

On the newly revised NPPF

The Government appears to have taken the view that there will be some votes in facilitating, rather than blocking, development, suggests Colin Brown

I was pleased to have attended the launch of the revised NPPF at the RIBA in London late last month and confess that, contrary to my initial expectations, I was moderately encouraged by the greater certainty that it will provide to developers, house builders and land promoters. Having made that bold assertion, we will have to wait and see how this all plays out on the ground, so I reserve the right to change my mind!

Ordinarily, Governments might be expected to sit on the fence and bide their time as they approach a general election. Alternatively, they could seek to become more radical in their position, providing a stark contrast to that of the opposition.

However, in my opinion, Michael Gove's announcement did neither. After almost a year of distinct uncertainty pending the response to the consultation on the NPPF, we finally have some direction, even though some elements of the announcement do appear to be flawed.

Counter to expectations, the Government has not completely given into the NIMBYs. In retaining the Standard Method as a starting point in assessing housing numbers, reasserting the 300,000 homes per year target, introducing league tables for LPAs, retaining the housing delivery test, putting two further LPAs into special measures and requiring seven local authorities to come up with an urgent action plan relative to the preparation of new local plans, the Secretary of State has sought to demonstrate that he is committed to growth. He even went as far as to declare himself a YIMBY!

The willingness of Government to intervene and propose a new approach to planning in specific locations is encouraging at a time when the sector had become increasingly concerned that entrenched, and slow local decision-making was delaying much-needed development. This new approach is discernible both in the decision to fast-track significant new development in Cambridge through the establishment of a development corporation, and through the increased use of special measures where local delivery has proven to be poor.

Having spent the majority of my career as a planning consultant in Cambridge, my experience of planners and politicians at Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire Council has generally been

very positive, but I confess that I can see that a development corporation is likely to be necessary to take on the challenging task of more than doubling the size of the city (especially in view of the significant amount of Green Belt that surrounds it). I do think it will however be important to ensure that the proposed development corporation seeks to work with local leaders and councils in a collaborative and joined-up way.

So, as we approach the next general election, it would seem that the divide between the Conservative and Labour parties on housing delivery is perhaps lessening – in fact both have asserted that they are 'on the side of the builders, not the blockers', while of course accusing each other of precisely the opposite! Blockages do potentially remain of course, not least the ability of LPAs to ignore their standard method housing calculation on the basis of arguing that to accommodate such levels of growth would be inappropriate to local character. Equally, where an

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authority is a predominantly green belt authority, it seems they may be able to duck the need to deliver much-needed housing. This would be highly regrettable and runs the risk of leaving a generation without suitable housing choices.

Despite this, the Government appears to have taken the view that there will be some votes in facilitating, rather than blocking, development – making the publication of the new NPPF a more positive development if the proposals can be delivered as intended. nsaying he wanted. ■

Katy Davis, partner, Carter Jonas (London) comments on...

Michael Gove's very personal letter of 18 December to Sadiq Khan sets out some very stark facts. It highlights that housing delivery in London is considerably short of the Mayor's own London Plan target by approximately 15,000 homes per year, and approximately 63,500 homes lower than was needed last year under the standard method. It also confirmed that fewer than half of the London Boroughs and Development Corporations delivered in excess of 95 per cent of their housing requirement over the last three years. There are conclusions to be drawn from the content of this letter, its tone and its timing.

First is the alarming fact that London is significantly under-delivering in terms of housing while other areas are delivering relatively well. London is a driver of the economy – so why has it fallen short in terms of housing delivery?

The answer may well be the Mayor's affordable housing policy – not so much the proportion of such housing required (which is consistent with that of previous Mayors) but the rigidity with which it has been applied. In many circumstances the requirement for 35 per cent plus affordable housing has led to schemes becoming unviable and ironically thwarted development of both affordable and market housing.

Additionally, there appears to be concern that under a future Labour Government, a similar policy may be rolled out across the country, with wider implications for delivery.

Perhaps the direct nature of this public letter and the stark statistics that it contains are aimed at encouraging the Labour Party to take a more considered approach to the proportion of affordable housing to be provided on future development sites.

The urgency with which the Secretary of State has commissioned a panel of experts to produce a report on the London Plan by January is in sharp contrast to the concerns over the delay and uncertainty that has dominated the planning system for the past year and more. It even raises the possibility that Green Belt release will be considered as a means of alleviating the housing crisis in London.

Whether or not this specific issue is addressed, the letter is encouraging in that, like the revised NPPF, it points to a renewed determination in the Government's attitude towards housing delivery.