

England planning workshops:

The status of the planning and development sector



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Introduction

In Autumn 2010 the Local Government Association, the Planning Officers Society and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors hosted a number of workshops¹ across England. The intention was to facilitate dialogue between the public and private sector about planning and development, the emerging policy implications, and to engage in some 'horizon scanning' for issues on which further thinking is required from government at all levels.

The workshop attendees, drawn from elected councillors with planning responsibilities, senior planning officers and private sector property professionals, were given broadly similar agenda items, a 'Chatham House' rules setting, and were encouraged to engage in frank and open discussion. While there were some specific locational differences in some of the points discussed (particularly London), the feedback could broadly be organised into a number of 'key themes', which are presented in this report.

This document summarises these key themes in a non-attributable way to present some of the commonly held views and concerns across the planning and development sector. The views in this document do not represent the formal positions of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, the Local Government Association or the Planning Officers Society – or the overall views of participants: indeed on a number of points there was strong disagreement. The inclusion of points merely reflects some of the more popular views expressed during the different sessions.

This paper is not intended to be presented as hard evidence of the state of the market and issues facing the sector, but rather a stock take of some of the general challenges and opportunities a number of local authorities and property professionals across England face.



¹Workshops held across England:

- Cambridge
- London x 3 (one workshop for London-area local authorities and private sector and two for wider south east)
- Manchester
- Birmingham

Representatives at the workshops

Local authorities:

Arun District Council, Ashford Borough Council, Aylesbury Vale District Council, Barnet London Borough Council, Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, Birmingham City Council, Bracknell Forest Council, Bury Metropolitan Borough Council, Cambridge City Council, Camden London Borough Council, Coventry City Council, Enfield London Borough Council, Essex County Council, Guildford Borough Council, Hackney London Borough Council, Huntingdon District Council, Manchester City Council, Milton Keynes Council, Portsmouth City Council, Salford City Council, Shropshire Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council, Staffordshire County Council, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, Trafford Metropolitan Borough, Westminster City Council, Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council.

Other public and private sector attendees:

Abbeygate Developments, Andrew Martin Associates, ATLAS, Banks Developments, Cambridge and County Developments, Central Salford, Countryside Developments, CSJ Brooke Smith, DLA Piper, Drivers Jonas Deloitte, Endurance Estates, Gleeds, GVA Grimley, Harrow Estates, Local Government Association, London Councils, Peel Holdings, Planning Aid, Planning Officers Society, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Royal Town Planning Institute, Rural and Urban Planning Consultancy, Savills.



Executive summary

- Planning is a crucial delivery tool for economic growth and it is vital that area-based enabling planning policies are based on a clear vision for economic growth, sustainability and community.
- There may be further need for more comprehensive guidance and information for the sector prior to legislation being enacted.
- The measures of the Localism Bill need to be communicated effectively across the sector, but especially to communities, to ensure that realistic expectations of attitudes to development are promoted.
- Cross boundary collaboration on infrastructure projects is important, and ways to examine the current and future roles of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to help facilitate this should be encouraged.
- Community enabling is a welcome but complex issue. A new culture of full engagement and ownership rather than tick box consultation is required which protects and draws out the views of the silent majority.

Key themes

General consumer information on energy

Time delay in implementing new system: In 1999 there was a new planning system and it took until 2004 to implement it. Given that time and money are the critical factors allowing a new system to be delivered, government and the sector needs to accept that during the transition there will be a greater need for certainty and clarity in the form of detailed guidance and information presented clearly.

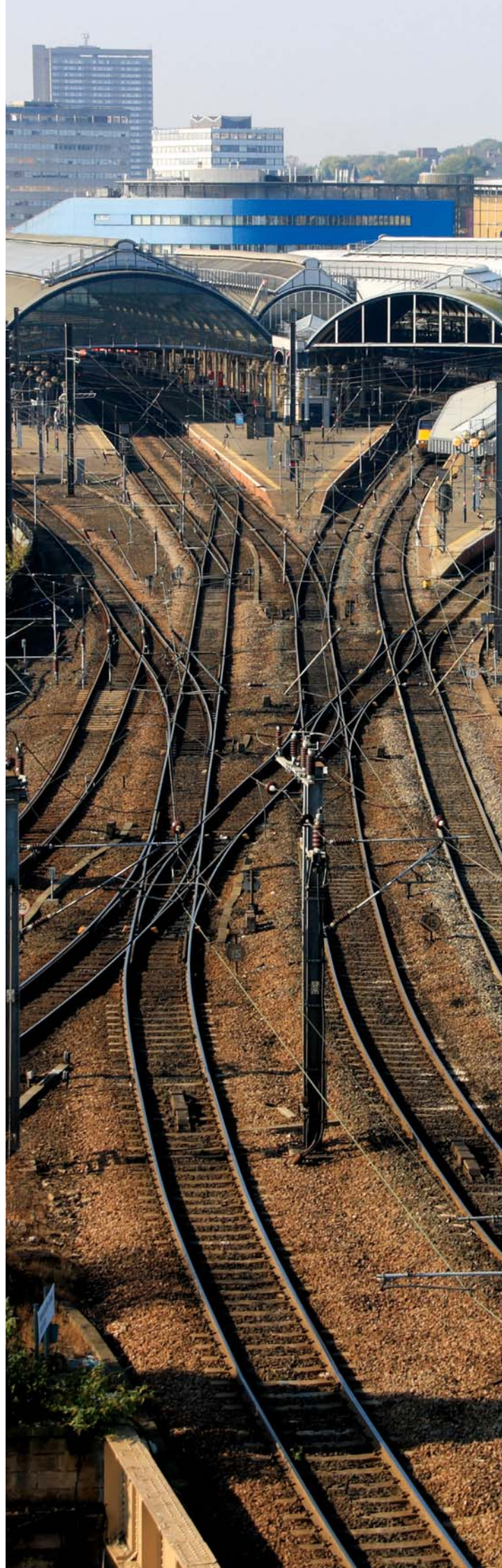
Implementation of new policy: Pilot schemes and vanguards are welcomed to test policy assumptions but it is also critical that care is taken to communicate the new policies and rationale accurately to the public and private sectors and wider society to ensure expectations are managed.

Sporadic development: It is already the case that as the differences are widening between the approaches of local authorities to s106 negotiations, as well as the status of their core strategies, developers are being attracted to those local authorities which want developments and are prepared to be flexible in the planning obligation negotiations. If this trend continues there may be implications on wider strategic economic planning, with knock on effects on commuting and transport and waste infrastructure.

Economic growth

The need for an economic blueprint: A written strategy for a cross-boundary economic area is important to steer involvement and collaboration. There does need to be a framework in place and people to sign up to it: this aids economic development and the creation of jobs. A good example of a successful scheme based on these principles is the *Energy Coast* project in West Cumbria. It comprises a strategy that is designed to deliver for the energy sector in terms of planning, development, regeneration, economic framework, as well as secondary and higher education.

Economic strategy leading planning policy: Planning policies for an area must flow from an economic plan to support the wider growth agenda, and in practice this might be achieved by LEPs. For example, could a digital media strategy drive forward wider planning strategies? An initiative which could be useful to be examined in more depth is the Atlantic Gateway collaboration in the North West.





Local Enterprise Partnerships

Above-local planning and infrastructure: There should be a real role for emerging LEPs in strategic planning and this should primarily focus on cross boundary schemes and infrastructure. Local infrastructure plans should be essential building blocks of LEPs, as only infrastructure delivery, gained through planned investment, will deliver sustainable growth in the housing stock.

Avoiding the lowest common denominator: In some local authorities members, residents and businesses all have very different perspectives and these do need to be reconciled. There is a role for LEPs to facilitate arbitration and mediation between parties to align the differing interests in a strategy which supports the holistic economic growth of an area.

Cross boundary collaboration: There is a marked contrast in the ways many local authorities communicate with each other, where there is either good collaboration between the authorities or where adjacent authorities hardly communicate at all. Some cases were cited where the local authority requested that the developer initiate dialogue between the two neighbouring planning authorities because there were no existing communication channels. Clearly this is not generating the certainty and clarity required by the market to deliver housing and infrastructure, and more best practice and collaborative models need to be promoted and disseminated.

Collaborative models = economic growth: Much collaborative work tends to be inward looking between local authorities, but effective joint working should be targeted at wider business growth and area-wide competitiveness. City-wide partnerships that focus on global competitiveness should major on 'champion' issues such as digital media. These issues will always have synergies with neighbouring areas – such as the games software industry in neighbouring cities, as well as the regional transport infrastructure that connects business hubs together.

Planning process

The central importance of an evidence base: The need for an evidence base is paramount and responsible localism which empowers communities and local authorities to make area-based decisions is predicated on the availability of accurate information. Without informed decision making which joins local vision for economic growth with place shaping, the implications on vibrant communities could be significant – affecting issues as broad as population distribution and movement to transport congestion.

Pre-application process: There is concern that the pre-application process will become longer and less clear in the localist context. Developers may avoid pre-application discussions with planning officers and instead target local residents with the loudest voices through kitchen table conversations. This is likely to lengthen the engagement process and make it more amorphous and less clear. Guidance on process and protocol, without being dictatorial, is essential.

Pre-application charges: There needs to be further training for planning officers to be empowered to give more consideration to market needs, rather than planned targets. Along with this training, there should be clearer standards and guidance on service levels to be guaranteed in local authority dialogue with the private sector. Too often it appears that assurances and incorrect information is given to private developers only for the application to be turned down on altogether different grounds by the elected member committee. Developers would generally be willing to pay for a consistent and useful service.

Infrastructure planning: The principle of 'greater good' for a wider area must be maintained to ensure that where a major (but non-national) infrastructure facility is planned such as a waste treatment facility, the community that it serves has the ability to override the preferences of the local neighbourhood in which it is located. The localism philosophy gives the government and policy makers a major dilemma in that it is raising expectations that could be undermined unless the correct messages are conveyed to the public and professionals. Also, forward planning for water infrastructure and other major projects could be problematic because of the long lead times needed. Some form of strategic framework is needed to avoid inefficiencies and uncertainties.

Co-ordinated plan making: There is a challenge in not only joining up cross boundary planning topics, but also integrating overall economic growth aspirations and plans between district councils and counties. Issues such as transport are already a sub regional concern, with some cross boundary schemes being co-ordinated between two cities and a county or more. Housing is a difficult issue to plan for in isolation, since it is intrinsically linked to travel to work areas and wider economic growth and infrastructure provision.

National Planning Statements: A revision of the system of Planning Policy Statements (PPS) could be beneficial as the current system is not well integrated and there are some inconsistencies. A broad vision is needed with a few points from PPS1. A slim PPS that has a focus on outcomes, but supported by daughter documents, would be useful, though if the document is too concise it could leave scope for developers to seek judicial review on imprecise guidance.

Adaptable and flexible new public space: There is a need to plan for a sustainable demographic structure and to be clear about how to adapt to an ageing population and the specific needs this will create. Public buildings and space needs to be multi-functional and adaptable to changing use. We need to have a community level vision of what it will look like and what the community wants – this will need to be long-sighted and visionary.

Planning with communities

Community definition and representation: Rural and urban communities can be defined in very different ways. Rural communities are altogether more homogenous than urban areas. In urban areas, where there are wealthy streets next to more deprived streets, there need to be mechanisms in place to ensure that the interests of louder, more involved communities do not override the interests of those who could be more vulnerable and less able to articulate need and aspirations.

A more collaborative approach to community engagement: Community engagement at pre-application stage is too often a PR exercise and not a genuine consultation. Engagement is the key word, rather than consultation. This involves working with existing communities and discovering their issues and challenges in an attempt to really understand what is important, which should then shape the integration of any ideas for development with the needs of the local community.

Community support: The ability of a local community to develop a neighbourhood plan is likely to vary substantially given the different make up and education of communities. There need to be mechanisms in place to 'meet the gap' for those communities that do not have people able to develop their plans effectively. This is critical in providing safeguards to ensure vulnerable communities are not sidelined. There is considerable work required to develop thinking on incentives and the concept of accepting the 'greater good'.



Housing

Planning for growth: In reality, housing requirements are not solely guided by indigenous population growth and the wider needs and aspirations of those outside of the specific community need to be taken into account and embedded in the system. There needs to be a way to plan around centres of employment and encourage effective long term planning for economic growth, while guaranteeing involvement by local communities.

Housing density: Removing housing density criteria could lower densities because they are perceived by developers as being more desirable for homebuyers. However, this is counter intuitive, as this will increase pressure to release additional greenbelt land for development. Lower density sites also seem to be more appealing in a slow market as builders are able to construct one unit as a show house and then build to order so there is minimal unsold stock.

Housing linked to economic growth: Housing is fundamental to economic growth. There will be cities and city regions looking for strong economic growth and the ability to provide the right home in the right place at the right price is fundamental. As an example, 75 per cent of new buyers in Salford are people new to Greater Manchester who have generally moved to Salford to locate near to their places of work. The unprecedented increase in Salford's population over the past five years has delivered an extra £8m per year in revenue to Salford City Council. This is a job linked housing related outcome.

Deliverability

Market-led housing and construction recovery:

Government and policy makers are rewriting the systems and procedures for planning and housing delivery but critical to its success is how the market responds. The market requires more information and certainty to be able to deliver the increased housing numbers required – this is a need in the short term prior to the new legislative framework, as well as in the mid to long term. Considerations relating to viability of schemes must be central to policy makers and local authorities.

Viable and deliverable projects: There is little point in planning expensive buildings if nobody will pay for them and this is where the role of surveyors is critical – to inject realism and help assemble viable projects.

Planning obligations: There is an expectation among policy makers that high value developments will deliver high value cheques to fund infrastructure projects for local authorities. However, given the current state of the market local authorities should set their tariffs with regard to the developer's ability to pay rather than solely their expectations/aspirations.

Skills and resources

Feast and famine: Local authority finances continue to be stretched. With the budget and staff reductions pending, sufficiently resourcing community engagement and 'localist' planning is likely to be difficult. Although local authorities will be expected to take a more involved role in neighbourhood planning there may be opportunities in outsourcing local plans and development control services, and this requires further thinking.

Community enabling: There is a significant opportunity for an expansion in community enabling functions. There is widespread concern about whether local authorities will have the technical skills to be able to address how to find new and more appropriate ways to engage with local people beyond the current model of 'consultation'.





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