



CHAPTER SIX

Planning: how
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Why

Radical changes to the planning regime will allow us to develop and reshape the economy – rather than just control development.



The failing

Localism does not work, with politics and Nimbyism stifling development, while top down national planning is mired in delay and scandals. Both fail to address the needs of the country – particularly outside of London – and the needs of future generations.

Policy recommendations

- I. Regional devolution: Create a regional planning authority like that created for the Olympics which is able to independently take decisions about development in an area, with the test case being the Arc, made up of members of the local community and businesses to ensure no bias and that all local interests are met
- II. Digital planning: Fully digitised land registry and planning portal, enabling seamless access to public data which can support innovation for companies looking to improve the urban environment, while also reducing costs and bureaucracy for home or property buyers of any kind
- III. Change the focus of Green Belts from early 20th to mid 21st century objectives. Focus on natural and human capital and net zero carbon emissions by 2050, allowing development in the green belt if it enhances these objectives
- IV. Zero Emissions Development: Make net zero carbon efficiency a prerequisite for new developments, restoring the zero carbon homes policy scrapped by the Government in 2015, and use Modern Methods of Repurposing to make existing buildings more efficient and less wasteful. Mandating negative emissions for green belt development schemes could also provide an incentive that brings online land sorely needed for new housing

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A series of radical solutions along the growth corridor

The UK planning system is failing.

It is a system trying to represent diverse interests in a densely populated county with a limited land supply, but that just stifles development.

Planning should be developing the communities of the future, but few generations of voters are capable of making sacrifices for tomorrow.

And making radical changes to the system has become difficult, where a culture of tweaking has been created that stifles genuine innovation.

But there are solutions, for the Arc and the UK.

1. Regional planning authorities along economic lines

Localism and 'community buy-in' have totally stifled development. In Guildford, 23 Conservative councillors lost their seats after voting in an unpopular local plan pushing more development.

We are not getting buy-in from communities, and decisions are being made for political rather than local reasons.

The answer is to put strategy and regional interest back into the hands of strategic planning.

It worked in the 1950s, with the wave of new towns created by development corporations. Now we have a range of new technologies and data systems – not to mention our own learning – to make it work better.

We should create a strategic planning authority along the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, joined by economic interest, that can push through the decisions that really matter and which would otherwise not be made, due to politics and nimbyism.

That authority needs checks and balances, but also the political freedom to make honest decisions, with defined executive powers like London and the powers to approve or refuse development.

The Pace of UK planning

	All apps received (year to March 2019)	% granted (year to March 2019)	Major decisions made in 13 weeks or agreed extension (% 24 mths to March 2019)
England	447934	88	93
Corby	359	84	68
Luton	505	76	83
Peterborough	1001	91	85
Wycombe	2065	90	82
Vale of White Horse	1514	95	81
Northampton	1263	89	97
West Oxfordshire	1483	93	67
Cambridge	1300	94	97
Oxford	1468	87	99
Fenland	766	82	99
Daventry	834	89	87
East Northamptonshire	920	88	88
Bedford	1387	85	78
South Northamptonshire	1175	91	91
Wellingborough	483	90	94
Milton Keynes	1733	91	82
Huntingdonshire	1573	95	77
Central Bedfordshire	2414	91	84
East Cambridgeshire	1142	86	97
Chiltern	1464	90	89
Aylesbury Vale	2245	89	76
Cherwell	1721	93	84
Kettering	663	90	93
South Cambridgeshire	2339	87	68
South Oxfordshire	2243	94	68
South Buckinghamshire	1224	90	89
Derby	1268	93	91
Exeter	606	93	71
Ipswich	722	92	100
Norwich	834	94	90
Nottingham	1387	91	85
Portsmouth	1142	84	87
Sheffield	2577	95	83
Southampton	1150	77	81
Woking	1206	85	88
Liverpool	2395	90	94
Manchester	2658	91	84
Salford	1028	95	81
Birmingham	5536	87	80
Newcastle	1347	91	92
Bath	2455	92	86
Leicester	1753	90	89
York	1948	89	87
Leeds	4653	92	92
Bristol	3081	83	86
County Durham	2707	96	97
Reading	1017	88	89
Middlesbrough	564	93	90
Brighton and Hove	2273	74	92
Coventry	1646	86	100

Source: ONS

2. Businesses need a voice in the planning process

Business is given little voice in planning by local politicians, who may listen to a handful of residents, but not the opinion of the company investing millions.

In the City of London, we have seen an example of what can happen when business has a voice. The Square Mile is one of the most innovative financial districts in the world due to mixed consultation.

This should not create a capitalist development spree, but represent business interests at a local level.

Experts of the built environment should also be one of the parties advising local government on commercial and residential development.

To many planning committees have few experts and too many politicians. A quarter of seats should be allocated to professionals.

3. LDOs and LDCs

Planning stifles certainty. A company investing millions should be given confidence in the process.

We should allocate some areas for development, and there let development happen without further strings. As an exchange, in other areas development could be banned entirely.

In areas of high strategic importance, Local Development Corporations run by new combined authorities can allow development without going to committee after an initial plan is drawn up.

Private companies that own land should be able to get Local Development Orders to allow them to develop on their land. MEPC in Oxford has an LDO to speed up development. This could be done along the Arc.

What is to stop us letting Trinity College or AstraZeneca taking an LDO for their land? It must rest in their ownership – to avoid land brokerage – but it can be done.

And to avoid the lack of the local authority resources, the private sector can pay for the privilege from a national body that steps in to make the planning decisions for schemes of size or importance – like the NIC is meant to do.

4. Green contributions in exchange for green belt

The green belt discussion goes round in circles. So why not consider other solutions, like incorporating a bio-diversity gain into developments on green belt land?

If you develop 50 acres of green belt, you must buy and return another 50 acres of land to green use – not farmland, but real public green space, such as woodland, somewhere else along the Arc.

This could allow development in partnership with national wildlife trusts, bringing them along at the planning stage, but giving them a chunk of land at the end for real biodiversity.

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Contributor

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Being clear on the benefits – and trade-offs – for local communities

Across the country, the housing crisis is driving social and economic change.

Challenges over the number and distribution of affordable homes, the quality of new housing, and the difficulties for young people getting on the housing ladder have deep roots and major consequences for the future unless they are addressed.

Our industry and government both spend a lot of time discussing and creating policy directives to tackle these problems. However, this top-down approach risks failure unless we communicate with local people on the ground, in terms that are relevant to them.

Often, this is as simple as showing residents how they will benefit from new developments. Locals can be sceptical about the rationale for putting new homes on their doorstep, particularly when the larger issues or 'crises' may not be so apparent in their own community.

Demonstrating that those new homes don't come in isolation, that they bring new schools, new GPs and better roads for current residents to use, can make a real difference to local attitudes. A project of 5,000 homes can deliver a secondary school, a number of primary schools and a new GP surgery for the local community, along with extensive open space.

In addition, it could provide new leisure facilities, millions of pounds in road

improvements, or new shops, restaurants and businesses. It may even intervene to stop existing doctors' surgeries or schools from being closed, or help to restore local ecosystems.

It's these benefits that can be of real significance to an area. As developers and investors, we need to be diligent about looking into the infrastructure needs of the community. By working with residents and businesses to understand what is missing in terms of local services, we can have open conversations about how we fill those gaps.

At its heart of the issue is trust. We have a real challenge in that people don't believe local authorities or developers when it comes to planning. Communities doubt the facilities will be provided and that the authorities will hold developers to task. If we are going to deliver homes and growth, we need to be honest about the opportunities and trade-offs involved – so that we can bring communities with us.

The Oxfordshire Cotswolds Garden Village – Grosvenor

On 215 acres of land to the north of the A40 near Eynsham, the Oxfordshire Cotswolds Garden Village will provide 2,200 homes alongside a new transport hub and business park.

Well ahead of planning, Grosvenor, Oxfordshire County Council and West Oxfordshire District Council are encouraging the local community to engage in the design, so that key decisions can be taken together through a better understanding of the benefits and trade-offs involved.

Grosvenor is working closely with the local authorities, preparing their planning application in tandem with the area action plan. This has enabled joint engagement with the community and should speed up housing delivery.

Through these discussions, the local authorities have also been able to inform submissions for funding for local transport infrastructure, that will benefit both the planned and existing community.

The multi-stage engagement process included early workshops (summer 2018), to really get under the skin of the site to understand the local issues. In May 2019, Grosvenor brought nearly 300 residents and interest groups together over three days for a design charrette to continue these discussions in the context of the garden village itself. Grosvenor went into the event with no fixed master plan and gave the participants a real opportunity to shape the new community.

Contributor

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Planning transparency is critical

When it comes to development being delayed in areas such as Oxford and Cambridge, where planning is proving lengthy, complicated and sometimes impossible, the key issue we find is lack of resource and transparency in the system from pre-application stage, through to determining an application.

It is very rare for an application to be determined in its statutory period, which is a result of lack of resource, visibility with the planning committee, or statutory consultees not responding in a timely manner. We maximise the use of pre-application and PPA, however this can become costly. Early engagement with planning committees at pre-application stage would help refine schemes where planning could be complicated or contentious.

Where schemes offer provision over and above the LPA affordable housing requirements, these should be prioritised. We find 100% affordable housing schemes take double the amount of time to approve than they should.

We support presumption in favour of development around transportation hubs, which are clearly a location for high-density mixed-use development and while local and national policy supports this, it could go further. The balance needs to be struck with high-density development and its relationship with the existing built environment and local community.

We support permitted development rights for selected brownfield sites, allowing for a presumption in favour of development where pre-agreed criteria are met. The high infrastructure costs to support such

developments can be considerable. As such, commensurate levels of infrastructure funding for small and large brownfield development should be available under a fast track system.

We also fully support the suggestion of a digital planning portal. It is critical that we create local authority asset mapping as a compulsory requirement to enable partnership working, and land assembly opportunities to maximise the amount of new housing in the planning system.

A single source system to ensure all local authority planning departments are managing and reporting information in a consistent manner would be a positive first step.

Currently, electronic planning systems vary dramatically across the currently. The ability for hard to reach parts of the community to be fully integrated if they so wish is critical. Engagement should not be seen as a tick box: it should be central to all development. A diverse representation of the local community should always be possible, and these people should be able to have their voices heard.

Clear, robust, up to date and iterative planning policy and provision of resource is key to driving quality and success in the planning system. The system itself needs a wholesale update to reflect modern technology and expectations. The challenge - and the offer of greater flexibility - is building trust in the planning and construction industries, to ensure greater flexibility is not abused.