



# Lands Improvement

**What the planning and  
development industry needs in  
2024 regardless of politics**

# Contents

Introduction

Unlocking the development impasse

Conclusion

## What do we want to see in the planning and development industry in 2024 regardless of politics?

With the three main party conferences now behind us for another year, we can reflect on what it would all mean going forward for the development industry.

The Conservatives lead with a focus on housing delivery and a commitment to delivering 300,000 homes a year. Coupled with this pro-growth approach, there seemed to be a waning of the commitment to the Levelling Up agenda. Disappointingly there were few new and specific ideas on housing and planning reform so desperately needed to provide the clarity and certainty for the development industry.

Labour's general emphasis was a focus on the delivery of new towns, housing delivery, primarily affordable housing, and the acknowledgement that development in appropriate locations is constrained by the greenbelt and as such some expansion into the 'greybelt' may be appropriate.

The Liberal Democrats restated their commitment to building 380,000 homes a year of which at least half should be affordable. They remain divided on views on development in the greenbelt but are clear on their desire to see more local neighbourhood planning and are committed to giving local authorities more powers to force developers to build homes on approved sites.

Regardless of any of the party lines taken, in order for the planning and development industry to respond adequately to the housing crisis, I feel that the following seven points, if addressed, would help to provide some form of consistency and certainty needed to unlock the development impasse we currently find ourselves in.



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Kathryn heads up the Planning Team, focussing on providing planning, promotional and land advice across the property portfolio. She has led on the successful planning and promotion of a number of sites within the portfolio, including land at Apedale, Colchester, the Frythe, Cuffley, Haddenham, High Leigh, Fardalehill, Shrewsbury and Worksop. She is currently leading on our land interests at Cambridge South and Aylesbury as well as having oversight of the planning and promotional activities taking place across the remainder of the portfolio.

Kathryn is a Board Member of the Land Promoters and Developers Federation (LPDF) as well as being involved in their Technical and Planning Committee. She is also a Member of the Cambridge Ahead Economic Planning and Housing Group and sits on the partners advisory Group for Public Practice. Kathryn is MRICS qualified.

## 1. The need for central government to emphasise the importance to the general public of growth.

Central government needs to help the public reframe how we talk about housing.

Government needs to proactively acknowledge the idea that housing in a variety of tenures is one of the most important tools we have to tackle the significant inter-generational equality that we're facing within the UK. Importantly, housing also contributes significantly to economic growth within the country.

### **As a whole, England and Wales have not built enough new homes for more than a generation.**

The statistics on this are difficult to read. There are currently 5 million adults still living with their parents. Child income poverty rates in the UK were the highest among the world's richest countries, a report by U.N. children's agency UNICEF published in 2022 said, with the UK ranking bottom of the table for changes in those rates in the past decade.

The UK needs many more homes built in all forms to provide our population with adequate housing supported by public amenities and appropriate infrastructure. Coupled with this is the clear case for economic investment that a certain and robust housing planning framework would bring to the UK.

As highlighted by the Litchfields report: 'The Economic Footprint of House Building in England and Wales' (2018) the economic contribution of housebuilding to the UK economy is significant.

It makes a direct contribution to GDP through the economic output, whilst also supporting a significant employment base and contributing to public finances through tax revenues.

Housebuilding activity also has an important role to play in stimulating economic activity through its extensive supply chains and networks, which in turn generates employment, spending and tax contributions.

**In March 2022 there were 1.2 million households registered on the national housing register in need of affordable housing. By March 2023, only 1.8% of that need was met.**

## 2. We need acknowledgement that a constantly changing legislative framework is not working, and that consistency is now required.

Uncertainty for developers equates to higher costs and risks resulting in a lack of desire to invest and commit. Certainty allows for controlled risk and longer-term investment in the housing sector.

Investors in all forms cannot plan for the future without clear consistency and certainty.

### **We have what we now all refer to as the 'revolving door of Housing Ministers'.**

Six Housing Ministers since 2019 is simply unacceptable. The constant change in thought contributes to the continued changes in policy.

Coupled with a consistent central government approach, which stops tampering with the policy framework, is the need for clear, local targets to be able to measure change.

At a local level, plans and policy needs to be simplified, clear and consistent. Central government is currently focused on supporting the digitisation and simplification of the planning system. I think we are all hopeful that these initiatives work and appropriately support LPA's allowing for easier plan making. Let's see.

### 3. The introduction of Regional Spatial Strategies to correctly invest in infrastructure and housing delivery across all regions.

The current planning system's evolution over the past 40 years has led to many of the structural failings we now have. One of these failings is the current lack of coordination across regions to spatially plan for growth.

We now need to revert to spatial level or sub-regional level strategies to help guide growth and to properly capture the benefits of development. Coordinated and strategic plan-making across functional economic areas is required, not just traditional local authority boundaries.

These plans need to link investment priorities to defined clusters of growth, ensuring jobs, housing delivery and infrastructure are linked and delivered in the most appropriate areas.

Government needs to consider the capacity for devolution deals for areas of local authorities, so that they are able to independently function and grow and are appropriately incentivised to work together.

### 4. The requirement to separate politics from planning.

We need to separate politics from the planning system. This could be in the form of a planning framework that's considered, embedded into decision making and properly understood by the public, which is not subject to constant change.

The small 'p' of politics needs to operate impartially and in accordance with adopted policy at a local level.

### Too often we see Councils responding to national announcements which are not enacted and making poor decisions locally and in a self-interested fashion.

We need to investigate how we ensure local people are properly informed in these positions in order to make the right decisions at planning committees, local plan meetings and the like, for the benefit of the wider population, not just local nimby's who often have the loudest voice.

### 5. Undertake a national greenbelt review.

There are very few policies that are as controversial as development within the greenbelt, yet the case for some housing growth in the right areas, is compelling, allowing for homes to be built next to existing urban centres with appropriate levels of transport infrastructure already in place.

It is now time for a national review of the greenbelt to be undertaken and the right sites, which no longer serve the functions of the greenbelt, to be released to allow for proper spatial growth in the right area to take place.

As set out in the 2023 Centre for Cities Report, the Adam Smith Institute called for a "complete abolition of the greenbelt" in a 2015 report titled "The Green Noose", arguing that this "could solve the housing crisis". It proposed "removing restrictions" on greenbelt land within a ten-minute walk of train stations to allow for the development of one million additional homes.

**The Centre for Cities also argued that the release of greenbelt land within 800 metres of train stations, which have a service of less than 45 minutes to major cities, would be one way of setting "the country on the right tracks for solving the housing crisis". Its 2019 report put forward the argument that this would unlock "an estimated 47,000 hectares of land" and provide "enough land to increase the housing stock by 7 to 9 percent".**



## 6. Continued emphasis on training and improving skills within Local Planning Authorities (LPA).

Morale is low and planning is not perceived as a career of choice. How do we change this to get better, more motivated and higher quality LPA planners and associated professionals?

We need to support LPA to becoming better places to work, that values and builds upon the expertise of its workforce.

**Since 2010 there has been a 26% reduction in LPA spending power, coupled with increased demand, which is not helping. A new workforce plan needs to be put in place.**

Central government has recognised the issues of lack of skills and low morale and is committing significant funding to supporting Councils with upskilling. It committed £24m as part of the Capacity and Capability Programme earlier in 2023, with additional funding allocated in the Autumn Statement.

Organisations like Public Practice, with the support of central government and private organisations, Lands Improvement being one of them, are working hard to deliver highly capable and motivated individuals to the public sector.

I hope that these initiatives and others help to reduce the skills gap and increase LPA capacity.



Lands Improvement: Oteley Road South, Shrewsbury

## 7. Continue to build meaningful trust.

This means engaging with all stakeholders - local communities, developers, social enterprise groups, LPA etc. and early in the process for better, more informed engagement. Trust opens the door to sharing of expertise, skills, support, dialogue and better outcomes.

It allows for both sides to operate with a level of risk that is acceptable, working with the knowledge that each party is working for a common purpose.



## Conclusion

A big challenge lies ahead of us to ensure our planning and delivery systems are functioning properly and working at full capacity.

It's a long road with many steps needing to be taken. The first step I'm taking to actively move these areas forward is focusing on step seven – the building of meaningful trust. Following on from Lands Improvement's placemaking event in September this year, we have prioritised two areas of focus – one being building trust in the industry.

Through a series of workshops, there will be an output. We will drive positive change in our industry and make a difference.

This is my small contribution to resolving these complex issues, regardless of what political landscape lies either side of the road. What will yours be?







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