Welcoming the new policy

John Howell MP for Henley gives thought to why the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) has been embraced by local planners...

The last Labour government left us with a dysfunctional planning system and planning policy. The starting point was the regional targets which were set in Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs). They took the view that Whitehall knew best the appropriate number of houses that should be built in any local area. This was a top-down approach to planning which did no one any favours and it was one we dropped. This did more than simply put the emphasis on local authorities to produce their own plans and their own strategies. It also helped take the sting out of the whole planning system.

The planning system had been highly confrontational. At its heart were a set of national planning policies covering well over 1,000 pages. Understood by few, this was a body largely outside the remit of those it most affected – all of us affected by the planning system. It put the control of the planning system into the hands of those who understood it and the way it worked. The system is still too confrontational. But the way out of this is now clear and we need real co-operation between developers and the people in whose area they are building if it is going to work.
The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) pulled all the relevant national policy together in a document just a little over 50 pages in length. It sought to establish a balance in the planning system between the economic, social and environmental aspects of the world in which we live and set out a framework for preparing plans and where required for deciding applications. Foremost, though, was its role in helping to prepare plans. Now some 76% of councils have draft plans in place whereas prior to the NPPF only about a third had done so.

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Rather than become a millstone round the necks of local planners, the NPPF has been embraced as the framework it was always intended to be. The Green Belt is still there and is being protected to maintain its essential role in stopping the spread of towns and cities and their merger into one. Most importantly, local villages and communities have the right to put their own plans together to determine not the amount of housing, but crucially where it should go and what it should look like. In places like Thame, in Oxfordshire, the referendum on the plan was held at the same time as the county council elections. Despite this, more people voted in the referendum than voted at the election proving that when something matters to local people they come out and support it.

The NPPF has been successful in taking national standards and merging them with local capability. It has given the right to local communities and their local planning authorities to work together in a shared planning system to establish what they want and to deliver it. It imposes a rigorous 5 year land supply to these figures. And so it should. It is essential that if councils plan to do something they also plan to deliver it and the 5 year land supply is the best way of achieving this. That means councils’ local plans have to be robust and demonstrably so.

In the absence of a robust and democratically accountable system, the clauses in the NPPF relating to the presumption in favour of sustainable development apply. That should incentivise local councils to get the answers right in their plans. It is by doing this that we achieve balance in the system.

There is still much to do. Few developers have embraced the opportunities of working with neighbourhood plans in a constructive fashion. Few communities have sat down with developers to work out exactly what they want and how they are going to get it. There is still the whiff of confrontation about proposals, but these attitudes are changing. Many developers have seen the NPPF as having 5 years to bed in. If so, it is already doing well. But to do this fully, more needs to be made of the duty to co-operate without it becoming a duty to cave-in.

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