



Position statement on Government's planning reforms

Introduction

The Cheltenham Civic Society welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the new Government's proposed changes in planning. These are some of the most far-reaching proposals since the 1947 Act. Changes of this kind are of great importance to everyone - and everyone should be able to have a say in deciding what should be done.

The statement is for public use and forms part of our response to the Government's consultation. Separately, we have tried to answer those of the 106 questions posed by the Government where we feel we have expertise and experience to offer.

In this statement, we:

- review our recent experience with planning in Cheltenham,
- briefly summarise what we understand to be the Government's aims, and
- identify what we like about the proposals; where we think more clarity is needed; what we don't like; and what's missing.

Our experience of planning in Cheltenham

We work closely with the local planning authority, Cheltenham Borough Council, and we acknowledge and respect their efforts to deal with a continuing flow of planning issues, big and small. The planning department are overstretched and understaffed, with frequent turnover of staff, and everyone is subject to heavy and unrelenting pressures. While our planners sometimes deliver good outcomes, the demands are such that the reactive taking of decisions about planning applications (development control) often takes precedence over the proactive tasks of making plans, setting standards and providing guidance for development. Our comments below should be seen in that light.

We welcome change in our town and recognise the importance of a flourishing local economy and a thriving and diverse society. However, respect for the economic, social and cultural value of Cheltenham's special architectural and historic qualities is essential, as is an understanding of the reality of the limitations imposed by our geography and administrative boundaries. We appreciate the need for new and adapted housing, but we do not welcome more of the developer-led solutions we have witnessed in recent years; Cheltenham does not need more 'executive' housing estates

on the periphery, so much as more affordable housing within the town. Our town must grow, but not at the expense of trees and green spaces within it, as these enhance the quality of civic space and the attraction of our town centre. Nor should we lose access to beautiful countryside nearby. Because the boundaries of Cheltenham Borough are drawn so tight, it cannot solve all its housing, transport and other needs within them – it must work with neighbouring local authorities in a sub-regional approach. This has implications for the way in which housing targets are set, pursued and monitored.

In our view, planning in Cheltenham suffers at present from the following:

- A shortage of up-to-date, well-researched and appropriately detailed plans and guidance for areas subject to change. The council should prepare and consult on site-specific detailed design briefs and master plans *before* new development goes ahead. The reactive approach – sometimes arrived at after negotiation between officers and developers in which there is no opportunity for an input from the public - has resulted in development schemes that fail to maximise opportunities for affordable housing and green space, that do not do justice to Cheltenham’s need for high quality design in new buildings, and that provide disappointingly little environmental enhancement.
- Similarly, the guidance about what is acceptable in Conservation Areas is unacceptably out of date, leading to poor quality and inconsistent decision making, and to outcomes that damage the significance, and economic and social value, of our wonderful heritage assets.
- Likewise, we need more supplementary guidance on a range of small-scale planning and design issues that affect thousands of homeowners, such as off-road parking and access, energy efficiency, adapting of heritage buildings for renewables, replacement of windows and the design of extensions. Recent advice published by the council on climate change and planning shows what can be done¹, as does Historic England’s guidance on adapting historic buildings for carbon reduction².
- Too often change is developer-led, not plan-led; and too often the quality of new development detracts from, rather than adds to the character of the town. These are not just issues of aesthetics but lead to poorly planned public and private buildings and spaces that do not meet our most pressing needs and fail to maximise the quality of life and sense of community that are essential for a thriving town.
- The separation of transport planning (a county council responsibility) from land use planning (done by the Borough Council). This supports the case for strategic planning and closer cooperation between neighbouring authorities.

¹ https://www.cheltenham.gov.uk/info/46/planning_policy/1037/supplementary_planning_documents/2

² <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/adapting-historic-buildings-energy-carbon-efficiency-advice-note-18/>

- Our town centre struggles from a contraction in retail, poor maintenance of the public realm, unresolved issues over transport, and a failure to understand and maximise the potential value of heritage to the economy³. It is also an area where there is unused potential for new residential in vacant premises above retail, and car parking space that could be built over in imaginative new development.

The Government's diagnosis of the problems with planning

The Government has put economic growth and greatly expanding the supply of housing at the centre of its policy, which will be supported by central government targets designed to deliver 370,000 new homes a year: these aims drive many of its planning proposals. It also seeks to accelerate the decarbonisation of the grid by 2030 by making the approval of on-shore wind power easier and to make it simpler for the hi-tech industries of the future to get permission. Plan making is given a new emphasis and strategic planning is back in favour.

The consultation says that some of the revisions to the NPPF made last year by the previous Government made it much harder to build new homes, blocked on-shore wind and generally held back economic development. It believes the absolute protection of all parts of the Green Belt should be modified to permit new housing on degraded ('grey belt') parts of the Green Belt, but it intends to strengthen the existing policy of 'brownfield first' when it comes to new housing. Within the housing plans, there will be a new emphasis on building affordable homes. New measures are planned to extract more value from development to fund infrastructure.

Our responses to the proposals

Based on our experience in Cheltenham

We welcome especially the following aspects of the consultation document:

- The emphasis given to the central role of setting direction, plan making and foresight. New development must be plan-led and plan making authorities must have up-to-date local plans so that they, not the developers, are in the driving seat when it comes to deciding on the needs of the town and its residents.
- The revived enthusiasm for strategic and regional planning. For a borough like ours that cannot meet all its needs within its boundaries, this is especially important. Also, this is the best way to ensure that new residential development is provided with necessary services from the outset.
- The 'brownfield first' policy. If this is done well, this can have many environmental, economic and social benefits. Planning authorities should be

³ See <https://uat.historicengland.org.uk/research/heritage-counts/heritage-and-economy/economic-value/>

required to draw up master plans for the development of brownfield sites where they anticipate significant change. However, in so doing they should be alive to value of important industrial heritage and places where formerly derelict land has established high nature conservation value.

We would like to see these aspects clarified or given more priority:

Housing

- We recognise the political imperative to build many more new homes. But rather than make this just a ‘numbers game’, we suggest five principles should guide the emphasis on new residential development:
 - That the right kind of homes should be built. Too often the volume builders concentrate on ‘executive type’ 3- or 4- bedroom homes for sale, whereas the priority is for reasonably-priced accommodation (rented, leased or shared ownership) that is accessible to those who need homes. We cannot see how that can be done without a larger role for the public or social sector than seems to be envisaged in the consultation, and we feel there are missed opportunities for imaginative tenure and funding approaches.
 - That the design of new homes should be of the highest standard. The obsession with numbers must not mean the sacrifice of quality. Planners need to set and maintain high design standards and Ministers must ensure these are upheld on appeal if necessary. In this connection, it is alarming that the proposals envisage removing references to beauty (see below).
 - That the highest sustainability standards are encouraged both in the design and the build of new houses and are not lost in a trade-off for quantity. Construction is a highly carbon-emitting industry and there is much scope to encourage innovative (often also more affordable) solutions. The “presumption in favour of sustainable development” should not be code for trading-off sustainability in favour of development; creating clear and stringent sustainability standards will lead to better development outcomes. Given the Government’s (welcome) commitment to reaching net zero and other sustainability targets, planning should be used to help pursue these – not undermine them.
 - That the emphasis should be on creating communities as much as hitting house building targets. That means that the associated infrastructure and public services must be delivered before or alongside the provision of new homes. Only the planning authorities can guarantee this is done:

they must be encouraged to prepare the plans and briefs needed to ensure this happens.

- That places to live need generous amounts of green space (gardens, trees, open space, water and natural areas). These should be designed as an integral part of all new developments. The Government's support for green infrastructure is welcome but it must be reflected in the plans made by local authorities to shape new development.
- While the Government is drawing a causal link between construction and economic growth, we think there is a missed opportunity to capture short term economic benefit from house-building, for example by involving and upskilling local communities.
- We accept the political imperative of setting housing targets, but the target set for Cheltenham has been increased from 454 to 830 (+53%). Hemmed in by Green Belt and the Cotswold National Landscape, with very little available new building land, Cheltenham will find it hard to meet that target. It is really important that, for towns like ours with a limited amount of available land for new homes, house building targets should be shared with our neighbours: Fortunately, a new strategic and local plan for Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury Districts is under preparation, with Gloucestershire County Council. Cheltenham should be allowed to meet its housing target through this means.
- Where availability of land is tight, land prices may be pushed up, which will reduce, or remove completely, the projected affordability bonus and could result in potential credit and wealth transfer impacts. We hope that DHCLG has given some thought to how this might be mitigated. While global house targets may be useful, what about setting targets for the development of brownfield sites to cover genuinely affordable housing and homes for social rent? Why are these targets, apparently, only to be set for 'grey belt' land in the Green Belt?

Green Belt

- While we accept that some Green Belt land will meet the description of 'grey belt', development on the latter should not undermine the basic purpose of the Gloucester and Cheltenham Green Belt, which is to keep the two settlements apart. Also there have to be safeguards to ensure that landowners do not 'run down' parts of Green Belt with the intention that these are then regarded as suitable for building on.
- The focus on the Green Belt should not only be on its potential for possible new housing land. We should give these areas, on the edges of our major towns and cities, a bigger role in landscape scale improvement, thus benefiting nature and helping to meet the needs of townspeople for fresh food, recreation space and

clean energy. A possible model for this already exists in the National Forest in the English Midlands, from which lessons can be learnt to how to use landscape enhancement to support more biodiversity and carbon capture, recreation and innovative economic activity. The Gloucester and Cheltenham Green Belt would be a good place to try out such an approach.

Planners and the profession

- It is good that the Government is planning to increase the number of local authority planning staff, but the stated intention to support the recruitment of 300 new planners has to be set alongside the existence of more than 330 planning authorities in England. Moreover, as we have seen in Cheltenham, understaffing and rapid turnover reduce the effectiveness of the planning department. It takes at least four years to train a planner and a further two years for them to achieve chartered status. We need a strategy to deliver a reliable stream of newly trained planners, but it cannot be done overnight. So, we also need urgent action to attract back to local planning authorities experienced chartered planners who have left the public sector for private practice or for other employment. In short, current government proposals are insufficient to staff the new, more proactive roles intended for the planning profession and need to be strengthened.
- Also, it is not just a question of the numbers of planners. Planners need the appropriate skills to take up the more proactive approach envisaged for them in the consultation. The Government needs to encourage up-skilling, training, the development of career paths within and between employers in the public and private sectors, and continuous professional development. They also need to give enhanced status to the role of the local authority Chief Planner.
- We welcome the potential for more flexible planning fees and we hope this can be used creatively to incentivise or discourage certain types of development as well as going some way to addressing the constraints of staff and resources in Planning Departments.

Renewable energy

- While we welcome the support for onshore wind and new ground solar arrays in areas of the countryside not subject to special protection, there are many acres of existing suitable roof space within towns which could be covered by solar panels. Large industrial and warehouse buildings come to mind; so too do car parks in town centres, many of which could easily and cheaply be covered with solar panel canopies. The Government should do more to encourage the

planning system to deliver a marked increase in renewable energy generated within towns in such ways.

Public engagement

- On community engagement, we agree there should be more emphasis on this at the plan making stage, but it is unrealistic to try to reduce greatly public engagement at the development control stage. This has been tried before but is always be resisted by the public, who – inevitably – demand a say about new schemes when they come forward for approval, especially when so many schemes have been of poor quality.
- It is wrong to assume that people only object to new development because they are trying to protect the price of their homes or through fear of change. Often people are motivated by the simple wish to create, or protect, high quality environment. Often too people are frustrated by the ‘take it or leave it’ kind of consultation they encounter, which reduces trust in public authorities and leaves local communities suspicious about lack of transparency and genuine dialogue. Councils **should** involve communities in a patient process of co-design: contrary to popular belief, residents are often enthusiastic about development when they feel listened to and when it has positive social outcomes at its heart.
- So, we strongly advise against attempting to reduce the public’s opportunity to comment at the point of development control and hope the Government will encourage and guide local authorities to follow imaginative ways to engage the public in shaping plans, not just responding to proposals.

We are opposed to the following proposal in the amended NPPF:

- There is no case for removing the references to the need to build beautiful new places. The Government’s arguments for so doing are unconvincing and unsupported by evidence. They say: “references to ‘beauty’ and ‘beautiful’ may result in inconsistency in how it is applied in decision-making, as many find the term subjective and difficult to define”. In fact, ‘beauty’ is an essential component of good design; it is a quality that people value highly and that contributes to quality of life with demonstrable positive outcomes. It is just not true that beauty is an entirely subjective notion: indeed, much has been written over the years on what beauty means in the design buildings and of towns. The advice of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission⁴ is a recent example: it should not be dismissed out of hand just because it was the work of

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-building-better-building-beautiful-commission>

the previous government. Remember too that the opposite of beauty is ugliness. To remove references to beauty will be taken as a signal that new buildings need not be beautiful, pleasing to the eye, or delight; it might even suggest that it doesn't matter if they are ugly. It is hard to think of a more short-sighted proposal. The words should be reinstated in the new NPPF after the consultation.

We think these points are missing

- We regret the lack of imaginative delivery and funding solutions for the much-needed housing. As we have said above, the developer-led construction in recent years has failed to meet need, affordability, design and sustainability standards, and profits are rarely retained in the locale where the development takes place. We believe that there are significantly more creative and appropriate solutions that will cost local people less, and result in higher standards in all the above respects. Hopefully these will emerge at the next stage of the government's housing plans take shape.
- We would also like to see encouragement given to experimental approaches, with evaluation and the sharing of good practice as more evidence emerges. Areas that might be suitable for this approach include: the creative use of fee-setting to help meet planning purposes; testing alternative approaches to delivering truly affordable housing; and encouraging more renewable energy provision within towns.

Cheltenham Civic Society

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