

Depending upon your reading matter of choice, the government's recent policy paper, "Planning for the Future" (the Consultation) is either a catastrophic "race to the bottom"<sup>1</sup>, heralding the slums of the future or, in the government's own sentiments, the way towards cherishing the past, adorning the present and building for the future.

Either way, even the most conservative of reports agree that the plans are controversial. The aims of the paper are laudable: "beauty, quality and affordability". The question is – will it deliver?

The aspirations of the Consultation are a streamlined, more democratic planning process that uses data to deliver the ambitious timeframes envisaged. The paper promises a greater focus on design and sustainability, with improved infrastructure, that takes advantage of enhanced developer contributions. If the plans deliver, communities can expect greater availability of the land they need for homes and development.

If you think you have heard this all before, inevitably it is a variation on a theme. The proposals are significant, however, and include:

- **Categorisation of land** – Aspiring to halve the time it takes to obtain planning permission for larger sites, land in local plans will be categorised into areas for:
  - **Growth** – Suitable for substantial development, with outline approval automatically secured for development specified in the local plan.
  - **Renewal** – Suitable for "some development, such as gentle densification."
  - **Protection** – Areas suitable for only restricted development.
- **Rigorous statutory timetables** – These will require local planning authorities (LPAs) to deliver local plans within 30 months or face sanctions.
- **Centralised policies** – Central government will set the policies, including housing targets, while LPAs will be responsible only for local implementation through a rules-based approach, with no power to challenge the principle of the scheme.
- **Wider community engagement** – With the intention that local people will shape how their communities will develop.
- **Greater use of data and digital technology** – By using digital tools and modern software, local plans will be clearer and more accessible.

There are some obvious questions. How will cash-strapped local authorities, some on the brink of bankruptcy, cope with additional sanctions (especially if financial in nature)? Will the necessary resource be committed to ensuring that the new systems will be properly implemented? Will communities really have the opportunity to engage in a meaningful way?



At the heart of the noise is the fear that dismissing planning controls and reducing regulation will deliver shoddy homes. If that fear is justified, and there are many commentators who suggest that it is not the current planning system at fault, here, the burning question is whether the proposals contain sufficient safeguards to alleviate those concerns.

The Consultation, (currently) closing on 29 October 2020, can be found [online](#). Whatever your views – and there are likely to be many, from local authorities expected to turn around their local plans in 30 months, to individuals who want to see real controls in place – this is your opportunity to have them heard. Don't miss it.

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian 6 August 2020