



Land Use in England Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Land use in England

Monday 23 May 2022

3.35 pm

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Members present: Baroness Young of Old Scone (In the Chair); Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville; Lord Borwick; Lord Goddard of Stockport; Lord Grantchester; Lord Harlech; Baroness Redfern.

Evidence Session No. 12

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Questions 127 - 136

Witnesses

[I](#): Rich Cooke, Principal Spatial Planner, Planning Service, Essex County Council; Maria Dunn, Head of Planning Policy, Birmingham City Council; Tim Slaney, Director of Planning, South Downs National Park Authority.

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Examination of witnesses

Rich Cooke, Maria Dunn and Tim Slaney.

Q127 **The Chair:** Welcome to this evidence session of the Select Committee on Land Use in England. We have Rich Cooke, the principal planning officer from Essex, Maria Dunn, head of planning policy from Birmingham City Council, and Tim Slaney, director of planning from South Downs National Park Authority.

In front of you is a list of interests that have been declared by members of the committee. This meeting is being broadcast via the parliamentary website and is live. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the committee website, and you will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary.

You are all deeply imbued in planning, so you know about the pressures on land use from a range of areas such as climate change, forestry, biodiversity, nature recovery, levelling up, housing and development generally. Is the planning system the right place to reconcile these pressures and, if so, what do you want to see changed in the planning system to make that possible?

Maria Dunn: You have raised a number of aspects. I think the planning system is the right place to address the elements that you have raised. There is the issue of a larger than local basis and whether we look at a national spatial plan to help address the issues, such as housing distribution, economic growth and allowing a more holistic approach nationally to that. There is a lot of opportunity for the planning system to help us move towards net-zero carbon, but it is limited in that it can address only things that come through the planning system, so it is not the whole picture. In moving us forward on the standard that buildings are built to and in how we shape the communities, services and facilities that we provide in the transport infrastructure, there is a lot that the planning system can do to help us move towards facilitating net-zero carbon lifestyles.

The Chair: Are there any changes to the planning system that you would like to see to make this easier?

Maria Dunn: Net zero needs to be much more firmly embedded in the planning system. We could do that in several ways. Moving forward more quickly on net-zero carbon new build nationally would provide a more level playing field, and the planning system provides an opportunity to do that.

The other sticking point is quite often viability assessments. At the local level we often find it challenging to push net-zero carbon policies forward, because of viability challenges. If we approach that nationally, we might start to overcome those issues, because we would level that playing field. There is huge potential with carbon offsetting through the planning system, and where developments cannot be net-zero carbon and need to offset their emissions, that would help authorities invest in retrofitting,

which is a huge area that needs to be addressed to reduce carbon emissions, which is very difficult to fund and tackle.

Rich Cooke: Certainly one of the things that I would flag up is the need to help local authorities expedite the local planning process. It is heartening that we appear to be continuing with the plan-led system, but unfortunately far too many local authorities find it very difficult to put local plans in place.

There are two characteristics of that to highlight. One is the local plan examination process. I am familiar with a district council in Essex that is now well over three years down the line since it had its examination hearings, and it is still some way off putting the local plan in place and getting over the line with it. Clearly that is not benefiting anyone. The examination process needs to be made quicker and simpler, and reformed in a way that would allow local authorities to negotiate it far more smoothly. I recognise the need for rigour and for plans to be vigorously tested, which is absolutely right. The examinations are taking a very long time though and the authorities are not getting over the line.

Some authorities that have produced local plans—again, there are a couple in Essex—have just been about to adopt those plans and then decided to pull the plug on the whole process. In those sorts of cases, the use of the Secretary of State's power of intervention is often necessary and perhaps needs to be exercised a bit more readily.

The other aspect of plan making is the impact assessment regime, in particular to adhere to environmental assessments, habitats regulation assessments and the environmental impact assessment processes. Again, local authorities find it very difficult to negotiate all those. They often become an industry in themselves, rather than add value to the process and be meaningful. You get these massive environmental reports that take up hundreds of pages, sit on a shelf and never see the light of day, the public do not understand them and they do not add to the plan-making process. So I flag up the examination process and simplifying those impact regimes.

Tim Slaney: I echo my colleagues' comments and will perhaps pick up on those last points. There is something about the scale of plan making. I am very lucky; National Parks are a sole-purpose authority, and we have a single local plan that does minerals and waste and all the other elements of plan making, so it is a unitary in that respect, and it is at scale. That really helps. We need to think about the sort of scale that we should be plan making for. I notice that the levelling-up talk is about combining authorities. I think that is powerful, and I come from a unitary background where there were a lot of the teams working together and you could thrash out property versus planning versus countryside management.

Rich's last point chimed with me. There is a plethora of information data out there. We use EcoServ mapping, another national park will use this, the neighbouring authority will use land spatial mapping data, and it all

gets too confusing. Although there are undoubtedly biodiversity net gain issues, and although that is only a subset, at least it is beginning to standardise the way we all look at this information.

Rich mentioned environmental statements and environmental impact assessments. A huge amount of information comes from those, based on a particular development. Where is the repository that goes to and informs the general area? They will have done a wide search, so there is the question of scale, standardising the methodologies and data, and being up front about where there are issues, or where you might have to rethink. We only have to look at the Knepp estate, which fails to qualify for all sorts of biodiversity net gain, as an example of where one must think constantly about whether it is the right measure.

For me, and this is not just from my national park experience, it is about not being afraid to link land management with land use. We are taught in planning that it is about land use, about development, and that you can lever gains or look for betterment only when there is a development. That is quite right, but then we go through tortuous processes of trying to link land management with land use. We have whole estate plans where we talk to large landowners, not just of the big estates—it can be schools, small farmers—and we do these estate plans. Our planning policy says that we will give them some weight, but in those estate plans there is a promise to do as much as they can in the agenda for improving biodiversity, renaturing, reducing phosphates and nitrates. We should not be afraid to link land use with land management. We do it by the back door. We would be much better served doing it up front.

Q128 Lord Borwick: This is a question for Maria Dunn. You mentioned viability assessments with reference to environmental aspects. The viability assessment is for the whole development, is it not, including roads, social housing, schools, playing fields and everything else? Any one of those factors could affect the viability, but you pointed out the importance of viability and lots of people criticise viability assessments. I understand that, but why do you think it has a greater effect on the environmental than it does on schools, roads and social housing?

Maria Dunn: On the viability assessment, when we do plan making it is a whole plan viability assessment. We look at all the things we want to deliver, and if the plan is not viable with all those policies we must start looking at what to take away or what to do to improve the overall viability.

I think the planning inspectorate inspectors in the past have put more emphasis than others on some aspects of the inputs into the plan viability and some of the asks. That is not to say that none of the inputs are important, but at the moment it feels like the move towards net-zero carbon has less emphasis because there is not the same emphasis nationally, and potentially in policy and in the NPPF, as there is on some of those other aspects. Fundamentally, a development will fall down if you cannot deliver all the things that are considered to be essential to make it acceptable in planning terms, but it does feel in policy-making

that the net-zero carbon agenda does not have the same emphasis in viability, and that is the bit where we end up moving away from our ideal position in plan making.

At the development management stage, when it comes to the viability assessment, again it is often things like renewable energy contributions that might fall away if developments are not viable, rather than other elements that are perhaps seen as more essential to make the development acceptable. Changing the emphasis of the planning system nationally is one opportunity to give that more importance.

Lord Borwick: The decision as to which is more important and least important is made by discussion between the developer and the planning authority, is it not? Does that mean that your criticism is partly of the planning authority for not giving the environmental aspects enough importance, or are you criticising the developer?

Maria Dunn: The applicants often do not give it enough emphasis, perhaps because they feel that it is easier to get away with, or for us to back track away from policy requirement on that. For example, when you go to a planning examination, it feels like it has less emphasis through the local plan-making process, so those policies do not get into the plans to start with in the way that perhaps local authorities would like them to.

Q129 **Baroness Redfern:** I have three very quick questions. Maria, do you think that a lack of attention is given to rural areas in the planning system?

Maria Dunn: My experience is predominantly in urban settings, so Birmingham and south Worcestershire, but with Worcester city as my employing authority. I do not feel that less emphasis is given to rural areas, but there is a different emphasis sometimes in rural areas.

Baroness Redfern: Rich, you mentioned bureaucracy in the planning system. How could we streamline that so we can get planning through much more quickly in the plan-making process?

Rich Cooke: Certainly the impact regimes that I mentioned are not a key form of assistance for local authorities. They are expensive and time consuming. The amount of time that it takes to go through all those hoops is an encumbrance to the speed at which local authorities can put plans in place.

Baroness Redfern: It delays and adds costs.

Rich Cooke: Yes, and they are also ripe grounds for challenges. A lot of local authorities have come a cropper as a result of relatively, some might even say spurious, technically based challenges.

Baroness Redfern: To delay the whole process as such.

Rich Cooke: Yes, exactly. There are several considerations there. It is right that local authorities need to have a sound evidence base to

underpin their plans, but again, although the requirement is for that to be proportionate and honed to the policies that a local authority is proposing, that level of evidence often tends to be much greater. I do not think local authorities always understand exactly how to pitch the level of evidence they require to justify their plans and get through the examination process.

Baroness Redfern: Tim, you mentioned trade-offs. How can we manage better trade-offs?

Tim Slaney: It goes back to an earlier point about just how strong your local plan is or the relevant plan in place. That is the basis for managing trade-offs. For example, the local plan in the national park I am at is very strong on affordable housing. We spend a lot of time and effort on the viability aspects of it, and it slides down to three and five dwellings. Any more than five dwellings and it is on-site, despite very high land pressures. Arguably that helps, but that is the case.

Also, we have a policy that is strong on ecosystem services. It is our central policy and it says right at the start, "We are looking for you to contribute to these nine elements". You can see it in our local plan, if that is helpful, and it lists those elements. We have mapped them out; we even checked all our land allocations against them. It is very clear, if you come to see us, that we are aiming at viability and improving the land betterment, with a strong evidence base supporting it.

One final point is to be clear on the outcomes. I find too many SAs and SEAs—sustainability appraisals and strategic environmental assessments. They are chucking everything at us, but what is the outcome that we are trying to achieve? What are the four or five things that are key to the landscape in that patch, whether it is urban or rural, and what is the impact of the development on those four or five things, not 500?

Q130 **Lord Harlech:** How can we build better metrics to measure and assess the trade-offs? For example, what tools do you use to help you make evidence-based decisions for land use and assess and manage trade-offs?

Tim Slaney: I have mentioned one of them already, EcoServ mapping, but that is just an example. I think you must choose which evidence tool you are going to use, understand its weaknesses and then just get on and assess the matters that are important to you and use that to build your policies. With the plethora of data out there, which I mentioned, it is about having an idea of what you are trying to achieve and focusing on that before you say, "Let's collect a lot of evidence". The point is to think what you might want, and then use the evidence to test that.

We knew we were keen on pollination, for example. We also knew that we were suffering from a lot of soil degradation and from soil going into the rivers and creating a lot of problems. We also knew that we needed to provide housing, retail and employment suitable for a national park, so we homed our evidence in on those areas and accepted that in some areas we might be a bit weaker.

Rich Cooke: The key metrics I suggest are adopted planning policy and the evidence base. Also, the Building with Nature accreditation is proving extremely useful. Some of the work that has been done in Essex under the Essex green infrastructure strategy is underpinned and recognised by the Building with Nature accreditation, so that is a useful endorsement and test of how strong local policy is.

The Chair: Do you want to describe in one sentence what nature accreditation is?

Rich Cooke: Yes. It is a system that has a set of principles and criteria to test a policy, plan or strategy. It is a nationally recognised accreditation system, and it promotes and helps with consistency. It is extremely useful from those points of view.

In Essex, a lot of work has been done to map and record green infrastructure across the county. We have a digital map-based system to understand and explain where the green infrastructure is and what its qualities and characteristics are. It is a good, strong evidence base of what is out there, what is important, what is valued, and that can assist if any decisions need to be made about any potential trade-offs.

Maria Dunn: I agree. Local planning policies are essentially what we use to manage the trade-offs. They are supported by a significant evidence base, some of which is the demand side—how many homes we need to build, how many jobs we need to provide for, and so on—versus the constraint management tools. Flood risk assessment, open space assessments, landscape assessments are part of those. That trade-off is balanced by looking at the evidence base and formulating that into the local plan. Again, viability is a big factor in trade-offs. Where a scheme does not stack up and deliver everything you want it to, you must start making decisions about what you move away from.

In Birmingham, looking forward and focusing specifically on climate change, we would like to look at whole-life carbon and setting a particular standard for new development. We find it quite challenging that there can be almost too many tools out there, and competing tools. It is how we can streamline that in the planning system to say, “This is a tool that we should be using”, or, “this is an approach that we should be using”. Having said that, I am conscious that we do not want to stifle creativity or innovation, and that being too prescriptive could lead to stifling of creativity and innovation.

The Chair: This is a very brief question with a one-word answer. Until about a couple of years ago, the planning system seemed to be fixated on a single objective of housing. It is now very much swinging towards net zero. Is that oversimplifying the whole thing, or have we seen a real move. Yes or no?

Tim Slaney: It is in its infancy, but it is a real move, and decisions bear that out through inspectors.

Maria Dunn: I think it is starting. I think there is a heavy focus on housing numbers.

Q131 **Lord Goddard of Stockport:** We have been talking about the interaction between various departments, but what role can multifunctional approaches play in delivering better outcomes for the ecosystem services, and how can we realise that in best practice if it means silos for bringing it all together?

Rich Cooke: Certainly in Essex we are very strong advocates of multifunctionality. The Essex green infrastructure strategy is all about trying to promote multifunctional green infrastructure, and there are a lot of reasons why multifunctional approaches tend to have their own inherent strengths. They can be very useful for a developer, because when a developer designs a scheme it must balance varying competing interests. It often has what is described as a land budget, so in that site it must have the right quantum of development to make the development stack up financially. It needs to provide open space, infrastructure and things such as sustainable drainage systems.

We advocate sustainable drainage systems that also promote wildlife, open space or recreational areas. You can have things like attenuation ponds with areas for the public to sit out, and they can be a visual, aesthetic feature. That can also promote wildlife as well as perform a drainage function. They benefit developers and the public and users of a development, and they help to promote a better design of development. As a principle, we advocate that multifunctional approaches are generally sought in most instances wherever possible. As Tim said, they tend to deliver better outcomes for schemes. That is getting back to the outcome point, looking at how a development functions in its entirety rather than in isolation.

In the work that Essex has done on green infrastructure principles and standards, multifunctionality emerged as one of the key nine or 10 principles that we ended up with. All the people involved in that work were very firmly behind that as one of the principles.

Tim Slaney: We have the macro and micro scale. At the macro scale at South Downs National Park we have the People and Nature Network, which is a map that has been evolving with the community as well as with the evidence base; Natural England; and the Environment Agency. It clearly marks out where there are opportunities for larger scale, bigger, better joined-up ideas and thinking principles. We point the big developers to that and say, "What can you do when you are looking to do the more major developments towards enhancing, helping and contributing?"

At the micro scale, we debated with our members on how far to go, and we are bringing it down to householder applications, so it is nearly every application. We have ecosystem services advice notes explaining what you can do, and it can be something tiny like swift boxes or bee bricks, right up to the much more major, "If you're doing a development and

there's an old tributary that is coming through that has been canalised, have you thought about opening it out a bit and there being some place for kids to play, some bullrushes, and do you have a signboard up explaining?" It is important that we bring people along with us, because a lot of people do not currently understand or get access to it. Those Technical Advice Notes, as we call them, have been invaluable because we can give them to people and say, "This is another part of the mix when you are about to develop", whether it is an extension or a major development.

Lord Goddard of Stockport: In essence, do you have an ecosystem almost like a checklist that goes from one dwelling up to 100 houses?

Tim Slaney: Absolutely.

Lord Goddard of Stockport: Is that a pick and mix, or are those broad principles that are adhered to or can be traded off?

Tim Slaney: That is a good question. It is a pick and mix, to put it bluntly, but it is intended to inspire, ignite and assist. If you have other ideas—and local people often do—we do local community character and landscape character assessments that can inform them, but it is a pick and mix. If you have other ideas, we will have that discussion, and I know we are relatively lucky; we have ecologists, rangers and others to help. It is important, if we are going to take this agenda through properly, that we resource authorities appropriately with the right skills, right from the schools and the education they are going through, the planners and developers of the future, to us. We must learn new skills and get assistance with that.

Baroness Redfern: Can I go back to Tim on canalising? It costs, which is a big barrier to doing major things like that.

Tim Slaney: I accept that. The canalisation itself costs. When we talk to the Environment Agency, it is often very keen on the larger scale and not necessarily on the tiny tributaries, but it does not like the upkeep week in, week out and year in, year out—all the issues that come with it, like the danger and steep sides and all the rest of it. We often find that we can have a sensible discussion about how to make them with slightly softer edges, which is better for water flood management as well as better aesthetically.

Baroness Redfern: It would support it.

Tim Slaney: In principle, yes, but it comes down to the detail.

Maria Dunn: I completely agree with what is being said. I think the resources issue is hugely important. There is a real struggle with recruitment throughout planning at the moment. Securing a pipeline of people coming into the profession will be important to ensure that we do not have even more compounded problems further down the line.

With current resourcing, we are on the cusp of big changes in the planning system and making sure that those changes are supported by access to the right specialists in local authorities. Whether that is managed by some sort of pool of people that local authorities can tap into, or some sort of mechanism to help us reskill the officers we have in the new areas that are needed, it will be fundamental to that change being successful.

On the point about opening up river corridors and looking at multifunctional green infrastructure, we have some work in Birmingham in the River Rea corridor looking at how we can start to open up the river and reap the multifunctional benefits of that and so create an opportunity for development, but doing so while having in mind the river corridor and flood risk, as well as benefits such as active travel corridors, wildlife, recreation, better design and more attractive places to live.

There is always a trade-off. We all talk about and support multifunctional green infrastructure, but there is often a trade-off between the human and the nature elements that we must balance.

The Chair: I had the pleasure of opening a site like that in south London not a long time ago, so if you want a trip down at some stage we can show you. It is an excellent decanalisation that offered a flood risk management scheme and a park for local people, so it was excellent all round.

Q132 **Lord Grantchester:** I will lead into to my question by asking Maria a bit about the differences that she accentuated of net zero needing to be embedded better, and then asking her to comment on how that is reflected between urban and rural planners. Have you identified any differences in approach in net zero between rural and urban aspects?

Coming on to my question, what are the key strengths and weaknesses of the planning system as a means through which biodiversity, net gain and wider environmental net gains can be delivered, as well as net zero? What changes, if any, do you feel are needed?

Maria Dunn: On the difference between urban and rural areas, the most obvious one is the challenges around transport in rural areas. Public transport, walking and cycling are all much easier to deliver at scale. You might be able to achieve walking and cycling links in a village, but quite often within the village boundary it will be quite tricky to negotiate safe walking and cycling facilities, and public transport can be much more difficult to provide because you do not have the volume of people trying to move around to support that infrastructure.

The biggest challenge in rural areas is how you deliver public transport or make rural areas less car dependent. In urban areas it is much easier to provide the infrastructure, but it has its own challenges in moving a significant volume of people. Post Covid we have seen impacts on our public transport network that have made them less favourable for some people. I think that is probably the biggest challenge.

Some of the other aspects of net-zero carbon can be equally achieved in rural areas with local service provision, encouraging people to walk and cycle where they can, and the quality to which we build in achieving or getting as close as we can to net-zero carbon and looking at the carbon lifecycle and what we can reuse.

Lord Grantchester: What about the community aspects of, for example, heat and the challenges and differences there between urban and rural? Have you identified that?

Maria Dunn: It is not something that I have looked at in the context of rural areas, but it is more of a challenge in rural areas. In urban areas you tend to have a better mix.

Lord Grantchester: That seems perhaps to be the biggest challenge for us to face in decarbonisation of heat.

Maria Dunn: Yes, I think there are bigger opportunities in urban areas to achieve decarbonisation of heat.

The Chair: Is biodiversity net gain an issue for Birmingham, or has it not really entered the planning lexicon there?

Maria Dunn: It has. We have responded to the Government's consultations on biodiversity net gain. We have access to specialists who can help us take it forward. We do not have it in local plan policy now, because our local plan dates to 2017, so it is very much on the agenda moving forward. In the autumn, we will start the first stage of consultation on the review of our local plan, so it is something that we must factor in. In that local plan review update we are looking much more closely at what we can do on net-zero carbon and how much more stringent our policies in that area can be.

Lord Grantchester: Tim and Rich, what are your thoughts on the wider question?

Rich Cooke: I suggest that the planning system is an appropriate vehicle for delivering some of these wider gains and for things like biodiversity net gain. From that point of view, I suggest it is quite useful now that biodiversity net gain is going to be compulsory instead of optional. Local authorities are relatively comfortable with that, because it also means that developers cannot renege on trying to deliver those commitments as part of their development. It is quite helpful for the planning system as practitioners to make that compulsory, as it will be.

I suggest that it will probably take a little while to bed down in practice among local planning authorities. There is not necessarily quite as much confidence among them as to how to go about that in practice. There may be room, a bit of a gap there, for some guidance and best practice advice to assist local authorities on how to best deliver biodiversity net gain through the planning system. There appears to be an appetite for trying to promote and deliver things like biodiversity net gain and wider environmental gain, so that is quite positive, but there is a need to

handhold them a bit through the process so that, as that starts to become more common and be implemented more practically, local authorities feel confident and able to make that happen on the ground.

Lord Grantchester: Does there need to be more consistency of approach?

Rich Cooke: Yes, because at the end of the day we are all trying to achieve the same outcomes. Things like the biodiversity net gain and net-zero carbon targets are nationally and internationally agreed targets that we are all trying to work to, so there needs to be consistency between all different kinds of authorities in delivering those high-level targets so that we are all pulling in the same direction.

Tim Slaney: It is interesting, because there are benefits in having a consistent approach. Biodiversity net gain is a great step for the planning system to begin to look at wider environmental net gain, and I will come back to that. It is good that there is a degree of consistency, that it is bedding in, and it needs to enable a bit of flexibility.

On the wider picture of environmental net gain, it is essential that there is quite a wide flexibility in how one might go about it. Reflecting on your question to Maria earlier, there are very different solutions to making sure that you are providing your own energy in a rural area than in an urban area, where a very small array of solar panels—we have allowed two, three, four—will supply four or five houses. That is good on the ground and has very little impact, and arguably it will bring some land into production that was not in particularly good food production, but at least now it is in energy production.

It is important that we have some consistency and start with biodiversity net gain and monitor it, and we have started to monitor it. We took 10 sites last year in our annual monitoring report, which is something that planning must provide every year. We looked at what the biodiversity net gain was, because we went in early on it and did a bit of a trial. On those 10 sites (we did not particularly fix the 10 sites; we just chose the 10 biggest ones) overall there was a 36% uplift in biodiversity net gain, looking at the metrics that were emerging. There were also other gains on those sites that biodiversity net gain does not catch. I think we need a bit of both—some consistency in a basic approach and flexibility to get to wider environmental net gain.

Q133 **The Chair:** I think I know the answer to this question, because you are all quite enthusiastic about it, but would you like broader environmental net gain and net zero to be statutory requirements, in the way that biodiversity net gain will be a statutory requirement?

Tim Slaney: Subject to resources, yes. It is a really exciting space. At last, planning is going back to where it started, where you had the environment, the economy and equity at the base. For too long it has been economy, economy, economy translated as housing, housing, housing. I think it is great that it is going back to being a bit more

balance. Yes, it will be good to have environmental net gain eventually as some sort of statutory responsibility through the planning system, but we must make sure that we can resource it properly, otherwise we will get too slow and bound up in all sorts of court issues and test cases.

Rich Cooke: To keep it simple, I concur entirely with that. That has summarised it really well.

Tim Slaney: We have never met before.

Maria Dunn: I also concur.

The Chair: Gosh, a great rate of harmony. Let us move on quick.

Q134 **Lord Harlech:** The committee has heard about the importance of green infrastructure and the potential of green belts in delivering nature-based solutions, but that it is often traded off against other priorities. Drawing on your own experience, how can policy and practice be improved?

Tim Slaney: In my previous role I worked in a local authority that was very constrained by the green belt. Policy-wise, it is essential that we make a sixth purpose. There are five purposes to the green belt. I will not repeat them all here, and some of you will know them, but they are essentially to stop sprawl and to stop cities from getting too large and to have green space around them. The policy has not necessarily worked. In a way, they have just become slightly moribund, and all sorts of odd activities are happening there. My view is that we should have a sixth purpose: that the green belt positively contributes towards nature recovery and all the benefits that provides. That could be done relatively simply.

On development management, a plethora of applications come through all sorts of districts and unitary authorities on green belt. Some of them are allowable, and we strain at the sinews to allow others, and others get very concerned. Imagine if they were accompanied by some good additional land management. They are normally part of a much wider holding, whereas in the urban areas and the central urban areas it is normally someone's individual plot.

At the development management stage you can make it very clear through your policies that if you are allowing development in the green belt and if it is deemed appropriate, having regard to all the normal factors that we take into account—not coalescing, avoiding sprawl—you would also be expected to do some better land management processes or some ecosystem gain, and understand what that green belt could be. A lot of the time they are fairly barren, but they were probably not barren 100 years ago, so use your landscape analysis and go back in time. What were the services they were providing, whether it was carbon sequestration or wildlife through hedgerows? Use that as your basis to make it locally specific.

Rich Cooke: In a similar vein, it appears to me that there are often several myths and misconceptions about the green belt. People think it is

designated because of the quality of the landscape and things like that, when it is not. Quite often it can involve significantly degraded land. Just because it is open does not necessarily mean it is a wonderful landscape or well looked after.

In a similar vein, I agree that there is a need to be more finessed about how that land is used, managed and looked after—some way of encouraging the stewardship of that land so that it provides greater value to wildlife, to people, to visitors, for recreation and things like that, and fulfils a useful function rather than just providing an open gap of land between towns and urban areas. It is moving beyond the simple policy protection part of it to the green belt contributing valuable functions to the environment and to people. It has a useful role to play, and it could be made much better use of in those respects.

Maria Dunn: I completely agree with everything that has been said. There is also a bit to add about the role of the green belt in biodiversity net gain so that it provides an opportunity to make some of those investments in nature and to deliver some of that net gain where it cannot be delivered on-site. There is also an opportunity in looking more holistically at the green belt and the open countryside beyond. Perhaps where green belt is allocated for development, where it perhaps will not meet the sixth purpose of nature conservation or is purely performing that gap function, could you allocate some of that land for development but then allocate some of the land further beyond for green belt? A comprehensive look at the functions of the green belt, what is in it and how it could be different is important.

Tim Slaney: The green belt should not be seen as the decamp for biodiversity net gain that cannot be achieved on-site. We have all gone to some lengths to say that environmental net gain in its wider sense should be provided on-site as far as possible. I am worried that we will end up dumping it in the green belt or, believe it or not, the national park, which would be great for us but not great for development generally. The mitigation hierarchy where you try to make sure that everything is right on the site is important. It should be good development, environmental net gain and biodiversity net gain, not biodiversity net gain shoved off to somewhere else.

Maria Dunn: I agree. The role for the green belt is where it is demonstrated that it absolutely cannot be delivered on-site, which I think we will have instances of, but it should not be a cop-out for developers to say, "We'll just make some investment over there and carry on with what we were doing anyway". That absolutely cannot be the case.

The Chair: We selected you three because you were all red hot on green infrastructure. Is there anything you want to tell us before we move on to the next question?

Tim Slaney: My starting gambit is that it has to be accessible or understandable to the public. There are areas where green infrastructure is provided not just because it is good, but it is getting the wider public to

be able to access it for health, well-being, inclusivity, and all that agenda. It is important that green and blue infrastructure is as accessible as possible. Planning is a public intervention in the market system to supposedly correct the not-so-positive effects, and if green and blue infrastructure is being provided, if you can explain it to people locally and to visitors who might come, they all start to nurture and cherish it and we will get the right ball rolling.

Maria Dunn: Yes, it needs to be embedded in communities, so although I completely agree with what we have said about the green belt, and it can provide a great opportunity for recreation, we also need green infrastructure embedded in developments to be accessible and to give people access to nature and green space literally on their doorstep.

Rich Cooke: There is an emerging and increasing wealth of good practice now among local authorities in the field of green infrastructure. I am not trying to blow my own trumpet, but some authorities have done extremely good work now. We often encourage other authorities to look at that and to feel free to use it, because there is not always a need to reinvent the wheel. If there is really good work out there to draw on, local authorities are well placed to draw on some of that work that has been done, with the heavy lifting already done by others.

It is a case of looking at the good practice out there and the excellent strategies that are being produced and trying to align with those, because that makes it much easier to get it all right and to produce some very useful material.

The Chair: Perhaps we could encourage you, if you are able, to give us a short list of the developments in green infrastructure in other authorities that you think are particularly good. Perhaps we could have that as a subsequent note.

Rich Cooke: I am very happy to do that.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Baroness Bakewell, we have already strayed on to democratic engagement, but feel free to stray further.

Q135 **Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville:** I will do, thank you. How effectively does the planning system provide for democratic engagement for land use policy and decision-making? Is it perfect or is there room for improvement?

Rich Cooke: There is certainly room for much better practice in this area. It partly comes back to the earlier question about resources. Probably local authorities need to be better placed with training capacity, skills in community engagement to get people meaningfully and genuinely engaged in the process relatively early on. As we know, quite often it is familiar people who tend to engage with the planning system. It is not necessarily fully representative of the rest of society. Quite often, people get involved when they are mobilised to oppose developments, which again is negative energy and does not necessarily benefit those people. It becomes a confrontational process.

It is not easy to crack this, but we need to find a way that engages the public in the process in a positive way so that there is a genuine, adult, mature conversation to be had, people understand what choices are available to them, and there are some things that are not necessarily up for grabs, like the delivery of growth and change. Those things are inevitable, and it is helpful for people to understand that. They can shape what the development looks like. They can express their local priorities and preferences as to the form or shape of that development, perhaps potentially even its timing, community infrastructure preferences—those sorts of things.

Also, it is trying to help people to understand that there are opportunities and potential gains through development. It could be delivering biodiversity net gain, new green infrastructure, all sorts of other community benefits. It is about trying to get people engaged in that kind of debate so that they understand not only the impacts but the potential opportunities and benefits.

Maria Dunn: The current planning system is difficult for members of the public to engage with. There is often a surge of engagement at the development management stage when a planning application comes forward, sometimes to the principle of development that has been established in a development plan, but people have not realised that the development plan is happening or what that means for them.

People sometimes struggle to understand what may change in an area and the importance and significance of the local plan. Generally, there is a lot of work to do around helping people to understand how the planning system works and how they can engage with it, but also the things that are inevitable with change and existing allocations, which might come forward as planning applications. The larger the area and the more strategic the issues, the more difficult it is for people to engage with it. As a long-standing policy planner, you go out to consultation and it is very difficult to get people to understand the implications of a local plan. Where they do engage, they tend to engage with specific site allocations.

A lot of good work has been done, for example where you have smaller areas. In Birmingham, for example, we did lots of good work around Perry Barr. We did “walk and talk” sessions. We spent lots of time with the community helping them and us to understand what the community wanted from the area. You can do that on a more local scale on a smaller plan. It is much more difficult at a bigger scale.

Moving towards a digital map-based local planning system I think offers a real opportunity to help people engage and to visualise what is going on in the area, what is likely to change, what and where, what we are asking their views on. However, I maintain that we need to make sure that people who are not IT literate or do not have access to the internet can engage with that process. Making sure that there are avenues open to engage with that in a digital way or in a non-digital way is really important.

While picking a resourcing point, resourcing in local authorities is fundamental to us being able to engage and to engage well. There are a lot of opportunities to use broader networks, such as parish and town councils where they exist. They can often be very good at supporting planning consultations, and organisations like Planning Aid have often helped in the past supporting local authorities with conveying that message to communities. We could better utilise things like our elected members' ward forums if we had more resources available to support this.

In short, the answer to the question is that there is lots of opportunity but it would require resourcing.

Tim Slaney: I echo many of those comments and will add a few. We need to be very clear about when it is engagement and when it is consultation. That goes to the point about what is really up for discussion and what is not, and that is at all levels. At major development level it should be compulsory for developers to show how they are engaged with the local community and to provide evidence in the design and access statement, or whatever vehicle it might be, of how they have changed their plans—or if not, why not—rather than leaving it to the planning officer's report, which gets to be hundreds of pages where it is responding to individual elements. There is room for the developer to help there.

We have just entered the digital age and I am very proud. Shoreham Cement Works is a major regeneration site in the heart of our national park. It is a kilometre long. You could put this building in it, it is that big and deep. We have YouTube, QR codes, social media going on about it, and we are engaging an entirely different audience in what the options should be for redeveloping that site, from reusing the existing—what some might think are ugly, others might think are beautiful—industrial buildings that speak of their heritage, to knocking them all down and starting again. What levels of growth do you want? That is quite exciting, and I urge you to look at the YouTube video, because it is us giving it a go. We are already getting a lot of young people from Worthing, Brighton and Shoreham-by-Sea saying, "Oh, so there's something happening there. We'll have a look at that."

Community-led plans are very important and have certainly worked for us. I accept that it might be different in urban and rural areas, but we have 50 neighbourhood plans and we have helped quite extensively with them all. They are delivering, through their own allocations, about half of our growth—250 homes a year. About half of those are coming through from community allocations. It has been hard work, and we have had to talk to each other, to developers and to the ecosystem services as we are going along. Those communities are quite proud of the allocations they have made and they are getting very involved in the development management system.

A degree of resource management is required on that, but it is helpful to get the community, who have allocated the site, the developer and the

planners in the same room saying, "Right, so we have this allocation for 15, 20, 30. How are we going to drive this forward together? You have a rough idea. We know there's a pipe down here, so what's the solution together?" It makes getting through the development management system so much easier. Community-led planning strongly has its place in rural communities, where you make it clear that there is some growth required.

Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville: Thank you, all three of you, for your answers. There will always be a section of each community that objects to planning applications, regardless of what they are and how much consultation and engagement you have had. It will be very difficult to take things forward in some areas. It is probably less of a problem in urban areas, but it is a real problem in rural areas, even when there have been dozens of consultation meetings.

Tim Slaney: In the Petersfield neighbourhood plan, the community that did it, led by an IT expert—nothing to do with planning—came up with a very clever way of weighting people's objections depending on how near or far they were away from the site. As I say, this was led by the community, not by the planners, so if you were within 500 metres of a site objecting to a potential allocation that had a different scoring than if you were further away, it was not the big, bad planners. The chap involved did wonderfully well and became a town councillor and is a real stalwart of the community. I accept the broader point, but sometimes we just have to be bold and say, "That's going to be part of the system".

Q136 **Baroness Redfern:** Mine is the last question. I think some of it you have already answered it, but I will just plough through it. How can we improve the planning management and decision-making for future land use in England? Please expand on that a little. Secondly, what organisation would be best placed to plan and decide on the allocation of land for various competing agendas for land use in England?

Maria Dunn: I think a national spatial plan to address some of the challenges in housing numbers and levelling up economic growth is needed.

On organisations, local authorities are still best placed to deliver planning in their local areas. If we were to go down the route of a national spatial plan, the statutory bodies would need to engage in it.

On improving that engagement at the local level, better resourcing and a stronger requirement to engage at certain times and within certain timeframes would help support us. It would make sure that we had all the evidence in front of us. We need it at the right times to make the decisions that we make. Obviously, a national spatial plan would require input from all those statutory organisations as well and that would need to be carefully resourced and managed.

Rich Cooke: I concur that local authorities are generally best placed to deliver plans in their own patches, but there also needs to be some means of resolution when that process goes wrong. For example, we

have short local political time horizons for some councils electing a third of their members every year. Then we get local authorities that have produced a plan and choose not to adopt it, so there needs to be something to fix that problem, certainly.

Short-term horizons can be very damaging. When you are trying to deliver development at scale—that growth—if you are delivering potentially thousands of houses in the form of a new settlement, the time horizon is decades. There has to be a way of maintaining that commitment on planning and delivering that growth over the medium to longer term. All too often, some of those can fail if the long-term commitment is not enduring. There are things like that to consider.

Baroness Redfern: Do you think the process should be time limited? When you are talking about councils being elected a third, a third and a third, should the process be attributed with a certain timescale? If you have a council elected a third, a third and a third, new members might not like what has happened before and then it is stalled.

Rich Cooke: Yes, there needs to be some way of resolving that tension between the longer timescale and those short-term political changes, which can be very significant and disruptive to the process. When you are talking about delivering development at scale, of course, there is also a role for local development corporations, as well as these working positively with local authorities. Local development corporations have proved very effective in some instances for delivering significant-scale growth. It is perhaps about more flexibility in planning arrangements, more encouragement for local authorities to plan across boundaries, doing joint local plans, things like that. That is potentially very useful as well.

We have been talking a lot about nature and biodiversity net gain and, of course, none of that recognises local authority boundaries, so there needs to be a way of planning at a wider than local level. Groups of local authorities or some other kind of larger area could be where some of the potential local tensions are reconciled and managed. The idea of more flexibility as to how plans are produced at those levels would be really valuable.

Tim Slaney: Picking up on that last point, I have been involved in five joint core strategies, as they were called. They are hard work, but they reap the benefits because they are at a much better scale. My first broader point is that there is space again, however one arranges it, for subregional planning. That is the scale we need to be doing this at, particularly given the longer-term timeframes of some of the new garden towns that are coming forward. I do not think we should be afraid of that.

Interestingly, to your point about a third, a third, a third, I am of course in the unusual position of working for national parks where Members are appointed by the Secretary of State or by their relevant parish or district authority. It is very different. They have longer-term timeframes, which you would expect for national parks, our jewels in the crown. Dare I say

it, they are able to take some decisions that I am not convinced a local ward councillor would be able to take, so there are lessons to be learned from there. I know that the democratic deficit versus community input versus actual growth point is very delicate, but it seems to be working for most of the national park authorities.

I go back to a point I made earlier that it would be very helpful for the system if there was closer link between land use and land management. That specifically involves DLUHC and Defra—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I am not convinced that the join there is as sound as it could be, as we move into a new era of planning where we are looking at the way we can add climate change action and renaturing as well as providing the infrastructure, housing and all the other kit that we need to live our lives.

The Chair: Thank you all for this afternoon. I am afraid we have come to the end. Your evidence has raised a shedload more questions. One notable thing that nobody mentioned is local nature recovery strategies, so if you have anything that you would particularly like to tell us about those ,we would be grateful for any further evidence you can give us. Thank you very much.