed. Kingstonfirst worked in partnership with Kingston Council to produce a baseline agreement which undertook to maintain or improve standards over the lifetime of the BID. Kingstonfirst would contribute additional cleansing, security and marketing initiatives making Kingston more commercially successful and more attractive to visit. A successful vote was held in December 2004 and Kingstonfirst began operations on 1st January 2005 as the first BID in the UK, generating almost £5m in ring-fenced funding over its five-year life.

Kingstonfirst is now in its second BID term, following a successful renewal ballot in 2009. In addition to the services provided through the first BID, businesses stated that they would like Kingstonfirst to increase tourist, retail and leisure visitor numbers to Kingston town centre. Making the historic heart of Kingston a memorable place to visit and revisit. Promoting, managing and developing a broad range of markets and activities in the open areas of Kingston town centre and bringing the riverside into better use.

At the start of the first BID, Kingstonfirst pledged to increase customers to Kingston Town Centre by an additional one million people a year. Since then, footfall has been increased by 2.45 million a year, with 21.45 million daytime visitors recorded in 2011. Kingstonfirst carries out a number of campaigns and promotions throughout the year targeting different customers through a

variety of media, including PR, email, online, print, press, radio and outdoor.

In 2010, the local authority handed Kingstonfirst the responsibility for delivering and developing tourism. This will enable Kingston to attract customers from a wider geographical area and capitalise on the benefits associated with our proximity to central London and major local attractions such as Hampton Court Palace and Kew Gardens.

### **Case study – Kingston Ancient Market**

The council recognises that high quality public realm will encourage investment. The Ancient Market and the immediate surrounding area is at the historic heart of Kingston town centre and has in the past been the subject of ongoing reviews over many years which has seen the delivery of low key, piecemeal regeneration schemes and improvements.

With the help of investment from RBK and the Mayor of London, the market will now be the subject of a major refurbishment. The council handed over responsibility for the management of the market to Kingstonfirst, which is now an essential stakeholder in the delivery of its transformation, and has a place on the project team overseeing the redevelopment.

We are working together to unlock the full potential of Kingston Ancient Market. The intention is to help the market trade more successfully by providing a high quality offer in an attractive setting which will draw more people to the historic core of Kingston town centre. We will be supporting independent traders and broadening the retail offer of the town. The ancient market place has long been an attraction to visitors, and its rejuvenation is seen as vital in promoting the town centre as a premier retail area.

**“The earliest success stories in neighbourhood planning already demonstrate that neighbourhoods must come to planning, rather than the other way round and that the way into these discussions is to focus on place and place-making.”**

# Place, people, planning

## Place first, planning second

**Antonia Layard**

*Professor of Law and Geography,  
University of Birmingham*

**N**eighbourhood planning has begun and there are some real success stories. Yet the vast majority of residential communities, particularly in urban areas, are not yet engaged. They lack this form of neighbourhood governance. While there is some momentum, supplemented by significant amounts of DCLG funding, if neighbourhood planning is to become a nationally significant movement, we need a change of emphasis.

This change should put the neighbourhood at the heart of the process and significantly broaden out our understanding of planning. If we understand planning as place-shaping, incorporating a range of neighbourhood interests and concerns, including traffic, litter, crime enforcement, public transport, shops and pubs, we are more likely to be able to engage a broad spectrum of neighbourhoods including those with less social and professional capital. We need to bring neighbourhoods to planning, rather than planning to neighbourhoods.

Many residential communities do not immediately frame their concerns and interests in planning terms. They may be concerned with the quality of open space, the amenity of local streets including aesthetics, litter or crime enforcement, the availability of local shops or the suitability of bus routes. They understand place, but not necessarily planning.

Of course, this point is not particularly new, place-based approaches are longstanding. Neighbourhood and community empowerment

projects have a long history, with many successful interventions. Yet too often initiatives and guidance cannot be maintained or the funding runs out.

Neighbourhood planning has two potential advantages here. The first is that it has a relatively standard format that can be replicated country-wide, providing some consistency between neighbourhoods. The second is that there can also be temporal consistency. If a Neighbourhood Plan were to be made on a regular basis (though some are currently being made to last as long as 2031), this would provide a regular point of discussion and understanding about both the place and the plan.

The earliest success stories in neighbourhood planning already demonstrate that neighbourhoods must come to planning, rather than the other way round and that the way into these discussions is to focus on place and place-making. In Thame, for example, the key issue has been to challenge South Oxfordshire District Council's Core Strategy allocation of 600 homes. Thame's residents wanted to make the decision of where new homes should go themselves. Similarly in Exeter St James, a community with many student houses, the Neighbourhood Plan focuses on controls on houses in multiple occupation, while making planning provision for both small-scale and large-scale purpose built student accommodation within the locality. Likewise, on Exmoor, Lynton and Lynmouth have proposed controls on second-home ownership in their Neighbourhood Plan.

In each of these places, residents who have long been engaged with these planning

questions, saw that planning law didn't give a role for neighbourhoods to address them. Housing allocations, for example, were only set at larger spatial scales, multiple occupation was not regulated until 2010, while local planning controls on second homes remain a rather open legal question. Once neighbourhood planning came in, because they were already familiar with the planning landscape, these communities were able to mobilise their resources and get off to a quick start.

Framed as planning, these Neighbourhood Plans are nevertheless still demonstrating a richer understanding of place than we see in core strategies or local authority development documents. The Lyn Plan Objectives, for example, are self-reliance, needs met and opportunities created. This is a place-based starting point that is quite different in tone from core strategies or local development documents. Neighbourhood Plans, because they are relatively unstructured, can begin with the place, rather than following a set pattern. In this case Lynton and Lynmouth are focusing on the need for self-reliance, which they see as a direct consequence for this community of their relative remoteness.

Similarly, in Cuckfield's draft plan, the Sussex village emphasises its location in a distinctive and attractive landscape, and its legacies from "nine centuries of history", noting that it "is blessed by a strong community spirit reflected in the number of groups and activities taking place". One of their key concerns is space for these groups to meet, a central issue in neighbourhoods yet one rarely considered in local development documents because it is seen as being outside the scope of plan-making.

Focusing on place, rather than planning, allows a much broader range of land use and societal questions to be incorporated. A smaller scale facilitates a holistic approach.

What does this mean in practice? It means that we need to start with place, with the neighbourhood, and then move to planning.

The DCLG guidance for neighbourhood planning identifies five stages in the process, with Stage 1 being local people coming together and Stage 2 as 'preparing the plan'. Yet in residential communities where residents do not already frame their concerns in planning terms, this is a huge leap from one stage to the next. And this is not to say that translating these questions into planning terminology or practices cannot or should not be done. It just takes time and effort.

The most significant point here for those doing neighbourhood planning is that there will be issues that are central to place-making that should not be left behind. It is not sufficient for neighbourhood planning consultants to come in and refuse to consider bus routes or the provision of fruit and vegetables in a neighbourhood simply because this is not part of regulatory neighbourhood planning.

If there is no building for community activities to take place and no access to computer expertise or photocopying then this needs to be resolved first. If neighbourhood planning is to engage all communities, and not just the more privileged communities, then there is work to be done by using the resources, the procedures and the regulatory status given to 'the neighbourhood'. If we focus on place first, planning second then there is real potential here.

This is even true if there is a sting in the tail, if neighbourhood planning is not about neighbourhoods but rather about facilitating house-building. Neighbourhood planning is already leading to more house-building, for example in Thame or Upper Eden in Cumbria, with less argument. This is primarily because potential developers can work closely with communities, talking directly about identified sites from the outset. There is a greater understanding of both property and planning from the beginning, intertwining plan-making and development control in a distinct way.

This is a win-win scenario. Both place-making and house-building can be increased, if, and this is crucial, we put the neighbourhood before the Plan.

# Agreeing a shared vision

## **Cllr Adele Morris**

*Shadow Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Jobs and Affordable Homes, LB Southwark*

The concept of neighbourhood planning has existed in communities across the country for many years, long before it became a 'formalised' process under the Localism Act 2011. So when DCLG invited applications for the Neighbourhood Plan pilot programme in 2011, many groups were already in a good position to apply and were excited by the prospect of being able to formally plan how their neighbourhoods are developed in the future. Proposals came in from parish councils with few development opportunities, through to busy inner city areas trying to manage extreme development pressure.

To date only a handful of over 500 applications have completed the full process and have an adopted Neighbourhood Plan. Writing a Neighbourhood Plan can be a complex business, especially in an urban context. Where there is no parish council to take the lead a neighbourhood forum has to be created specifically for the purpose, although there is nothing to prevent an existing group from coming forward to do this.

The Neighbourhood Plan boundary needs to be agreed, and this can be whatever the neighbourhood forum thinks is appropriate. Both the forum and the boundary need to be formally designated by the local authority before a draft plan can be put forward for consultation with the community.

Once the community and the local authority are happy with the plan, it needs to be approved by an independent examiner before it can be put to a referendum of all who live in the plan area. If more than 50 per cent of the votes cast are in favour then the plan is adopted by the local authority and it sits alongside the suite of local development plan documents.

## **Managing complex neighbourhoods**

Bankside Neighbourhood Plan was one of DCLG's early 'frontrunner' projects. It covers a stretch of the London Borough of Southwark that runs alongside the River Thames and is a major tourism and regeneration area. Both the business and residential community groups were granted frontrunner status, however it soon became clear that there couldn't be two separate Neighbourhood Plans for the same area.

The two groups formed a partnership and agreed to set up a neighbourhood forum that consisted of seven business, seven resident and seven community group representatives – including a local ward councillor. It was an easy decision for the group to reach, as there was already a history of strong cross sector working between the Business Improvement District (BID), the local residents' forum and local community groups. However, getting the plan boundary agreed was less straightforward. Some residents wanted the whole ward to be included whilst the BID wanted to stay within the area it already covered. Eventually an area was agreed that is wider than the BID area but doesn't cover the whole ward, and which includes some 6,000 residents and 60,000 employees.

Although the neighbourhood forum is an independent, voluntary body the forum and boundary area had to be designated by the local authority through what turned out to be a lengthy formal process. Although both have now been signed off by the cabinet member, the boundary is currently the subject of a challenge from a neighbouring forum whose proposed boundary overlaps.

Whilst the forum and boundary were being formally agreed, the group had started to meet and discuss the kind of policies they thought should go into a plan. They formed sub-groups to explore housing, retail, heritage and open space concepts, using the responses to recent

council planning document consultations and their combined extensive local knowledge as their basis for discussion.

In an area like Bankside there is very little development opportunity that has not already been identified, but it soon became clear that the Neighbourhood Plan could add value to the local authority's plans. It could enhance existing policies, helping to further define what is appropriate development, and it could set out a project list to direct the spend from the extensive Community Infrastructure Levy funding that will be generated over the coming years.

It could also set out policies to protect and enhance the local heritage – not just the conservation areas but the light industry in the railway arches and the old warehouse buildings that give the area its much-loved character. And it could help to identify the community's infrastructure needs – nurseries, doctors' surgeries, cycle routes – especially given the plan for substantial growth in both residential and business developments.

Two years on from being granted frontrunner status, the Bankside neighbourhood forum is now able to involve the wider community in the plan preparation and, if all goes well, the final plan could be written by the end of the year.

This means that despite all the time, energy and goodwill of many volunteers the group is still months away from having a Plan that has been approved by the local authority, an examiner and most importantly the community via a referendum.

But getting the Plan agreed is only the beginning, and there are many more hurdles to cross before the community really sees the fruits of its labour. Once the Plan has been adopted the real test is in the implementation – and therein lies the potential, eternal conflict between community aspiration and development management.

With financial 'viability' being used more and more as a material consideration, many of the

obligations that a developer should meet under existing policy are failing to be delivered. And it is the direct benefits from a development that are of the most interest to a local community – particularly in an area where land is valuable, property prices are high and infrastructure is struggling to meet the demands of a rapidly-expanding population.

Add to this the increasing pressure from central and London government to meet the national housing shortage – which includes the presumption in favour of sustainable development in the NPPF, the new permitted development (PD) rights to convert commercial premises to residential premises and the recently proposed PD rights to convert shops to residential premises – and the policies in a Neighbourhood Plan could be rapidly undermined.

### **What could government change to help Neighbourhood Plans succeed?**

Site-specific proposals included in an adopted Neighbourhood Plan should not be allowed to be undermined by the newly agreed PD rights. The Neighbourhood Plan must take precedence over any PD rights without the need for a potentially costly Article 4 Direction. Any Neighbourhood Development Orders included in the Neighbourhood Plan should remain unaffected.

The rules relating to boundary challenges from other groups must be amended. Once a boundary has been designated by the local authority it should no longer be subject to challenge, as this puts unnecessary strain and uncertainty on the forum members who are working hard to progress their plan to the next level.

Neighbourhood forums should have access to viability reports where developments are not able to deliver what has been set out and agreed in a Neighbourhood Plan. This would enable them to make an informed judgment about whether to support or oppose an application.

## Should we still be encouraging people to draw up Neighbourhood Plans?

Of course we should. Whilst they may not deliver all of the community's aspirations in the end, the process gives the developers and the local authority the opportunity to see and hear what really matters to the local community. And they have the potential to bring people

from different backgrounds together to agree a shared vision. Surely, that in itself has to be a worthwhile exercise?

# Creating places communities can be proud of

**Stephen R. Hodder MBE**

*President, Royal Institute of British Architects*

For too long, design and the economic and social benefits it brings have been considered an appendage or afterthought in the planning process. Despite planning policy and legislation setting out clear aspirations for better places, the system often fails to deliver the kind of quality development that communities want and will embrace.

Decades of under-investment and the subsequent disintegration of skills in planning departments combined with a steady stream of central government dictats have fostered a risk-averse, tick-box culture in many authorities. Planning has become too one-dimensional and overly focused on development control rather than facilitating the delivery of high quality places for people to live, work and play.

In order to create better places, the way the planning system values and interprets design needs to change. It should be recognised that design lies at the heart of economic efficiency, long-term value, and strong, participative local democracy.

Design does not mean decoration. It solves multiple, often complex problems, helps balance a wide range of needs and interests, whilst still being affordable. High-quality schemes can be responsive, adaptable and

cost-effective when requirements of users and communities change.

Whilst recent reforms, particularly the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) have sought to drive design up the agenda in planning, they have simultaneously undermined the ability of councils to insist upon it on the ground. The decision to entrench financial viability at the heart of the planning system has served to consolidate a short-termist approach to development, and straightjacket those councils who seek to innovate and aspire to high standards.

This change, born out of today's economic circumstances, seems ignorant to the needs of tomorrow. It supports a highly speculative approach to development which could cause long-term damage to our towns and cities. Whilst it is understandable that developers want to keep costs down in order to increase profit margins, it is the communities themselves and the public purse that face the long-term costs of poorly-designed developments. The objective of the planning system should be value maximisation not cost minimisation.

To ensure we get value for the public purse we need to front-load the planning system, changing the emphasis towards early engagement on design issues and allowing councils to get on the front foot. The role of councils needs to shift away from regulating development through Development Control

and be re-set to emphasise proactive, creative plan-making. This will provide greater certainty for developers that ambitious schemes will not be refused on design grounds at detailed planning stage. It will also encourage greater collaboration and meaningful dialogue between communities, developers and councils, speed up the system and subsequently reduce costs.

Re-energising and revitalising the planning system will depend upon us resourcing it properly. We must see planning as a crucial investment and ensure local government has the tools and support it needs to deliver. Spending cuts have not only decimated many planning departments but also led to the removal of many of the crucial support structures (such as CABE and the Regional Development Agencies) that were in place to enable councils to deliver better quality development.

So instead we need to bolster existing structures and delivery agents such as the Homes and Communities Agency, the Design Network and Architecture Centres to ensure that councils have access to the right expertise. Councils should also be encouraged to pool resources, share services and where appropriate, outsource smaller applications.

Reform of the planning system is not the only means by which we can achieve better design outcomes. There is often a temptation to overplay the role of planning and underutilise the capacity for local government to encourage sustainable development in other ways. Councils need to harness the full potential of the powers and assets they have at their disposal. If the right barriers are removed, there is no reason why local government cannot begin to bring development forward itself, flipping on its head the passive and reactive way in which it has often had to engage in the development process over the past few decades.

Councils have powers to plan, to compulsory purchase and procure. Many also have a tremendous amount of assets at their disposal which if used in the right way, have the

potential to bring about long-term economic growth, help re-balance development in favour of the public interest and transform the fortunes of their localities.

One game-changer to promote better design quality – particularly in regards to housing – would be a radical new approach to the use and disposal of public land.

Central government rules should be changed, to discourage the fire-sale of public sector land assets. Instead, the government should be incentivising councils to develop partnerships that will help bring development forward themselves. This would allow councils to make a more productive use of their assets and to have greater control over the quality of development, rather than relying largely on the blunt instrument of planning. In order to cement this new design driven approach, the government should also amend the Social Value (Public Services) Act to include the disposal of public land and public works.

Where the public sector does dispose of land to the private sector, developers should have to bid not just on how much money they will pay but on the quality of the schemes they propose, set out in a detailed design brief. This would allow the public sector to encourage a more diverse, competitive and affordable local housing market as well as implementing new and innovative ways of developing land through custom-build, self-build and smaller development orientated schemes.

Any public land disposal should also require the involvement of the local community both in developing concept designs and in decision-making. This 'community asset panel', a citizens panel with members of the community trained to assess design, would give local people a greater say in the future of their built environment, drive up standards and ensure that value is maximised from precious public assets.

For local government to be a key player in the delivery of high quality development, national government needs to ensure that

councils have access to the finance to do so. By either raising the prudential borrowing cap or by guaranteeing a minimum return on local government pension fund investment in housing and infrastructure, the government could catalyse a sustainable building programme with local councils and local people at the centre.

This would set in motion a more flexible and dynamic relationship between developers and local government, and bring about a re-birth in creative planning. It would strengthen local authorities' ability to respond to a community's specific needs and demands for

sustainable growth, regeneration and public provision.

Responding to the challenges of realigning the planning system to ensure it encourages more ambitious design is difficult in the current economic climate, but this can be achieved through collaborative commitment by landholders, developers, communities and all levels of government.

Good design contributes more value than it costs, so let's take this challenge and give our communities the homes and places they deserve.

## Please let's plan for intermediate housing

**Marc Vlessing**

*Founder and Chief Executive, Pocket*

**H**ousing policy in Britain for the best part of the last 50 years has been characterised by at best a jumble of contradictions, and at worst a polarising discourse that has ignored the spectrum of housing need and resulted in a false dichotomy where the only groups that mattered were the 'haves' (those with the market housing) and the 'have-nots' (those with social housing). And our planning policies have often made matters even worse.

Today, the housing crisis is an intermediate crisis. Intermediate means those who earn too much to qualify for social housing, but are priced out of home ownership: some of these people are in fact higher-rate taxpayers. Today, across the UK and indeed the world – whether New York, Vancouver, Tokyo or Amsterdam – practically all those who were not already on the housing ladder before 2000 fall between those extremes.

'Generation Rent', the 'squeezed middle', or whatever you want to call them, have been ignored for too long, and in combination with

their increasingly pushy parents they are becoming a powerful political voice.

We must recognise this fact and start talking about intermediate housing in its own right – and the planning context to support it. We must acknowledge this demographic and treat it as worthy of its own attention and policies, separate from social housing, and distinct from the broader discussion of affordable housing. Without such a shift in psyche, workable housing solutions for this fast-growing group will continue to prove elusive.

Efforts to tackle this problem have been repeatedly held back by a lack of understanding or an acceptance of the true nature of the problem. The landscape has remained confused to the extent that we don't really know or understand housing requirements.

As such, efforts that have tinkered with the planning system and piecemeal government initiatives have had little impact, and in fact exacerbated, the problem.

Building more affordable housing is of course a positive step, but it needs to be based on an in-depth understanding of housing need.

The task is to build homes where people want to live: for the intermediate market this predominantly means in dense urban areas. This can only be achieved through intelligent design and use of the limited space that is released for development each year.

Pocket flats typically make use of small infill sites and are of high quality, innovative design. This includes floor to ceiling windows, built-in cupboards, and underfloor heating. Each flat can rent additional storage if they need extra space, a key feature in many homes in Holland.

A bold new approach is long overdue, but what is most needed from government is to set the framework for the interaction between the private and public sectors. The private sector is best placed to provide solutions to the intermediate market and in doing so can free up public subsidy to focus on developing family homes. It is imperative that local authorities and public bodies play a much more active role and adopt a 'can-do' approach to releasing their land holdings.

Efforts made by a number of local authorities in London under this government to actively release unused land are encouraging, but this approach must be adopted more widely.

We need a totemic shift in mindset across local authorities, driven by central government, towards a presumption in favour of developing intermediate housing on sites which are perceived as either too small or not well located to deliver housing, or where the planning system might still try to prioritise questionable and potentially unviable employment uses.

Our housing challenges can only be tackled by employing a broad range of solutions, of which the Pocket model is just one part of the mix. Solutions previously touted as silver bullets have been fundamentally flawed. Shared ownership, for example, while appropriate where there is genuine market failure and in areas where solutions such as Pocket's model of grant-free house-building do not exist, has

clearly not achieved its stated objective in terms of improving mobility within the housing market.

We need to use the planning system to promote both a carrot and a stick approach to development. Carrots should include creating a national exemption for Community Infrastructure Levy for all forms of intermediate housing satisfying the National Planning Policy Framework definition; consider allowing self-invested personal pensions to be invested in intermediate rented homes; and consider the creation of 'DISAs' – an ISA for the savings of family and friends applied to a first deposit for a home.

Such initiatives can have a cumulative impact if combined with a stick approach that encourages London councils and beyond to have a register for residents and workers looking to buy intermediate homes. This would involve mapping actual demand and enable a response to demographic and market change far more rapidly than Housing Needs surveys.

This register would enable councils both to direct supply where it is most needed, and create a far more active secondary market for both shared equity and outright for sale intermediate housing. Lenders should also be set firm and ambitious targets to meet first time loans, which currently remain a fractional slice of the UK lender's current mortgage book.

There is no one policy initiative that will solve the affordable housing crisis, and attempts to deliver such an intervention have proved, and will continue to prove, fruitless. Questioning restrictive catch-all requirements though, and encouraging planners to be more pro-active about land use, will help.

So, by employing and encouraging a range of solutions, we can at last deliver to the ever-growing intermediate demographic the housing solutions they deserve and so desperately need.

# Bargain booze, banks and betting – how can we make planning powers work for communities?

**Carl Quilliam**

*Local government policy officer and LGiU policy associate*

**U**nder normal planning rules, if there's an old grocer's shop that wants to become a takeaway or a new bargain booze shop on your local high street and there are already eight, nine, 10 or more of the same kind of shop, then you can ask your council to intervene and they have some power to do so.

That's because each of these types of shop are in a separate planning 'use class', which means if they change from being an ordinary shop then they need permission from the council. The use classes are all helpfully arranged by letters and numbers so you can talk about changing from A1 to A2 or A2 to A5. So, for any fans of '90s children's TV, B1 and B2 don't refer to the Bananas in Pyjamas.

So far so good...

But if a bank closes down and the new owners want to open it up as a betting shop then they can do so without planning permission, the same applies to bars and pubs. That's because in the case of banks they are in the same (A2) use class for financial services as betting shops, whereas bars and pubs (or the 'A4' use class) have an exemption from planning permission when they change to a betting shop or bank.

So if you can follow this use class alphabet spaghetti it's easy to see how a street with say two or three banks, two pubs, a wine bar and a couple of betting shops can instead, quite quickly, become a street with eight betting shops under the current rules.

And this isn't just a hypothetical situation. In

Walthamstow where I've worked for the last two years, there are 11 or 12 betting shops on the High Street and more trying to open all the time. The same can be said in other parts of London, in Haringey, Newham and elsewhere.

This isn't a sensible situation to be in, and along with the licensing rules creates all sorts of odd incentives and market distortions in our high streets that have a real impact on people in those communities.

Similarly, in rural areas you can have entirely different kinds of shops clustering together that create different problems. So some communities, Bath for instance that relies on its image as a historic town for tourism, are trying to fight back the number of supermarkets. Not because they don't want any supermarkets at all but because too many could erode the look and feel of the historic town and its appeal to visitors.

Many people who have followed this debate were therefore hopeful when the government said it would review the use class system but instead of giving more powers to local people they have taken them away.

The biggest changes are dropping the need for planning permission to change from commercial to residential use and the dropping of restrictions to agricultural land for three years. Developers in places like Islington, where I live, are already responding, with some sensible and some less sensible plans.

Many Liberal Democrats across local government have opposed these changes because they take power away from communities and give them to developers without anything in return. It's feared this will lead to resentment of development in local communities and in the long-term hinder, not

help, the cause of development in general and house building in particular.

Most recently Lib Dem members and the then Liberal Democrat local government minister Don Foster, backed a new use class for betting shops at our 2013 Autumn conference. But this isn't government policy yet and a better solution would be to give communities the power to tackle planning problems themselves.

New 'community use classes', set locally, would solve this problem. This would require the government to create an 'umbrella use class' for commercial properties that local authorities can assign themselves. Surely a much better solution than chasing problem issues after they arise by piecemeal changes to legislation?

This requires the government to trust local authorities in the spirit of real Lib Dem localism. If the government matches that trust by also giving councils more borrowing powers, then they could not only give communities more power over development but also unlock some

of the house-building we desperately need.

In many areas councils are already rising to the challenge with record amounts of social housing built. Even in the hotly contested Eastleigh by-election Liberal Democrats successfully championed the building of 1,400 badly needed houses near Botley, against fierce Conservative and UKIP opposition.

This goes to show that councils and politicians can and do support development where it is needed and, with statistics from March 2012 showing 150,000 sites with planning permission yet to even start building, it is clear that it is not just planning that is holding development back.

In the long-term, taking power away from communities only creates resentment and more barriers to development in the future. Giving power back to communities in the true Lib Dem style of community politics will help our high streets, help house-building and help the people who want to work and live there.



**Third Floor,  
251 Pentonville Road,  
Islington,  
London N1 9NG  
020 7554 2800  
info@lgiu.org.uk  
www.lgiu.org.uk**

November 2013