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Raynsford Review calls for ‘people-centric’ planning

November 23, 2018 / Isla MacFarlane



The Raynsford Review began with a simple question about how we could achieve better outcomes for people. The final report has demonstrated both that planning is central to achieving this objective and that recent reforms have made the job much harder.

The review – which was carried out by former housing minister, Nick Raynsford – aims to transform ‘a troubled system into one capable of delivering the outcomes our nation deserves’ and deliver ‘a better, fairer and more transparent planning system, focused on delivering the high quality and sustainable places in which we all aspire to live and work’.

It concluded that the current planning system is too focused on delivering high quantities of new houses, with little or no consideration for where they should be built, the quality of their design, and whether they are genuinely affordable.

The final report makes a series of 24 recommendations that would completely reform the planning system, making it fit for purpose. The recommendations include: redefining the purpose of planning system; reforms to ensure the planning system is centred around people and their communities; delivering a new

‘community covenant’; capturing the ‘betterment values’ in order to ensure a higher quality of development that the nation needs; and boosting the numbers and development of high-calibre, visionary planners.

“This landmark report is unequivocal in its recommendations – we must rebalance the planning system back in favour of public interest, and through doing so, prevent the continued unnecessary loss of our finite countryside,” said Tom Fyans, Director of Campaigns and Policy at the Campaign to Protect Rural England. “We need to rebuild trust in the system to deliver positive outcomes for people, not help line developers’ pockets, in particular by striking a new covenant for community participation, and eliminating “hope value” in the land market.”

The report calls for cross-sector political consensus in which all parties can see clear benefits. Greater certainty will inevitably result in lower and fewer speculative profits for land-traders. But for those in construction, infrastructure delivery and the provision of the multiple market services that go along with the creation or renewal of communities, there are major benefits.

Given the reality of our politics, the review calls for a route map to take us from the current problems to a lasting settlement. At this point, many reviews default into recommending a Royal Commission or further research, but, instead, The Raynsford Review advocates a shorter-term ‘plan B’ which could make things better now and provide a pathway to that lasting settlement.

This plan recognises that some change can be effected now by using secondary legislation and changes in policy which would require minimal parliamentary time. It recommends seven immediate actions:

- End the commitment to extend permitted development to the demolition and rebuilding of office and commercial buildings, and return powers over permitted development to local government;
- Ensure that the forthcoming Environment Bill and the principles it contains are applied to the planning system;
- Provide a new remit for the National Infrastructure Commission to prepare a national planning framework for England;
- To support the government’s ambition, set out in the Civil Society Strategy, to ensure that citizens are able to influence local decisions, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should publish comprehensive new planning guidance on how genuine public participation can be promoted in all parts of the planning process;
- Organisations working in the planning and built environment sector should draw up a cross-sector compact on the values and direction of future reform of the English planning system; The government should set out in policy clear direction on the returns that landowners can expect when calculating viability assessments;
- The professional bodies that collectively have a hand in planning and the built environment should urgently review their ethical codes to embed the principle of ‘Do no harm’.

Dean Clifford, co-founder of Great Marlborough Estates, said, “Currently, the system can be complex and a hindrance to development. Recommendations that aim to deliver simplified planning structures should be welcomed and acted on with urgency. I believe that recommendation 14, which advocates for consolidating planning laws, is central to delivering real change. Integrating the different planning regimes will offer much needed clarity to what can be a Byzantine process.

“We also welcome recommendations to make planning more conversational rather than combative, and to broaden public awareness of planning. There are, however, some areas that cause concern. For example, if local authorities are given too much agency over planning this could have a dampening effect. Rather than viewing the long-term sustainability of projects and the value they create for local communities, planners might focus too heavily on their short-term goals.

“We must ensure that additional obstacles to development aren’t erected. Overall, this is a far-sighted document that has identified some of the key flaws in the current planning system. We look forward to seeing these remedied and achieving the real change the Review has proposed.”

Martin Bellinger, executive chairman at Guildmore, added, “I believe that creating “real purpose” and delivering “real change” means a clear vision of what we are trying to achieve with planning reform.

“Out of the list of recommendations, the 10th stands out as setting a desirable goal, by proposing a duty imposed on local authorities to plan for high quality affordable homes. It is outrageous that even during times of severe housing shortage, there is no set responsibility for local authorities to meet housing needs. The proposed duty should be implemented with urgency if we want to see a “real change” in the number of affordable homes we are able to deliver. The way local government can get there is by looking at the private sector to pool resources and deliver better housing at affordable prices for people in need.

“Developers, we welcome most of the recommendations and the initiative of the review in the way of planning reform. However, more can be done to facilitate a smoother planning process for the companies delivering homes in times of shortage. We hope that provisions to ensure that local authorities deliver on their plans and meet housing needs will be taken seriously. Giving communities and people a voice in shaping housing delivery has to be taken into account and implemented in the planning system.”