



PLANNING FOR A BETTER FUTURE

RTPI Proposals for Planning Reform in England

RTPI
Policy
Paper

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The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

The RTPI champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 25,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors.

Using our expertise and research, we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social and environmental challenges. We are the only body in the United Kingdom that confers Chartered status to planners, the highest professional qualification sought after by employers in both private and public sectors.

This paper

This paper outlines RTPI's proposals for planning reform in England. In April 2020, the RTPI published [priorities for planning reform in England](#). We have now returned to this topic and devised some practical proposals for change. It summarises our main asks on plan making, control of development, Green Growth Boards, planning for climate change and nature recovery and planning with and for people.

Front and back cover image

Brooklands. Taken from a submission by Places for People to the 2021 RTPI Planning Awards for Excellence. Brooklands is a community of 2,500 design-led homes of mixed tenure as well as essential infrastructure; roads, playgrounds, two new primary schools and a high school – all of which have anchored this place as a new neighbourhood. The homes are varied in their size, ranging from 1 and 2 bedroom apartments to 3, 4, and 5-bed family homes. The development is located 10 minutes from Milton Keynes.

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1. Introduction

Modern urban planning was conceived during Victorian times as a public health intervention, responding to the spread of disease through overcrowded slums. The UK's current systems were designed to help the country rebuild after the devastation of World War II. In the decades that followed, planning evolved to reflect wider objectives: improving access to public parks and open spaces, setting standards for high quality and affordable housing, protecting cultural and historical assets, and shaping neighbourhoods to provide a mixture of local services and offer a choice of sustainable, healthy modes of transport. The [RTPI's Awards for Planning Excellence](#) champion these achievements of the planning profession in delivering on these goals.

Now, as we recover from a new and different health challenge planning is poised to be re-imagined to deliver in new ways. Through planning we can create healthy and thriving communities that are more equally economically robust, whilst tackling overarching threat of climate change. Planning is the system by which we can join up so many of these agendas, to literally plan our way to a better future for our towns and countryside, and therefore for the people that live and work in them. We need to recognise the importance of planning once again and to be visionary in our response to this opportunity. We need to be open and honest about what doesn't work and look at new ways to create holistic visions for places that capitalises on technical innovation and levers the renewed interest in local place by communities.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals were agreed by many nations in 2015. These are all of vital importance but in the planning field, we notice particularly:

- SDG3 Good Health and Well Being
- SDG5 Gender Equality
- SDG7 Affordable and Clean Energy
- SDG8 Decent Work and Economic Growth
- SDG9 Industry Innovation and Infrastructure
- SDG10 Reduced Inequalities
- SDG 13 Climate Action
- SDG15 Life on Land

For the first time globally, a special goal - SDG11 Sustainable Cities and Communities recognises that effectively coordinating our ambitions in *places* is the real test of their effectiveness.

As we recover from the pandemic, planning must now respond to new challenges and opportunities: supporting the economic recovery while tackling inequality, accelerating progress towards net zero carbon, building resilience and reversing habitat and biodiversity loss. This will require a reinvigorated planning system. And everyone involved needs to know what *purpose* it serves.

Chief among its purposes must be the provision of housing which is affordable to a range of occupiers and which is located and designed in ways that achieve carbon neutrality, supported by

the upfront provision of transport, utilities and green infrastructure.

However, while plans must deliver new housing, the health, economic and climate crisis demands a greater emphasis on the renewal, repurposing and retrofit of existing buildings. Planning can integrate this with interventions to regenerate deprived areas, creating new green spaces, improving access to jobs, services and amenities, attracting businesses, and supporting a resurgence of social and cultural activity.

Moreover, as markets respond to the climate crisis by providing new green jobs, planning can boost our competitive advantage by creating places, which meet the needs of those businesses and industries driving the shift to a zero-carbon and circular economy.

In April 2020, the RTPI published [priorities for planning reform in England](#). We have now returned to this topic and devised some practical proposals for change.

2. Plan Making

By taking a long-term view and considering all relevant factors, we believe that better outcomes can be generated through making plans for local areas, not making piecemeal one-off decisions. It is not only a matter of consistency, it's also the only way that *coordination* of all relevant investment streams can be achieved; it is also the only way to provide certainty to developers and communities. A cohesive systems approach is required that supports delivery across multiple priority areas. There is little point in planning land purely for housing purposes unless many other investment programmes are linked in so that we can plan for people and places.

Plan making is in need of improvement. The resources available to undertake it have been severely depleted over the years since 2010. Public engagement in plan making is low and skewed to certain groups. It can still take a long time to produce a plan despite repeated attempts to address this problem by successive governments. Local plans still have remarkably little leverage over investment programmes – even key programmes in the *public* sector such as health, education and transport. Local plans are sometimes not even followed by the councils that drew them up and the developers who helped produce them. As a result, people lose faith in them, and worse, strongly oppose proposals in them to making provision for much needed housing in some parts of the country.

Furthermore, local councillors in particular can feel disenfranchised in the plan making process by the repeated changes in government policy and the requirement to follow it very closely. As a result, they can instead feel obliged to intervene more at the planning application state. And many would agree that whilst plans must be backed by evidence, the amount of reports now apparently required for plans has become disproportionate.

We propose ways to rectify this by:

- Proper resourcing for the local plan function
- Greater weight for local plan allocations
- Fixed timescales for local plans
- A new “duty to deliver”: bringing other spending programmes into alignment with local plans

- Building on the digital transformation of planning in order to increase public engagement

3. Development Management

The determination of planning applications (“development management”) is the part of the planning system, which the public is most connected to. We consider that there have been many wrong turns in how the control of development has progressed in the past. Central government (and some local authority management teams) have placed undue emphasis on the *speed* of determination of planning applications. Far too little research has focused on whether the control of development is producing the outcomes society needs.

Public policy commentators have focused unduly on the challenges faced by applicants in the process, and nothing like enough on the value added through development control. An area where evidence is sorely lacking is the assessment of the way planning offices improve schemes through negotiation with applicants both before applications are submitted and when they are in the system.

Development management staff are rightly concerned about unrealistic expectations from councilors and applicants (given the level of resources available).

We propose:

- Sustainable Development Commitments: Adding Value to Plan Allocations
- Increased use of neighbourhood development orders
- Development control to be properly resourced – at the very least full cost recovery

4. Green Growth Boards: Planning over wider areas

It has been well documented that the current Duty to Co-operate does not operate as effectively as needed in practice. However, there is a pressing need for it to be replaced with a new mechanism to deliver joined-up thinking for climate action, transport, infrastructure, housing provision and nature recovery.

Many of the problems associated with planning in England can be traced back to an insufficient focus on the wider area. The lack of integration with other public sector strategies and spending programmes is partly because most other public activity is planned on wider areas than many local planning authorities. However, even within the planning sector alone, over the last ten years a huge waste of effort has gone into trying to align the local plans of adjoining areas. It is a broad-brush rule that the slowest progress on local plans has been in places where agreement on “housing numbers” within single housing markets has been bogged down in lack of political leadership at both central and local levels.

We do not propose a revival of regional strategies (which had problems) nor even of county structure plans, but a radically new approach, which faces the challenges of the 21st Century head on.

For far too long planning has not grappled with issues of climate, public health, skills and infrastructure head on, partly due to insufficient permission to do so from central government, but also due to insufficient wider-area institutions with which to engage. With the slow evolution of wider-area government starting (but by no means limited to) combined authorities, this is beginning to change. Planning must not be left behind.

We propose:

- Green Growth Boards
- Local Planning Agencies
- Resources for Strategic Planning

5. Planning for Climate Change and Nature Recovery

Climate change is one of the biggest challenges facing our society. The potential changes for the UK until 2100 are illustrated by the [UK Climate Projections 2018](#) (Met Office, 2018). These show that the UK is projected to see increasing summer temperatures, more extreme weather and rising sea levels. The impacts of climate change have the potential to affect every part of our lives, including access to natural resources, essential infrastructure, affordable and secure housing, green open and natural space and health and wellbeing. As the climate crisis deepens, disadvantaged communities will bear the brunt. [A complex range of factors](#) combine to make them vulnerable— including high average ages and levels of disability, low incomes, and cuts to local government.

As well as a climate emergency, we are also in the middle of an ecological emergency. Both are connected and should be tackled together. Climate change has exacerbated the impact of habitat loss and the fragmentation of biodiversity. The UN's fifth Global Biodiversity Outlook Report provides an overview on the current global state of nature. Published in September 2020, [the latest report](#) brought into stark reality the fact that the past ten years have been a lost decade for preventing biodiversity loss. According to the report, none of the 20 'Aichi' biodiversity targets agreed in Japan in 2010 have been fully achieved. [The RSPB's 2019 State of Nature Report](#) revealed an ongoing loss of species in the UK, for example, more than 40 million birds have disappeared from UK skies since 1970 and [estimates suggest](#) that the UK has only half of its natural biodiversity left, putting it in the bottom 10% of all countries globally.

As nature continues to be depleted, 'carbon sinks' such as forests and peatlands become degraded and start releasing carbon back into the atmosphere. Rapid climate change disrupts the delicate balance of the biosphere and can push certain earth systems such as retreat of ice sheets or coral dieback into [abrupt or irreversible change](#). Many ecosystems, from tropical forests to coral reefs, have already been degraded beyond repair, or are [at imminent risk of 'tipping points'](#).

If appropriate adaptation and mitigation measures are not delivered to the extent and speed required, climate change will have a severe lasting impact on people and wildlife. [Mitigating and adapting to climate change](#) will also define future economic progress with action on climate change a potential driver for economic renewal.

Planning plays a crucial role in the transition to a zero-carbon society, engaging communities and enabling environmentally friendly choices in everything from energy to transport. Planning can do this by minimising the carbon emissions of development through sustainable locations, which are integrated with low carbon infrastructure, ensuring design delivers climate adaptation and mitigation, and coordinating a national retrofit of our built environment. Planning can do this as part of a wider democratic conversation with the local community, helping to both reduce emissions and build resilience to extreme weather events.

The RTPI has been [championing the role of planning](#) in delivering climate mitigation and adaptation, and increasing the resilience of our communities to climate change. We have called for bold policies and strategies to reduce emissions across key sectors including buildings, land use, transport and energy. However, delivery of climate adaptation and mitigation ‘on the ground’ is generally poor. This is in part the result of uncertainty produced by government policy subject to reversals; an overwhelming focus on house building; and severe under-resourcing in planning departments. Stronger climate change law and policy would help, but these practical and political issues are currently the key barriers to effective planning.

We propose:

- Climate change legal duty
- Stronger national policy on climate
- Local Environment Improvement Plans

6. Planning with and for People

The planning system arose out of a democratic process. The public called for better public health in towns. Private individuals such as Ebenezer Howard demonstrated how much better a planned environment is to urban sprawl. Between the wars, public concern about ribbon development and the impacts of growing road traffic fueled calls for a more proactive planning system. At the same time the growing success of municipal housing led the way towards a planned approach to improving many people’s living conditions.

For planning to thrive it must continue to be based on consent. It could be argued this consent has worn a bit thin. Many people question a planning system, which seems to act to convey large increases in land value to a limited number of landowners. The role of the planning system to provide affordable housing for all seems to have run into the sand. Projects approved in local plans end up looking unattractive to neighbouring residents – blots on the landscape. People question why for years increasing numbers of houses are built but local services seem to get poorer. Recent increases in the scope of permitted development “rights” (i.e. activity that does not involve express planning permission) has also decreased people’s acceptance of the planning system as one, which has them at its heart. Does the public even see the planning system as a key tool in mitigating and adapting to climate change (except possibly regarding flood risk)?

In our [recent study of engagement](#) with Grayling we found that COVID-19 has speeded up shifts towards digital: the vast majority of organisations (83%) interviewed changed the way they engage with communities during the pandemic, but that almost all organisations (93%) told us that digital

engagement would continue to be important after the pandemic¹. The pandemic has legitimised digital engagement has been legitimised in the eyes of the public and decision makers. Nearly half (46%) of those surveyed stated that the expectations of decision making with both local authorities and the public had changed, with most citing the shift to and acceptance of online tools as reasons for this change.

The Government is all in favour: it wishes to: *“move the democracy forward [sic] in the planning process and give neighbourhoods and communities an earlier and more meaningful voice in the future of their area as plans are made, harnessing digital technology to make it much easier to access and understand information about specific planning proposals”*.

Digital Engagement may be the key to unlocking a younger, more diverse participation: just under half (49%) of the general public surveyed told us that having the ability to respond digitally would make them more likely to get involved. But digital engagement alone won't do this: it will be necessary to think about how to attract and access new audiences. An increased focus on digital could be seen as a plus for some groups in particular. Over one in five respondents with a disability (21%) said difficulty accessing physical events was a barrier to getting involved in local decision making.

Continual investment, resourcing and training is needed to ensure industry and communities have the right skills and tools to make the most of the digital opportunity: 73% of planning professionals do not believe their teams have the skills and tools they need to deliver effective digital consultation.

Changes to public engagement must consider everyone's needs. Planning services, data and tools need to be accessible to all, including those without the confidence or skills to use digital. We advocate for a mixed methods approach where interactive digital methods are supported by traditional deliberative consultation. It is important to include people from diverse backgrounds in the design of Plantech and digital engagement tools to ensure they appeal to a diverse audience.

It is vital in future for those designing public engagement to think about what audiences actually want, rather than just what the promoter needs from them. Too often consultation and engagement activity can be seen as a list of questions that need responses. Creating a conversation that the community cares about joining and building in value-add activity for participants can help to reach the widest possible audience.

We propose:

- Digital engagement fund
- National public awareness campaign
- Community engagement specialists
- Pop-up Planning shops

7. Conclusion

As the professional body for town planners in the UK and Ireland, the Royal Town Planning Institute comprises a mass of valuable expertise amongst its 26,000 members. We have drawn on this to write this paper. We consider that involving the professionals who make this system work in proposals to change it must be a great way forward.



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For more information about this paper, visit:

www.rtpi.org.uk/planningforabetterfuture

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