

Buckinghamshire Expressway Action Group's consultation response.

BEAG

The Buckinghamshire Expressway Action Group (BEAG) was established in September 2018 by a group of local people who value the Buckinghamshire countryside, and who came together to challenge needless plans to construct an Oxford-Cambridge Expressway and 'growth arc'. Since then, we have successfully grown our supporter base, which now includes village societies, parish councils, councillors from across the political spectrum, as well as individual supporters. BEAG is also part of a network of cross-county community groups campaigning on the expressway and arc proposals.

Democracy

The Planning White Paper states:

Our reforms will democratise the planning process by putting a new emphasis on engagement at the plan-making stage. At the same time, we will streamline the opportunity for consultation at the planning application stage, because this adds delay to the process and allows a small minority of voices, some from the local area and often some not, to shape outcomes.

The PWP offers no evidence that the planning process is delayed by local consultations at the planning application stage. Nor is there evidence that the planning system acts as a barrier to development. As the [Local Government Association](#) (LGA) states: 'Nine in 10 applications are approved by councils'.

The suggestion that objections to planning applications often come from outside the local area bears little relation to reality. Currently, the way that most people become aware of a planning application is when they see a yellow notification go up in the area where they live. That being the case, the people who primarily respond to a planning application are the people who live locally, and who will potentially be impacted by the proposed development.

Labelling those who engage in what is meant to be a democratic planning process as 'a small minority of people' is dismissive. If only a small proportion of the local population responds to planning application consultations, that is because the experience of those who do engage is that their voices are rarely heard and that it is a waste of time to engage.

It is not clear why anyone objecting through their democratically elected local authority is necessarily any more of a small minority than the developers who stand to profit from a development. The PWP states that: 'The voice of those who stand to gain from development is not heard loudly enough'. But with Persimmon and Barratt Homes reporting profits of £1bn and £910m respectively in 2019, it seems clear that the voices of developers are being heard loudly and clearly. (Details [here](#) and [here](#)).

The PWP correctly identifies a key problem with community engagement: that those who engage with the planning system do so when a planning application could impact their locality, rather than at the local plan stage. Local plans processes are highly complex and protracted, and it stands to reason that members of the public do not have the time, expertise or energy to get involved. Yet the 'streamlined' process proposed by the PWP would remove consultation processes at the *planning application stage*. Instead, local people would only be able have their say about a Local Plan. In short, having identified a problem with engagement, the PWP proposes to exacerbate it.

Having 'streamlined' out the possibility of local opposition at the planning application stage, the vision is that the public will get more involved at the local plan stage in a 'more modular software landscape' (21), whilst 'on-the-go on a smartphone' (18). The Paper seems consumed with the idea that information technology would be the saviour of the planning system (the word 'data' appears eighty times in the document and 'PropTech' thirteen times. The word 'countryside' appears only five times).

The PWP also proposes (paragraph 2.48) that a planning inspector will have the discretion to decide the way in which a member of the public presents their case at public inquiry (by telephone, perhaps) thereby removing the right to be heard in person set out in Section 20 of the 2004 Planning Act. As an alternative to this (paragraph 2.53) the right to be heard – in any form – might be removed entirely.

The government will consider the most effective means for neighbours and other interested parties to address any issues of concern, but only where 'the principle of development has been established leaving only detailed matters to be resolved' (35).

Restricting public engagement with the planning system is plainly not democratising it. The Government seems intent to exclude local people from the process because they stand in the way of a straightforward, top-down imposition.

Zoning

The PWP proposes that local plans will identify and designate three 'zones': Protected, Renewal, and Growth.

Protected zones

It is unclear how Protected zones, which refer to designated land and greenbelt would differ from current protections. The aim does not appear to strengthen protections as the PWP indicates that development will be permitted in protected zones. However, it is simply not possible to assess what the Government has in mind, as the policy around development in protected zones does not yet exist.

Renewal zones

It is not clear on how a complex arrangement of permitted development, permission in principle and Town and Country Planning Act planning applications would fit together and work in practice. There is also no detail on how development design codes – some prepared nationally, and others locally – are to be produced. Design codes and pattern books appear to be a simple-minded way of approaching planning matters. The Government pays lip service to the uniqueness of place, but it is not at all clear how the rules it wants to impose on us will adequately represent different localities.

Growth zones

The intention here is to identify areas that are 'suitable for substantial development' and to grant permission in principle, as long as it conforms to national and local design codes and pattern books. Again, the simple-mindedness of this approach stands out and the lack of environmental assessment is a particular concern (discussed further below).

Growth zones are particularly relevant to Buckinghamshire and surrounding counties. The priority is to identify areas for growth, 'in particular land needed to take advantage of local opportunities for economic growth, such as commercial space for spin-out companies near to university research and development facilities, or other high productivity businesses.' (32) This is evidently written with the OxCam 'arc' in mind. There is no intention here of any strategic attempt to remove the geographical inequality that mars this country, but instead to provide facilities for IT start-ups by Oxbridge graduates. If the PWP leads to legislation, communities can expect to see North Buckinghamshire zoned for growth. Locally elected councillors will not be able to scrutinise the details of the proposals, and members of the public will not be able to comment, with or without their smartphones. Centrally-imposed planning like this is the very opposite of democratising the system.

The need for planning reform

BEAG agrees that the Planning System is not currently fit for purpose, but we do not agree with the Prime Minister that it is a barrier to house-building and other development.

Far from preventing developers the opportunity to realise their ambitions to build over our green spaces, the planning system has been, and continues to be, quietly deregulated. For several years the 'presumption of sustainable development' has been at the heart of the National Planning Policy Framework. The default position is that planning permissions will be granted, making it highly difficult for elected representatives to refuse them, which explains why so many are currently granted. This is a pernicious policy statement, and it continues to skew the planning balance in favour of the developer.

In addition, local planning authorities are required to supply land for at least five year's worth of building at the rate the Government imposes on them. Local authorities are assessed not for their land supply, but for the number of dwellings built in their areas – something over which they have no control. Yet, when housebuilding rates in a local authority fall below 85 per cent of its assessed requirement, the government treats this as a shortage of land supply, and will require the local authority to find a 20 per cent extra of additional and deliverable housing sites. This policy plainly benefits land-banking developers; they have been keen to exploit it, to the detriment of our countryside.

BEAG and our supporters would welcome reforms to a planning system that would ensure that the balance is not tipped in favour of developers' profits, such as the removal of the presumption in favour of sustainable development. We would welcome reforms to ensure a rational approach to the supply of land for housing based on need (not demand). Disappointingly, with its obsession with simply increasing the number of houses built for purchase (more than 300,000 per year) the PWP seems little more than a charter for developers to build unaffordable housing.

Housing shortage and affordability

We agree that there is a crisis of housing affordability but the PWP wishes us to believe that building more houses will lower prices. It is plainly the case that developers will not want to lower house prices by flooding the housing market with new developments, an additional reason that one million homes that have planning permissions have yet to be built.

There are more sensible options, such as putting an end to schemes such as Help-to-Buy, which allow people to buy houses at inflated prices. In addition, action should be taken to reduce the number of properties bought for short-term Airbnb rentals. Earlier this year, [it was reported](#) that 'some part of the country have one listing for every four properties'.

Introducing a cap on rents and deterring the lucrative buy-to-rent market which depends so heavily on tax-payer money in the form of housing benefits, would also assist.

If the Government believes that there is a chronic shortage of houses, it should introduce policies to require developers to build the more than one million houses that have planning permission.

As developers have no financial interest in delivering affordable houses, to address properly the crisis of affordability, local authorities should be given a budget to build homes for secure tenancies on brownfield land that would simultaneously avoid urban sprawl. In its [recent report](#), the CPRE points out that the Government has 'identified capacity for 1.3 million homes on local authority brownfield registers'. Furthermore, there is currently planning permission for 53% of the total brownfield housing capacity, the CPRE has found.

Climate and Environment

It is highly dispiriting that the PWP wishes to zone the countryside without carrying out proper environmental assessments, such as those under the EIA and Habitats Regulations. The intention is also to water down environmental protections in traditional planning applications. The PWP argues that necessarily complex environmental assessments get in the way of allocating land for deliverable development (12). Instead of detailed case-by-case assessment, the Government wants to see decisions 'determined by clear rules' (10). The 'clear rules' the Government has in mind will be determined, of course, by data collection. How the Government proposes to make data collection adequate to the uniqueness of places and the wildlife they support is not clear at all. The Government's proposals demonstrate an appallingly simplistic and risky attitude to the environment, and a high-handed attitude to local people.

The PWP envisages development on a massive scale to meet the Prime Minister's 'build, build, build' agenda – new towns and extensions to existing ones, with all the infrastructure that this will necessitate. This does not appear to square with the Government's commitments to achieving net zero carbon targets by 2050. Ignoring the rhetoric, there is no evidence in the PWP that the Government takes the climate emergency seriously. Indeed, the watering down of crucial environmental assessments indicates that it does not. The proposals in the PWP will exacerbate climate change, not tackle it.

DCO process for new settlements

We oppose this as the DCO process bypasses engagement with members of the public, except on detail, which will not help to 'democratise' the planning system.

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