

Hopes and Fears

What next for reforms to the planning system?

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The best time to repair the roof is of course when the sun is shining. But we seem instead to have spent years obsessing over Brexit and its consequences, only then to be faced with a pandemic and serious war in Europe, then with policy stasis following a prime ministerial resignation and now a growing economic crisis.



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Our planning system is in a perilously neglected state. Even in the good times it has not been delivering, whether in the delivery of homes (particularly affordable homes), in the battle against climate change or in “levelling up” this country’s huge geographical inequalities. But most problems are not with the legislative framework within which policies are formulated or decisions are taken but with those policies themselves and with how the system is managed and resourced. The ambitious proposals of the government’s 2020 planning white paper are dead, killed by one by-election last year. The measures within the current Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill in themselves are a pale compromise and do not amount to a set of sustainable long-term repairs to the system. The published publication date of July 2022 prospectus for a revised National Planning Policy Framework came and went. There have been other matters on ministers’ minds.

So, what do I hope for? And what do I expect, or, rather, fear?

I hope that our caretaker Secretary of State, Greg Clark, stays in place. He has a better understanding of, and closer interest in, the issues than would a new appointee.

I hope that the Bill makes progress but that the Government listens to the well-founded concerns of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. Its chair wrote to the Secretary of State on 24 August following its various evidence sessions:

“In respect of the planning provisions, the main concerns that have been raised are about a lack of detail in the Bill, which has hindered effective scrutiny, and about a perceived movement towards the centralisation of planning decisions due to some of the provisions in the Bill and the tone of some of the language. Both these concerns have meant that the evidence we have heard has been presented with some scepticism and some distrust as to what the Government’s intentions are. If one central thrust of the Bill is not to centralise planning decisions, then the remaining planning provisions in the Bill can be described as loosely connected proposals to tinker with the current system, hopefully achieving some improvement. We have not received strong opposition to any of the proposals, but in part this is a factor of the detail not being published, so witnesses are having to hypothesise what will be enacted rather than respond to a firm proposal.”

I hope that the Government proceeds with its proposals for a national set of development management policies to replace the policies that are repeated with slight variations in every authority's individual local plan – but only for policies where there is genuinely no legitimate room for local variation.

I hope that the Government publishes its NPPF prospectus without further delay, including a renewed commitment to its annual 300,000 new homes delivery target, and publishes its updated methodology for determining local housing need to apportion those numbers rationally, and without the opportunity for prolonged debate and politicking, amongst England's 309 district/borough councils and unitary authorities.

I hope that the Government renews its exhortation to authorities to have up to date local plans, with consequences for those which do not, and I hope that there is a proper review of the continuing role for the green belt, given that this socially regressive policy is the root cause behind most local plan delays.

I hope that the government examines again whether its proposals for an infrastructure levy will actually work and will not make a bad problem worse when it comes to delivery of affordable housing and indeed having a predictable, workable system of development taxation.

I hope that the government does what it can to improve the system without recourse to legislation – of course more resources for local authorities would help but probably more than just money is required to encourage a less cautious culture – perhaps an equivalent review of processes as Bridget Rosewell successfully carried out in relation to the planning appeal inquiry system.

What do I fear?

I fear further delays and uncertainty being caused by a new inexperienced team at the ministry (whether or not it retains "levelling up" in its name).

I fear the consequences of what will effectively be a new government, trailing in the polls less than two years from a general election and therefore with one short-term objective in mind: re-election. Populism in planning means policies which please prospective voters by reassuring them that there will not be development near them. I also fear that in a time of severe economic pressure, local authorities and developers alike will be hit hard, regardless of the wider implications.

I fear that the climate emergency will be low down the agenda with, potentially, an increasingly negative environment for solar farms, a continuation of the current opposition to onshore wind and possibly encouragement again for fracking as well as short-term decisions in relation to coal and gas.

I do fear that short-term politics will frustrate yet again any notion of the long-term planning that this country needs. But in the meantime, let's hope – and act – for the best.

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(personal views)