



conserving buildings of historic interest

14 October 2020

Planning for the Future Consultation
Planning Directorate, 3rd Floor, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4DF

Dear Sir or Madam

Planning for the Future Consultation

Bury St Edmunds Town Trust – objects

BTT is a charitable company founded in 1979. The trust operates a 'revolving fund' that is used for the conservation of historic buildings in the town including where appropriate the construction of new dwellings. It also works with and sponsors West Suffolk College in the training of building trade students in conservation techniques.

Responses

A new vision for England's planning system. Paras 1.6 – 1.29, pp 12- 21.

BTT agrees that the planning system would benefit from the careful updating of current planning law which dates back to 1947 and has evolved from this time. However, we are concerned that elements of what is proposed in its place would in part oversimplify the system. This would lead to poor decisions that would adversely impact on individuals and local communities in an unbalanced manner, and potentially damage both the natural and built environment.

Pillar 1 – Planning for development

Question 3, p.23

Our proposals will make it much easier to access plans and contribute your views to planning decisions. How would you like to find out about plans and planning proposals in the future?

Response:

In commenting on the use of 20th century technology the Secretary of State's foreword (p.8) states "We are moving away from notices on lampposts to an interactive and accessible map based online system – placing planning at the fingertips of people". This is repeated in para. 1.13 (p.15) where it states that "Residents should not have to rely on planning notices attached to lamp posts, printed in newspapers or posted in libraries". While we support the use of modern technology it is essential that when planning applications are submitted all those living adjacent to application sites are made aware of them and therefore have the opportunity to comment. Even with the use of the latest technology it is hard to see how all adjacent owners can with certainty be made aware of proposed developments. Even if the scheme in principle constitutes "permitted development" neighbours should have the opportunity to check on whether an application has an unacceptable adverse impact on their property. While it may be possible greatly to improve on-line viewing of applications, and with 3D realisation in all cases indicate the impact of overlooking or shading, to achieve this neighbours will still need to be notified. For those with neither the use of a computer, nor possessing a mobile phone, it is hard to see how this will be accomplished with certainty if site notices are no longer used. In addition, where wi-fi is poor in some areas, access to the relevant information could prove to be difficult. Even if applicants were to be legally required to serve notice on adjoining owners a check would still need to be made by the planning authority that this had been done and that the correct parties had been informed. The current experience of the Covid19 track and trace systems does not inspire confidence that, whatever

system is selected, unless there is a clear legal duty to serve notice on neighbouring owners this is an achievable objective at present.

Proposal 1.

Question 5, p.25

Do you agree that Local Plans should be simplified in line with our proposals?

Response:

The suggested focus on identifying land under three categories – Growth (substantial development), Renewal (some intensification) and Protected (restricted) areas is an oversimplistic approach to categorisation unless further detail is provided within them given the complicated nature of the English landscape – its countryside, villages, towns and cities. To suggest that this categorisation by itself “could halve the time that it takes to secure planning permission on larger sites identified in plans” is concerning and unrealistic. While a properly drawn up and approved local plan will, as now, indicate that certain sites, whose boundaries are clearly identified are suitable for various forms of development, there will still be a need to conserve and enhance existing areas within such sites if we are to meet national environmental and climate objectives. The approach that needs to be adopted is therefore, as in part suggested, one of seeking to make the local plan preparation process more efficient by

- using modern mapping and related technology,
- extending the scope of NPPF policies by defining new ones to include those that at present are incorporated within most local plans,
- restricting local plan policies to those that clearly relate to issues in their areas not covered in the NPPF,
- ensuring that local planning authorities have adequate and properly trained staff, and
- improving engagement with communities.

While there are no short cuts to this process, we agree that with greater efficiency the time taken to prepare local plans could be materially reduced.

Proposal 2.

Question 6, p.26

Do you agree with our proposals for streamlining the development management content of Local Plans, and setting out general development policies nationally?

Response:

As explained in our answer to Question 5 we agree that local plan general development policies should be restricted to those that clearly relate to issues in their areas that are not covered in an updated NPPF.

Proposal 6

Question 10, p.32

Do you agree with our proposals to make decision making faster and more certain?

The delegation of detailed decisions to officers.

The White Paper suggests the delegation of detailed planning decisions to planning officers where the principle of development has already been established, as detailed matters for consideration should be principally a matter for professional planning judgment. While we do not object in principle to this proposal there needs to continue to be a procedure where, in contentious cases, the matter may be referred on to committee.

Proposal 11.

Question 17, p.40

Do you agree with our proposals for improving the production and use of design guides and codes?

Response:

We concur with your proposals for the production of design guides to assist in ensuring that new development is generally appropriate for the area in which it is located, both in terms of the form details and materials of buildings and site layout requirements. However, we have concerns about their content and the manner in which they are used and too often interpreted. It is essential that where such guides are in place local authorities insist on proper compliance with them in cases where they have to enforce a minimum standard. Our reservations about the manner in which they are currently used are explained in answer to **Proposal 14, Question 20**, below.

Proposal 14.

Question 20, p.43

Do you agree with our proposals for implementing a fast-track for beauty

The proposals in the White paper lay considerable emphasis on the use of design guides by “making it easier for those who want to build beautifully through the introduction of a fast-track for beauty through changes to national policy and legislation”. This proposal extends to “automatically” permitting proposals for “high quality developments where they reflect local character and preferences” as defined in Design Guides. The publication of the National Design Guide in 2019 is mentioned as well as local guides. This is not a new concept. The first Design Guide was published and adopted in Essex in 1973, and Suffolk has had a similar guide since 1993. Based on some 45 years of experience, while such guides are of assistance in defining minimum design standards and the layout of sites, they certainly do not ensure “beauty” which relates closely to the ability of the designer. Furthermore, beauty or ‘form’ is not the only consideration, the ‘function’ of the proposed structure or development has also to be carefully considered. In our experience, with some notable exceptions, such guides are often used by developers in a manner that effectively relates standardised house types to the minimum of what is required, resulting in poor schemes related neither to “beauty” nor their context.

For the above reasons automatically to afford compliant design guide schemes a permitted “fast track” to consent, as is suggested, is a matter of real concern to us. In this context may we draw attention to the 2019 winner of the RIBA Stirling Prize for Architecture? The winning Goldsmith Street housing scheme in Norwich demonstrates what can be achieved with good design. It is a scheme which properly relates its design or ‘form’ to its ‘function’. As well as being of outstanding design it successfully provides for the needs of all sectors of the affordable housing market in a manner that integrates the elderly and the young in a safe environment. To achieve this though it had to break what were the existing housing guidelines. Would it have complied with the proposed fast track requirements had they been in place? It seems unlikely.

Proposal 17

Paragraphs 3.29 – 3.31, pp. 44-45.

Conserving and enhancing our historic buildings and areas

We agree that the planning system has played an important role in ensuring that historic buildings are preserved. The NPPF and additional statutory protection for listed building consent and conservation area status has in general worked well. We are pleased to note the proposal to build on this framework, not least in relation to Local Plans, and the reference to both national and local assets (the latter of which our Trust has been recording in Bury St Edmunds). We support a review and update of the planning framework for listed buildings and conservation areas, to ensure their significance is preserved while allowing, where appropriate, sympathetic changes to support their continued use and address climate change. We note that you propose to explore whether there are new and better ways of securing consent for routine works, to enable local planning authorities to concentrate on preserving and enhancing the most important historic buildings. You suggest exploring whether suitably experienced architectural specialists can have ‘earned autonomy’ from routine listed building consents. We consider that such a move, if adopted, would be likely to lead to inconsistencies in approach and for this reason would prefer to see local authority conservation teams properly resourced. At present they are overstretched.

Delivering change

Paragraph 5.4, p.54

How we move to the new system

The overall balance of aspects of the White Paper is a matter of concern. Its purpose is said to cover a package of proposals for reform of the planning system in England, including plan-making, development management, development contributions, and other related policy proposals. If this purpose is to be achieved successfully it needs to be carried out in a balanced manner so that all relevant aspects of each topic are considered and appropriate long-term reforms made. We are therefore concerned that a section of the report covers what are referred to as “shorter-term measures” (para. 5.4), and relate to provisions which if approved would temporarily lift the “small sites threshold” so that developers do not need to contribute to affordable housing in developments up to 40 or 50 units. As explained in the White Paper these proposals are the subject of a separate consultation to which responses have to be submitted by 1 October. The fact that this shorter-term matter has been included in a document examining possible long-term change indicates the

importance that Government attaches to these proposals. The difficulty that this proposed relaxation poses is that, if approved, while it may only be a temporary expedient the losses incurred in affordable housing will be permanent and it will materially worsen an already serious position. As the government itself cites in the Introduction to the White Paper "The shortage of affordable homes in and close to the most productive urban centres is a major drag on national productivity" (p.10).

Many medium size towns such as Bury St Edmunds are already struggling to provide sufficient affordable housing to meet their needs. It is particularly important that development sites within the historic town boundary, nearly all of which are under the proposed temporary threshold, continue to provide their share of affordable housing. Without such provision local councils will not be able to meet their affordable housing requirements. Conservation of historic towns is not just about preserving buildings, it is also about properly providing for the needs of the people that live in and around them. The paper refers to affordable housing which "existing communities require" including the young and the elderly who cannot afford to buy their own houses and need to live close to the town in rented accommodation as they have no transport. It is just as important to retain a properly balanced community as well as restoring its buildings if we are to conserve the town for the future. If therefore a decision is made temporarily to relax mandatory affordable housing provision it is important that such a dispensation is not applied within the main boundary of towns such as Bury St Edmunds.

Yours faithfully

Peter Riddington
Chair BTT