Environmental Audit Committee

Oral evidence: National Planning Policy Framework reforms and the environment, HC 458

Wednesday 20 November 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Toby Perkins (Chair); Olivia Blake; Julia Buckley; Ellie Chowns; Barry Gardiner; Anna Gelderd; Sarah Gibson; Chris Hinchliff; Martin Rhodes; Blake Stephenson; Cameron Thomas.

Questions 1 - 56

Witnesses

I: Anthony Breach, Associate Director, Centre for Cities; Sophie O'Connell, Senior Policy Adviser, Green Alliance; Professor Alister Scott, Professor of Environmental Geography and Planning, Northumbria University.

II: Councillor Richard Wright, Leader of North Kesteven District Council and District Councils' Network planning spokesman; Dr Hugh Ellis, Director of Policy, Town and Country Planning Association; Sam Stafford, Planning Director, Home Builders Federation.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Anthony Breach, Sophie O'Connell and Professor Alister Scott.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the first evidence session of the Environmental Audit Committee in this Parliament. I am honoured to have been elected Chair of the Committee for the current Parliament and I look forward to building on the excellent work of the predecessor Committee chaired by Philip Dunne.

I am delighted to be starting our work today with an introduction to the Government's proposed planning reforms and their effect on the environment. The unique feature of this Committee is its remit to examine the Government's policy on the environment across all Departments. This cross-cutting work is hugely valuable and enables us to get an overall view on how the commitments of Ministers on the environment, climate and sustainable development are being implemented.

When discussing our future programme, colleagues were in no doubt that the environmental implications of the Government's proposals to boost housing growth in England ought to be examined. No one doubts that the country is in a housing crisis and that new homes are desperately needed, but we are also facing an environmental crisis and a climate crisis, so as our first inquiry we have decided to examine how the Government are going about changes to the planning system to promote housing growth and what effect these changes may have on the environmental protections in the planning regime.

This evidence session has been arranged as a scene-setting discussion for us to gauge what the issues are. The terms of reference for our inquiry were published on our website on Monday and I encourage all who are interested to study them and to give us their views. I am very grateful to our first panel of witnesses for agreeing to join us today. Can I ask each of you to introduce yourself for the record, starting from my left, please?

Professor Scott: Good afternoon. My name is Alister Scott. I am a professor of environmental geography and planning at Northumbria University. I am also a chartered member of the Royal Town Planning Institute and a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, but the views I will give today are personal.

Sophie O'Connell: I am Sophie O'Connell, senior policy adviser at Green Alliance. Green Alliance is a charity and think-tank working for ambitious leadership on the environment.

Anthony Breach: My name is Anthony Breach. I am associate director at Centre for Cities, where I am the lead on housing and planning. We look at the role that cities play in the national economy.

Q2 **Chair:** Fantastic. Thank you for introducing yourselves. The Government are proposing very significant increases. What needs to change for them to achieve those increases? Can they be done in a way that does not

weaken environmental protection? I will start with you, Professor Scott.

Professor Scott: Yes, there are a large number of increases. The starting point of the NPPF consultation was housing. I disagree with that as a starting point. To me the starting position has to be about placemaking rather than focusing just on housing, because that is the priority. From my perspective, it is really important, building on the HM Treasury-appointed Dasgupta review in 2021, where the recommendation was to think, act and measure differently. I do not see anywhere in NPPF '23 or '24—the consultation—any changes in the way that we think about prosperity and economic growth.

I would like to see a much more balanced breaking-the-policy-silos approach to the way that we plan. While I welcome the rebirth of strategic planning in the national planning policy framework after it was pickled in 2010, the danger is that it is focusing purely on housing, environment and community in separate silos rather than what I see as strategic planning—good planning—and joining them up together.

My own research, published this year, shows that a lot of the new policy areas—the policies for nature—are fundamentally siloed and weak. For example, the policy wording of the national planning policy framework compared with Wales and Scotland is a lot weaker and there are major areas of nature missing, such as blue infrastructure and stewardship. The issue at the moment is that there is a lot of damage to the natural environment through weak policy wording. We need to improve that policy wording if we are going to deliver the kind of environment we want, the kinds of homes we want and the kinds of places we want.

Sophie O'Connell: I agree with a lot of what Alister has said about placemaking. We have been doing some work with other environmental NGOs, thinking about the Government's housing agenda, the appropriate locations and particularly public transport and active travel infrastructure, rather than placing new towns in areas of green belt and places where there is poor transport connectivity.

We know that economic growth is very closely linked to public transport connectivity as it connects people to economic opportunities and social and leisure activities, and that that is really important to a healthy society. Therefore, we think that new housing developments should be strategically placed around places where there is strong public transport and active travel infrastructure, or where that can be brought in quite rapidly.

At the same time, we think we need to have more of an emphasis on densifying housing in the UK. There is a lot of demand for dense properties and townhouses in cities such as Edinburgh, Glasgow and London. They are really popular and sought after, yet we do not really build like that any more. That is something that could definitely be picked up.

Going back to the transport point, something that we are developing with other environmental NGOs is thinking about a "no net traffic growth" test for new housing developments. We have not quite figured out exactly how the wording of that would work, but it is something that we think the Government should really look into to ensure that we are not creating communities that are car dependent for decades into the future. Even with the electric vehicle transition, we know that will not be enough to get us to our climate targets.

Then, yes, there are a lot of nature points that Alister picked up on, which we can pick up on throughout the session.

Anthony Breach: Our analysis at Centre for Cities shows that, since the planning system was created in 1947, we have established a shortfall compared with the average western European country of about 4.3 million missing houses, which is about 15% of the housing stock in the UK. If we are serious about tackling the housing crisis—and I am sure members of the Committee will see examples of this in their own surgeries—those houses simply have to be built. There is simply not enough stock. There is not enough floor space for people to live in.

The question, from an environmental perspective, is: where are those houses built, and how does the planning system ensure that those houses are in places that are environmentally sustainable but also economically make the biggest benefit to both local economies and the national economy?

Part of the problem with the planning system is that, even though we know that cities are broadly good for the environment and nature, sharing land, and sharing infrastructure reduces the pressure that human civilisation puts on the natural world. The way the planning system works—it is case by case, discretionary in nature—puts houses in the places where they are the least politically unacceptable, which often means far away from existing infrastructure, more remote locations, more car-reliant locations, and not really in places where people want them either.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Ministers are proposing increases to local plan housing targets based on existing housing stock levels rather than on historical growth. In many areas, planning authorities will see the requirement to allocate land to housing shooting up. Accepting what has been said about the place-based approach, which there seems to be agreement on, how concerned are you about the impact that that approach is going to have on our environmental protection? I will start with you this time, Mr Breach.

Anthony Breach: One problem with the pre-existing system of targets, which was based on previous population growth, was that that worked fine for places that had fundamentally low demand for housing, so parts of the north of England where house prices are pretty low. Places where housing delivery had fundamentally been low, but housing demand was high—so a lot of green-belt, shire locations, often with excellent public

transport—did not have very high housing targets as a result. On balance, the shift towards the 0.8% dwelling stock increase is a net improvement for housing and for housing outcomes. There may be some changes that we would make to it, if that is of interest.

From an environmental perspective, the challenge is more about knowing that there are large areas in many of these places—in shire areas that have excellent public transport links into metropolitan areas and city centres—that currently are not being allocated for development. The planning system is still quite unclear about whether it really expects land in the vicinity of railway stations, for example, to be allocated for new development for new housing. I think that is where the big gap is.

Sophie O'Connell: We have not done too much work on targets, but I would say that building on the green belt is not a silver bullet for a housing crisis that has been decades in the making. There are other, bigger structural system issues, like the right to buy—selling off council housing, meaning we do not have council housing stock, increasing wealth inequality across the country. Therefore, we think there needs to be a real focus on affordable and social housing and that should be a priority for the Government.

The Labour Government did say that they would bring in at least 40% affordable homes in new towns. There is a question around the other 60%. Similarly, going back to the previous question, we need to look at which types of housing are needed in which areas, and look to organisations such as Shelter, which has recommended at least 90,000 affordable and social housing to be built per year over this Parliament.

Other infrastructure questions come in around making sure there is public transport infrastructure, but also GPs, schools and so on to support the demand. We would be against new road building for new housing development and recommend that housing should be placed around public transport and active travel infrastructure, as we know that roads just create increased road traffic and bake in emissions for decades to come.

Q4 **Chair:** Professor Scott, I heard what you said about how you would like to see a different approach taken in terms of place building. Do you think that it is possible to bring about the increased level of house building in a way that does not negatively impact the environment, if the Government were to take an approach more in line with what you outlined?

Professor Scott: First and fundamentally, as recommended by the Royal Town Planning Institute report, there need to be extra resources for the local planning authorities themselves, because these extra numbers will trigger extra work. The call for sites is going to be led by developers and we are not necessarily going to have the right houses in the right places because the developers will be shaping them rather than the planners. It is not either/or; we should be working in partnership and working collectively to ensure that we have the housing, the environment and all

the infrastructure. To me, nature is part of the critical infrastructure along with everything else.

In order for it to happen, there needs to be a more effective strategic planning process that brings those different players around the table from the outset, and we should not start with the housing numbers. We should start with a broader base. To my mind, we need more planners in that particular equation in the public sector.

Chair: Do you want to quickly come in on that, Sophie?

Sophie O'Connell: It is not just the planners, but I completely agree. The RTPI report shows that 25% of the profession left between 2013 and 2020. There has been a mass exodus of any expertise at local government level, and that was in the public sector. It is not just the planners but environmental expertise that we don't have. That means that when planning applications do come in, we will not be looking out for potential harm to nature.

Q5 **Olivia Blake:** I am interested in how we can practically ensure that the framework works with the environmental measures that we already have. You touched a little bit on that, Professor Scott, but I wonder if there is anything else that you think we could enhance to ensure that all the various provisions that we have in legislation are functioning and that we can de-silo. You said silos were the problem.

Professor Scott: Right. Primarily, we need a stronger enforcement and monitoring sector in local planning authorities. I see enforcement as the Cinderella of the planning system, and I am afraid there is no Prince Charming out there that I can see, so in that sense that is needed. Also, the environmental principles under the Environment Act provide a mechanism for policy to better reflect those five principles—I would actually add a sixth principle, a participation principle under the Aarhus convention—but at the moment there is a lack of clarity as to how those principles are being used. However, I do see them as a way forward as well.

Chair: I will bring Barry Gardiner in now and then there will be opportunities for other people to respond to those points.

Q6 **Barry Gardiner:** Professor Scott thank you for introducing the Dasgupta review into our conversation—Ny/α must be less than or equal to G(S). I think you are right: the whole model of inclusive wealth that Dasgupta is talking about must be the foundation for this. It is really good to have you saying that to this Committee and I hope we can incorporate some of that into our recommendations.

I want to focus on the consultation that went out in July on the NPPF and the strengthening and reforming of the presumption, as they called it, in favour of sustainable development. They said that the primary role of the presumption is in addressing inadequate land supply. Now, you have argued that the current focus on planning reforms, on economic growth and housing development distorts the concept of sustainable

development and misrepresents its implementation in the planning system. You said that the presumption in favour of sustainable development should be redefined to explicitly incorporate the UN sustainable development goals.

Could you expand on those criticisms? Could you explain which specific environmental objectives are being excluded here, or which you think need to be specifically included, and how this Committee might make recommendations that ensure that a complete range of environmental objectives is delivered while not in any way undermining the Government's 1.5 million target?

Professor Scott: Thank you very much. For clarity, your comments there relate to my consultation response to the NPPF, which is obviously in the public domain.

For me, the starting point is the viability issue. To me, in sustainable development you need to have the environmental and social limits, and at the moment we have a sort of operational approach that has an economic slant on the viability. For sustainable development, we really would need to encompass much more of the environmental and social limits.

The other component of sustainable development that is definitely missing from the planning system—and it is a real weak link—is equity. Going back to the basic definition of sustainable development, that talks about intergenerational equity; I am talking about equity now. That is also a weak link in the planning system. We do not deal very effectively with environment and social justice there.

Those are the two key areas in my head, but the third element is this. I think that everybody pictures sustainable development as this three-legged stool of social, economic and environmental. We spend a lot of time around that stool, but it is not the legs that matter; it is the bit that we all sit on—our proverbial backside, if you like. I suppose it is how we integrate that element. At the moment, I just feel that because of the way viability is defined, because of the lack of equity and social justice going on, we have this distortion occurring. To my mind, that is where we need to address it.

Q7 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you. Ms O'Connell, your organisation, Green Alliance, has rightly pointed out that the construction sector is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions and that such an ambitious housing programme will have consequences for our emissions reduction targets. How best do you think those might be mitigated? In particular, perhaps you could outline for us the proposed amendment to building regulations known as part Z and say how you think incorporating that into the Government sustainability criteria might deliver for us?

Sophie O'Connell: I can provide some additional notes after the session, but we are thinking about the materials when building. Steel and cement are some of the biggest sources of industrial emissions at the moment,

and new homes obviously should be implemented while trying to minimise the climate and environmental impact.

There are some lessons to be learned from the London plan—I could pass those on in writing—which mandates carbon footprinting and circularity statements, particularly with the circular economy being a priority for DEFRA. That is something that we think could be brought in, but I could provide some more detail in writing on how exactly to do that.

Q8 **Barry Gardiner:** To be clear, document Z, which I referred to, would set out the requirements for the assessment of whole-life carbon emissions and limit the embodied carbon emissions for all major building projects.

Sophie O'Connell *indicated assent*.

Q9 **Barry Gardiner:** And just to get your confirmation on the record, that is aligned with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors professional statement, and it is endorsed by the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers, yes?

Sophie O'Connell: Yes.

Q10 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you. Finally, Mr Breach, I know one of your research areas is the lessons we can learn from other cities around the world. You have done research into that, I think in Japan and other places, including Russia. Valencia has been in our focus over the past few weeks after it received 343 mm of rain—three quarters of its annual rainfall—in just under five hours. Do you think that the proposed reforms are focused on growth at the expense of resilience and adaptation? Could you perhaps talk us through the United Nations Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and say how it might be better incorporated into the NPPF reforms?

Anthony Breach: I have not done any work on the United Nations framework that you have mentioned, but on your broad question regarding the trade-off between resilience and growth, I do not think there is necessarily a contradiction. We know there are efforts in the planning system to implement sustainable urban drainage schemes. That is obviously an ongoing—

Q11 **Barry Gardiner:** Sorry, I did not mean to say that there was a contradiction here. What I was pressing you for was whether you felt that in the proposed reforms these things were taken into the same account as the other parts of the reforms—whether the mitigation element or the adaptation and resilience element was in some way losing out here.

Anthony Breach: My understanding of the NPPF changes is—well, my assessment is that they are relatively light in nature. They wind the clock back to 2017, 2018 or so. I think the focus has really been about this question of house building and trying to restore it after changes were introduced by the last Government that were designed to reduce house building.

Coming back to your question a little earlier about building the 1.5 million that the Government have as a target, land supply has to be increased if the Government are to meet that, because the previous Government supplied a certain amount of land under the planning system and that did not reach 1.5 million. In the context of resilience, I am not sure that has been a huge focus in this phase of planning reform. If the Government are serious about reaching that 1.5 million target and delivering other environmental benefits of house building, particularly getting more housing built inside urban areas—where the NPPF as currently proposed would really struggle—I think there will need to be a bit more of a conversation around resilience and environmental benefits, as you describe.

Professor Scott: Can I come in there? Yes, we have been focused on Valencia, but there are other parts of the world where there is extreme heat—New Delhi, for example—and all the associated pollution and health disbenefits. I do not think in the NPPF—either now or previously—we are prepared for extreme weather. There are 15 mentions of flooding in the NPPF. There is one mention of overheating, and we do not have any infrastructure or any planning that is going on to look at that, such as grey water systems, use of building regulations for SUDS, and rain gardens and tree species that are more drought resistant. We will get extreme weather, and we have large amounts of house building targeted in areas of water constraint, so resilience is going to be a real problem unless we develop tools and policies to protect that.

Q12 **Barry Gardiner:** Yes, and the mapping of excess deaths as a result of that—absolutely.

The Sendai framework sets out four goals: understanding disaster risk, strengthening governance to manage it, investing in disaster risk reduction and resilience, and enhancing our preparedness and response and the whole principle of building back better. In terms of preparedness and response, what should be we be doing with the building regulations that we currently have, the EPC ratings—which we know are going to be changed—to ensure that we are getting that readiness, preparedness and resilience into the system?

Anthony Breach: One area where I know there is quite a tension in policy as it stands is overheating, in that you are seeing this conflict between part O of the building regulations, which requires overheating standards to be applied to rooms that have closed doors, and parts of the London plan, which has metrics on overheating relating to rooms with open doors and cross-ventilation across dual-aspect new dwellings that are being built. So even in areas in which the Government and the states have begun to think about these metrics on preparedness in response to climate change, the lining up between central Government, local government and what that actually means for developers on the ground is often in a bit of a mess. There is scope for tidying in that area.

Q13 **Ellie Chowns:** I want to ask about the concerns around the NPPF reforms and their impact on the green belt. To what extent do you think

that the proposed reforms achieve an effective balance between the demand for new housing and protection of the green belt, and what mechanisms could help achieve balance? Is there a proposal to really change the balance? What is your view on that and on what is needed for adequate protection?

Anthony Breach: Broadly, we support the changes proposed to the NPPF. In the context of the balance between house building and protections of the green belt, the green belt in its current form is extremely large. It is about 13% of the land area of England. It stretches from the Mersey almost to the Humber in the north. It is about three times the size of Greater London—the one around London—and it has remained largely unchanged since its designation in the 1950s through to the 1970s. In the context where land supply has to increase and house building has to increase if we are serious about tackling these problems, there does have to be at least some form of green-belt release, especially nearest to our urban areas and nearest to public infrastructure, because that is where people want to live and we get the greatest economic benefits.

As for the proposals that the Government have put forward in the NPPF with the "grey belt" definition, there is still a lack of clarity about what exactly they mean by that. There are fears that this could lead to a nibbling away of green belt in an unstructured and not particularly environmentally friendly way. To properly comment on that, we need to see stronger clarity from the Government as to how they intend to define the grey belt.

I would say the correct solution to managing that balance, which you have mentioned, is to have proper strategic reviews of the purpose of green belt and where it is currently designated. For instance, we have done some research at Centre for Cities that has shown that you could build about 2 million suburban houses near railway stations feeding into the five big cities in England on less than 2% of the green belt. We do not necessarily need massive de-designations of huge amounts of the green belt in order to achieve a big increase in housing outcomes and a big improvement, but we do need to be quite strategic and careful about making sure that the land that we are releasing is exactly what is being demanded by households.

Sophie O'Connell: I think this is an area that we are probably going to disagree on a little bit. We would not necessarily recommend the release of the green belt. We think where it is released that it should most definitely be prioritised for affordable and social housing, but we see it as eroding the purpose of the green belt and not prioritising urban regeneration, which was one of the purposes of the green belt. Going back to the point raised earlier on transport, we think that it will promote low-density sprawl into areas that have poor transport connectivity, so we would much rather build in and around existing urban areas where possible.

We think that brownfield land should be prioritised over the green belt, even when that is more expensive or inconvenient to developers. That is where they should be developing, over the green belt. Previously developed land and green belt should be kept for nature and used in that way for the environment and for the public to access the environment and have greater access to green and blue spaces, and we do not want to lose that privilege.

Professor Scott: I agree with Anthony Breach's point about lack of clarity. That issue of what is low value in relation to the grey infrastructure definition really concerns me.

The other point that I just want to build on—and maybe I am sitting in the middle here—is that green belts are vital components of green infrastructure surrounding cities, and as such they can provide very important environmental services for carbon storage, flood mitigation and public access for enjoyment. Dr Matthew Kirby, a colleague of mine at Northumbria, has done research highlighting areas of high and low multifunctionality. To me, if green belt is going to be released, you want it released where it is performing less of those functions, and at the moment the danger is that it is not released in the best areas for that. We want green belts to be multifunctional, like the remit of this Committee, with nature, climate, health and wellbeing, and all those different elements joined up together.

In my current work, looking at the 8 Hills project in Bromsgrove—a regional park where they are looking at the south-west part of the west midlands green belt—there is a proposal to integrate people, nature, health and wellbeing collectively within a green belt system. Obviously, that will be funded by selected green-belt release, but it needs to be in areas where there is less environmental damage and maximum multifunctionality, because that is the driving force for our policy in this country. With land scarcity, we need multifunctional land use.

Q14 **Ellie Chowns:** I have a few follow-ups. Perhaps I will throw them out and you can pick up the ones that you want to pick up on.

First, on the point about the very vague definition of grey belts, I am concerned about this idea of limited contribution to green belts. "Limited" is an extremely flexible word. Do you have a suggestion for how that definition could be drawn more tightly? If we said "demonstrably historically insignificant contribution" or something like that, might that address some of the issues?

Secondly, the risk of deliberate degradation by developers of green-belt land has been raised as an issue. To what extent do you think that is a potentially significant issue? That is, developers purchasing land and deliberately allowing it to become worse and worse so that it will be permitted for development.

Finally—Sophie, perhaps this picks up on a point that you raised—there is the point the Government made about the golden rules that would have

to be met before green-belt land could be released for development. There is affordable housing and all the rest of it, but also release of land for necessary improvements to local or national infrastructure, including transport links. Now, there are transport links and transport links, aren't there? There are public transport links, but this seems to indicate that green-belt land could be released for road building to facilitate low-density sprawl. Please pick any or all of those to follow up on.

Anthony Breach: On the grey belt question, I think in some ways we are a little bit nervous about the concept of grey belt as it introduces a new purpose into the green belt, which is not explicitly defined. You see this a little bit in other parts of the NPPF where the green belt is seen to play this role in nature protection and nature preservation, which it hasn't historically had. It has been previously very specifically defined around urban containment, and green-belt land that has that role of preventing the outward growth of urban areas has been previously defined to be correct green belt use.

If instead we start introducing more nature designations, and designating some parts of the green belt as not contributing to a nature preservation role, what we will actually be doing is designating that 13% of England, which might not be the right land, as land on which we want to pursue nature or environmental preservation because of the role of cities and urban areas in reducing the pressure on the natural environment. We know that the green belt causes house building to leapfrog the green belt, so we see new developments being added on the outskirts of the green belt and people having to drive everywhere simply to go about their daily lives without use of public transport and similar infrastructure.

While there is probably scope to have either isolated parts of the green belt that do not make a contribution to urban containment, or for brownfield land that is in the green belt to be defined in a grey belt way, we think a strategic review of the green belt is probably a safer option from an environmental perspective but also probably more beneficial from an economic perspective as well.

Sophie O'Connell: On the point of transport and green-belt release, there needs to be a much stronger definition of what types of transport are sustainable transport and therefore should be included in that definition. We definitely do not want to be releasing green belt for road projects that are really costly, a bad return on investment for Government and bake in emissions, plus congestion, plus more siloed societies. We want public transport and, yes, there could be some clarity there on the definition of why and for what purpose it should be released rather than just broad transport. What is meant by sustainable transport?

Professor Scott: I am uncomfortable with the addition of grey belt. I do not see that it adds any value, and it causes the potential for ambiguity and confusion.

The point you made about the definition of "limited" is classic. It reflects that problem and also—going back to the hard roots—it is supposed to be

in exceptional circumstances. The question for me is: when does exceptional become almost commonplace? "Exceptional" to me is pretty rare, but we are almost talking about green-belt release being pretty common now. That seems to be corrupting one element of the NPPF with that.

The only other point I would make relates to what Sophie was saying about transport links. Everybody does talk about the benefits of being close to stations, but we have a rail infrastructure capacity issue at the moment; you might well be near a railway station but there isn't the capacity there. Again, this is where strategic planning comes into play. We do not have the joined-up strategic planning for this, so we do need that good infrastructure planning. We have to be very mindful that these green areas are the lungs for many people who live in cities and, as covid illustrated, they are a bit more than just nice places to play. They are essential. They are the accessible spaces that, again, work by Matt Kirby found really important, and we neglect those at our peril.

Q15 **Olivia Blake:** I would like to focus a little more on biodiversity and habitat protections. Do you think the proposed changes to the NPPF sufficiently consider biodiversity and habitat protection?

Anthony Breach: Coming back to the NPPF changes being relatively light in the grand scheme of things, winding the clock back to before the previous Government changed it at the end of the last year, I have not seen anything that raises any alarms with me about habitats or biodiversity being particularly either under threat or enhanced by the changes that the Government have brought in.

Sophie O'Connell: To talk a bit about biodiversity net gain, we have seen that brought in through the Environment Act at a 10% minimum, but in practice we are seeing it as more of a ceiling than a floor. There is some unhelpful guidance around that that would need clarifying, and we think that should be rapidly reviewed. It needs to be brought in quickly for NSIPs, as that has not been introduced as yet. We are also seeing exemptions from biodiversity net gain actively being sought through certain projects. I can provide a bit more detail in writing on that. Similar to what Anthony said, the NPPF has tinkered around the edges. It has not created big changes unless we are looking at potential development on the green belt and the impact that that would have on certain sites.

Professor Scott: For me, the real big surprise in the NPPF consultation was that there were no changes in chapter 15 on conserving the natural environment. While biodiversity net gain has come in and that is referenced, we also have local nature recovery strategies, a natural capital approach that has been used by DEFRA—a whole raft of policy mechanisms—but the NPPF has nothing to say on those. I found that strange because in my head there is a real need to put strong wording around the duty around local nature recovery strategies, otherwise they could become paper tigers.

Given the point that I made previously, not just in this NPPF but in the previous NPPF and in planning policy more generally for the environment, the weak policy wording, except for the statutory protected sites, has led to the trumping of the wider nature network by economic interests, so there is a real problem in my head about needing to improve the policy wording in response.

In our work, we have seen huge variability across the country in the policies that do exist in plans. At the end of the day, the NPPF needs to have a much stronger hit. For biodiversity net gain, the key issue for me is that there is a risk that the mitigation hierarchy is being bypassed, so we are moving very quickly to the compensation, restore and offset, and the avoid and minimise aspects of the mitigation hierarchy have not really been hit. Again, that goes to the fact that it has not been referenced.

Obviously, there is a small-sites issue, but the single biggest issue for me is monitoring and enforcement. While that is not a BNG issue alone, it is an issue that really worries me. We are getting these very big schemes being developed with lots of ambitious gains, but who is monitoring and enforcing against those? At what stage are they ever going to deliver, and how are we building that into the system? I think the resources needed for that have been underestimated.

The last point I would make is that, with the number of offsite units being developed, there is a real risk—this goes back to my environmental justice issue—that we will have development, and in those areas of development we will have very limited green infrastructure and biodiversity gain, because it is all going to be done off site. I know at the moment DEFRA's favoured position is on site, but there is a real risk that that is going to happen. That is something that really needs strong protection, but better policy wording from the top is vital for the nature conservation protections we need.

Q16 **Olivia Blake:** Do you think there is a conflict at the moment between the concept of biodiversity net gain and the nature potential of any land, thinking about grey belt? Do you think that is an issue or not?

Professor Scott: Well, a piece of land can have significant environmental value and deliver significant environmental benefits. First and foremost, biodiversity has to be key, but the wider environmental net gains are also very important to consider. The danger as I see it—and it has also been recognised by the Royal Town Planning Institute—is that the concept of biodiversity net gain is being considered in a silo, environmental net gain is considered in a silo and the climate benefits are considered in another silo, so we are getting silos within silos in the environmental field. To my mind that is a big issue.

That can be reflected in the portals where the information is stored. In that sense, we do not realise the multiple benefits that we can achieve. If trade-offs are needed, biodiversity needs to take priority. There has been a lot of knocking of biodiversity net gain. I am a great fan of adaptive

management and the cock-up theory: if things are not working, you do not try to sweep it under the carpet; you learn from those lessons. It will take a while. It is a world first type of issue. There are teething troubles. We need to make sure that it is joined up and not done in its own silo.

Anthony Breach: Biodiversity net gain is very new. We have not at Centre for Cities done a fully developed research programme looking into this area, partly as a result of that. However, we hear from both developers and local authorities that it is turning out to be exceptionally expensive on the ground and in particular for developments that would otherwise enhance the environmental benefits of cities.

You are perhaps aware that biodiversity net gain is turning out to be easiest to achieve on large sites and allocations that the current planning system already does well—new housing estates on the periphery of existing settlements or deep into the countryside. It is struggling with brownfield sites and small sites. We see estimates from Lichfields, an esteemed planning consultancy, that the cost of buying the units is three times the cost of the actual development. The actual construction costs are X; the biodiversity net gain cost is three times all the bricks, all the labour, all the legal, all the marketing and so on, because it is so expensive as a concept to deliver in urban areas.

From a conceptual point of view, that suggests limiting biodiversity net gain to those site allocations in local plans; that may be one possible alternative to the current system. Also, though, in principle, if biodiversity net gain has been introduced to ameliorate or reverse nature degradation that has already taken place in areas, it has been structured as a tax on new development and a tax on, essentially, victims of the housing crisis—young people are asked to pay to fix the damage already caused by previous nature degradation. That points to, instead, if we are serious about local nature recovery, local authorities having in-house ecologists and reforms of local taxation so that they have the resources and the mandate to do that, working with new development, working with existing land, working with communities to improve and protect nature across a jurisdiction rather than putting all the pain on new development.

Chair: I will invite Martin Rhodes to come in and then, Ms O'Connell, you can maybe respond to that and also Martin's question.

Q17 **Martin Rhodes:** Thinking about the questions around green belts and biodiversity, how could the revised framework ensure that development on released green belt contributes meaningfully to environmental and social objectives within the planning system?

Sophie O'Connell: I will reply to Anthony's comment on the biodiversity net gain point first. This is a new type of scheme that has been brought in and so, like you said, there will be teething issues, but it is not something to be scrapped. We should not throw around the word that it is a tax on young people and people who are victims of the housing crisis. I am under 30. I am not a homeowner because I cannot afford it. Call me a victim of the housing crisis, but I would love to have a thriving, natural

world for my future and for my potential children's future and my peers. It is not a nice-to-have. It is necessary for the survival of the human race and to countering climate change. It is important that we do not scrap it at the first hurdle and that we push through and, like Alister said, find some workarounds if there are issues.

Chair: Thank you for that. Can you also respond to Martin's question about the framework ensuring development on released green belt contributes meaningfully to the environmental and social objectives?

Sophie O'Connell: Yes. As I said earlier, we are not necessarily in favour of releasing the green belt for additional housing, but where it is released, we strongly propose that it should be released for affordable and social housing and for that to be prioritised. We would like to see the numbers on that.

Also, other social and health impacts could be brought in around, like I said, public transport access and making sure that these communities are walkable and wheelable to amenities, economic opportunities, doctors' surgeries, and so on. That has a strong social impact on society and would make us a healthier population, particularly as the Government want to focus on prevention of poor health and building an NHS fit for the future. We should look at prevention. When people are moving house is a good opportunity to interject and to change people's lifestyles and behaviours, particularly around transport use.

Professor Scott: Maybe not just fixing to the green belt per se, because here I argue that green infrastructure is a useful delivery mechanism that can be used to deliver those wider environmental and social objectives. That goes back to the principle of multifunctionality. It is important that we think about green and blue infrastructure in that way and we do not fix purely on the green belt. Yes, it is a significant area of land, but it is not where a lot of people live and there are green spaces there. To me, those environmental and social objectives are better met through an integrating mechanism.

It is interesting in Wales. They use the green infrastructure assessment as a bridge to unite the natural and the built environment, and that cuts across multiple sections of the planning framework, "Planning Policy Wales". We do not have that in England. In England, we have it siloed; a lot of the green infrastructure and the environment is in chapter 15 and nothing else. If we could properly deliver that multifunctional green infrastructure, we could try to address those health and wellbeing issues, and the benefits to health of green infrastructure in terms of prevention.

Many studies show its value. Natural England's green infrastructure framework helps support that. Building with Nature, which is the first UK benchmark for measuring quality green infrastructure, deals with environmental and social objectives through its 12 standards. I should declare that I was chair of the Building with Nature standards group, so I might be championing something that I worked with, but these are

important tools and mechanisms, as is the greening factor, to help build these wider social and environmental objectives.

Anthony Breach: You have heard a few of my ideas on this already: the strategic release of green belt, building by train stations, maybe keeping BNG, and getting ecologists to work on green-belt release. However, as a framework, the overarching principle that should be guiding that is using green belt, which is designed to prevent urban growth, by going with the grain of urban economics and allowing green-belt release to ensure that new housing provides as much benefit to the environmental benefits of cities and urban areas.

Q18 **Martin Rhodes:** Thank you. Should we look at additional support for local authorities to create and maintain urban green spaces more generally? We have been concentrating on green belt, but I am asking you to think about urban green spaces more generally.

Sophie O'Connell: To echo what was said earlier about support for local authorities in terms of resources for planners and ecological expertise, that is really important. We will not know how to maintain and support pockets of green and blue infrastructure if we do not have that expertise. There can also be an improved system for data sharing among local authorities so that they can share best practice and learnings.

We also need to think about the resilience of our green spaces to future climate shocks. We know that with current projections, we are on track for a 3° increase in warming by the end of the century. If we plant native British trees, they probably will not withstand the heat and flooding that are consequences of that.

However, there are also lots of opportunities for bringing in more green spaces and looking at green roofs on houses. Green Alliance did some work a couple of years ago looking at Birmingham City Council and its 10,000 redundant parking spaces that were free and it did not charge any revenue from, replacing those with trees and looking at the maintenance costs of that. It would not have taken any revenue from the local council.

Anthony Breach: In principle, yes. However, when you look at local government as a system, we know there is this huge problem with the huge statutory duties they are currently dealing with and also, conversely, a problem where central Government impose burdens on local authorities. Individualised, tiny pots of money go to local councils and it is all allocated and spent in a very inefficient way and also not respecting principles of local self-government and prioritisation.

We know that voters really care about their local environment and local green spaces. If local government was reformed more broadly—and we have done a programme of work around this that made it more fiscally autonomous and fixed some of the structural problems it is currently facing—we could be quite confident that reformed local authorities would prioritise urban green spaces for improved amenity.

Chair: Thank you very much. Barry Gardiner has a specific question for

Professor Scott.

Q19 **Barry Gardiner:** Professor Scott, you spoke about how the environment is siloed into chapter 15, in effect. This Committee is in the business of preparing a report and making recommendations to the Government. What recommendations would you like to see in that report that could overcome that siloing and ghettoisation of the environment? Part of what Mr Breach has been arguing is that the environment underpins every sector: the economy, social—everything depends on the environment. But what recommendations can we make that would help to achieve that in the NPPF?

Professor Scott: Thank you for that question. At the moment, I see one big problem. MHCLG is seen to be responsible for the NPPF. DEFRA is then responsible for the stuff that deals with nature. That White Paper and the environmental improvement plan that every Government Department signed up to in theory does what you are talking about. However, in practice, when you look at the NPPF, it does not incorporate those elements.

My starting point is that we need somebody—apologies if I go into a metaphor here—to conduct this built and natural environment orchestra. If you can imagine an orchestra, we have all these different sections blowing their own tunes and making rather discordant music. I am struggling to think who the conductor could be. We do have one in theory and that is the land use strategy, but, again, that sits in DEFRA's remit. To me, that land use strategy should work right across all the different Government Departments. It should not be top-down. Lord Cameron as chair of that committee was clear that this must not be a top-down imposition. The conductor has to be a conductor of a jazz orchestra. You have the principles, but then everybody can play the music that works collectively together. I am not sure that sits very well in recommendation context—

Barry Gardiner: I was just beginning to think that.

Professor Scott: But in reality—it goes back to the Dasgupta thing—we do not need to think outside the box—

Barry Gardiner: You are just pressing my soft spots now.

Professor Scott: I am sorry. But we need to punch the edges of the box to get that connection. I always liken myself to an interdisciplinary champion. I do not sit comfortably in a geography—well, I sit in a geography department because it is a multidisciplinary area but, as an interdisciplinary person, I think we need more people that are willing to build bridges across them rather than perpetuate the silos. It is a culture change from the top and it needs to work down.

If you want to see it in practice, in places like the South Downs National Park planners embrace a lot of this thinking. They come from London boroughs. They come in and the culture is not down with one champion; it permeates the whole team. I have worked in the South Downs over

several years and I have seen that culture work through the whole organisation. The culture change needs to happen. I have seen it in Wales and parts of Scotland.

Barry Gardiner: I promised the Chair a short question, but you have given me a long answer. I am sorry, Chair.

Chair: I didn't doubt it for a minute, Barry. Julia Buckley, please.

Q20 **Julia Buckley:** Coming back to some of the more pragmatic tools that we have at our disposal, how effective are the current environmental impact assessment requirements in the NPPF at identifying and mitigating potential environmental harms from proposed developments?

Anthony Breach: We have not looked at this in our research. I know there was growing concern among parts of the urban economics planning reform community about some of the examples in which environmental impact assessments have been used—for example, the bat tunnel relating to High Speed 2—but it is not an area we have developed thought on yet.

Sophie O'Connell: We think that they have been effective in ensuring that site-specific impacts on certain species and habitats have been protected and identified. There is also good integration with other policy tools like habitat regulations assessments.

Environmental NGOs had some concern when the proposal to change environmental impact assessments to environmental outcome reports was proposed because that would give the Government significant discretion as to the scope of those reports and whether they would be undertaken. An EIA is a stronger mechanism than that.

We would not suggest further changes to the planning system, because that creates more delays. We want a consistent system so that planners and people throughout the system know how it works, particularly at a time when we are trying to speed up the process.

Q21 **Julia Buckley:** I am interested to hear that you feel that is stronger than the outcome report. Do you want to suggest any other improvements? You sound positive about them, but this is your moment if you want to raise any suggestions to improve them in any other way.

Sophie O'Connell: There could definitely be improvement to data sharing among environmental impact assessments. That would speed up processes for future applications.

Julia Buckley: Making them publicly available earlier?

Sophie O'Connell: Yes, particularly with neighbouring areas, I guess, or where similar habitats and species are concerned. That is our key point on how to improve them.

Professor Scott: I will be short this time. On EIAs, I do not have many comments, and I do not have much research to build on, but my main concern is quantity over quality. At the moment all of the EIAs are far too

long and they are impenetrable to understand. The non-technical summaries are okay, but they need to be streamlined.

We need more focus on sustainability assessments, because they will influence the development plans. At the moment they are perceived as a hindrance and an obstacle, yet to me, if they used correctly, they can be an effective planning tool. That is where I would like to see the sustainability assessments bring in some of the SDG material and the material on equity to improve local plans, and then that filters down to the EIAs anyway.

The only other point, I suppose, is that they are still developer-led and there is still that potential problem of the developers paying for the right result rather than for, again, the mitigation hierarchy result.

Q22 **Julia Buckley:** Interesting. Do you have a view about the environmental outcome report and whether that was preferable, or—

Professor Scott: I agree with the point that Sophie made strongly.

Q23 **Julia Buckley:** Thank you. We were going to come back to you about the presumption of sustainable development. I know you have spoken to it at great length, Professor Scott, but do either of the other two witnesses have any views on whether that is currently fit for purpose in the NPPF?

Sophie O'Connell: I have not worked on that, sorry.

Anthony Breach: The changes that have been brought forward relating to increased primacy of land supply within sustainable development are positive and we support them. A lot of environmental damage and nature damage that has been occurring across the country is not particularly related to development that has occurred. If development was broadly more within urban areas, which would require even bigger planning reforms than the NPPF, but also on the immediate outskirts of urban areas allowing more people to access urban benefits, you could easily enhance nature nationally and locally while also making housing more affordable.

Q24 **Sarah Gibson:** I have a quick curveball before you all go. The reviews talked about new towns, and 10 or 15 years ago we talked about new villages, which of course quite often would be in the green belt. Do you have any quick thoughts on whether you consider the options for new towns—or new villages, perhaps more appropriately—viable within the reforms that we have had?

Anthony Breach: We have a report on new towns coming out in December—keep an eye out for that. Our overarching reflection is that new towns historically have provided only about 5% of house building at their peak and so they will not make a massive difference. When they are built, they should primarily be built in the greater south-east because that is where housing demand is highest. To the extent that they have environmental benefits, they have to be partly in the green belt and linked into urban economies. The risk is that they are built where it is

easiest to build new towns, which are not necessarily the right economic or the right environmental locations to put new towns.

Sophie O'Connell: Quickly going back to the place-based point that was made at the start of the session, the location of those needs to be prioritised based on public transport and active travel infrastructure or where that could be brought in most easily and quickly. On villages, it seems strange to build much smaller developments rather than bigger ones in terms of transport connectivity and tackling the housing crisis. Also, affordable and social housing should be prioritised for those areas if we are to address the housing crisis.

Professor Scott: It needs to fit into our broader strategic vision. We cannot just pluck these things out; they need to sit within an overall housing development strategy for the area that is built with the consultation approach and partnership approach that I talked about from the outset.

Chair: Thank you so much to our opening panel of this parliamentary term. We appreciate the excellent evidence that you have all provided. We will bring this first session to a close and invite the second panel in. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Richard Wright, Dr Hugh Ellis and Sam Stafford.

Q25 **Chair:** I invite the three panellists, starting with Dr Ellis, to introduce themselves and then we will get into the questions.

Dr Ellis: Hello. I am Dr Hugh Ellis and I am director of policy at the Town and Country Planning Association.

Councillor Wright: Good afternoon. I am Councillor Richard Wright and I am the DCN spokesman on planning and growth and leader of North Kesteven District Council in sunny Lincolnshire.

Sam Stafford: Hello from West Yorkshire. My name is Sam Stafford. I am a chartered town planner and I am the planning director at the Home Builders Federation.

Q26 **Chair:** Excellent. The Government are proposing significant increases in house building. What needs to change for the UK to achieve those increases, and can they be achieved without weakening environmental protection?

Councillor Wright: One of the first things is asking whether it can be done, when we need to look at the development industry itself and the skills and personnel available. It is clear to most of us from the evidence we get from developers that that is not the case. Whether they can build the numbers of permissions that are suggested I doubt very much.

We already have a situation where we have somewhere in the region of 1.1 million unbuilt permissions that there does not seem to be a rush to build out. I can give you a distinct calculation on that. In my district, since 2016, we have permitted 11,500 and just short of 5,500 have been built out. That is either a control of the build-out rate or there are not the skills there to build at speed. I cannot see that that will change in the near future.

Q27 **Chair:** Do you believe it is mainly because of skills that those permissions have not been built out?

Councillor Wright: At times we are told that. It is a mix. Are the skills there? What would that do to the house prices if they were built at speed because the skills were there? Like most of us in the in the planning system, I have been on a planning committee for 17 years and I suggest that it is more to do with control of the build-out rate to maintain prices than it is to do with the skills.

Sam Stafford: The HBF very much welcomes the changes to the standard method. Fundamentally, if the country is to build 300,000 homes a year, it needs to plan for 300,000 homes a year. The current standard method adds up to 305,000, but when you take off the arbitrary cities uplifts you get to about 230,000 and we are building 230,000 now. Other factors are at play, of course, macroeconomic conditions notwithstanding, but as a country we need to plan for 300,000. They need to be plan-led and so putting the standard method on a stock basis at 370,000 is a starting point for doing that. Then, with the certainty and security of land coming forward, businesses can plan accordingly.

I am more than happy to dive into the unbuilt planning permission and market absorption rate phenomenon in more detail, but I fancy that is a separate question.

Q28 **Chair:** Yes. In terms of whether they can be achieved without removing environmental protections, are you confident that that can be achieved within the planning framework as it has been suggested?

Sam Stafford: I heard the previous session. It was pointed out that there are no changes fundamentally to the definition of sustainable development in the NPPF. There are no proposed changes to chapter 15 of the NPPF. The Environment Act environmental impact assessments and habitat regulations assessments are embedded in law and unchallengeable. So I think a legitimate answer to that question would be yes.

Dr Ellis: The core issue is that you can meet this target only by a radical change to how we develop, and that radical change has to include a new approach to environmental standards, particularly standards on health and wellbeing, because what we are building now is not fit for purpose. It is not fit for purpose in resilience terms. It is certainly not fit for purpose in terms of carbon.

It is interesting to me as a planner, which is not the most popular of professions at the moment, that the gravest mistake in public policy this nation has made over the last 40 years of planning reform was to fixate on consents and not to focus on delivery. The problem is delivery. The private sector operates on profit maximisation. That is lawfully what it is meant to do and it cannot question that or be blamed for it. That is a reality. However, according to Government statistics, every year for the last 10 years we have consented just over 90,000 more consents for housing in this country than have got built. The issue has always been that, if you consent land, the multiple problems necessary to deliver it require muscular government, local and national, to do that.

The thing I am really terrified about is that these housing targets as set—and I do not agree that they should be based on a percentage uplift of existing stock. That is a category error. You cannot separate housing forecasting from demographics. It is extraordinarily dangerous to do so, because the planning system starts to diverge from what people need, particularly with the complexity of an ageing population, which is one of our biggest challenges. There has to be wholesale change and the point here is that the NPPF was not fit for purpose and has not been for 15 years, so minor changes to it now will not create the level of change in delivery that we need.

Q29 **Chair:** Are you concerned that the correct balance between the viability of developments, getting those permissions completed, and the ability of local authorities to represent their local communities will be correct with these targets and this planning framework?

Dr Ellis: As a very pro-housing organisation, we are caught with the problem that this is complex, but you cannot build in this country without consent. The political cost of trying to do that has always failed in planning reform. The principal failure of all planning reform in the last 40 years has been to forget that people have a vote and that people care about their local environment. A tremendous amount of talk at the moment is about command and control on housing delivery targets. It is not a respectful way to start a conversation with communities.

My more positive view would be: give communities the opportunity and they will meet their housing needs and take responsibility on the whole. Where they will not, the Government may in the end have to intervene, but at the moment no part of the NPPF deals with co-operative housing, co-operative energy, community-led housing, nor any mention of the need to deal with the asymmetry in the planning system where most communities—not all but most—have little say, understanding or involvement in the decisions that shape their lives.

Q30 **Chair:** Councillor Wright, you are a council leader. Do you share those concerns?

Councillor Wright: I do share them. It is to different levels across the country. My authority is part of the central Lincolnshire local plan, which went through not only local plan stage but revision last year. That is

three authorities working together, which gives us a little bit more freedom. As we know, the environment does not stop on a local authority line and neither does employment or any other factor.

Simply imposing targets of this nature does not achieve anything. The number of iterations I have now seen of the NPPF and the NPPG—they get inflicted on us and then occasionally we get asked to answer a few questions around the edges of a few parts of the policy where they are looking for an answer that fits Government policy rather than fits our residents. That is simply not good enough. We have to deal month by month with the implications of the NPPF, trying to explain to residents what we can and cannot do legally.

The local authorities are not there to stop development. Most of them want to see sustainable, good development that benefits their communities, and not in the year that it is granted but for the next 10, 20, 30 or 40 years that it will at least exist for in some form. The current system is not fit for purpose. Inflicting an NPPF and then asking us questions at the last minute, rather than asking us right from the outset what we would we see in an NPPF—that would be the better way of doing things.

Q31 **Chair:** As local representatives, we all know that major housing applications come with considerable public concern locally. The Government are clearly of the view that too many of these have been blocked. As a council leader, is your ability to represent your constituents undermined by this? Do you recognise that criticism from the Government and others that sometimes local authorities are so in hock to voters that they prevent the growth that we need?

Councillor Wright: We are hit from all sides. The residents think we are responsible when, actually, we enact policy. If you look at the stats, they show that nine out of 10 applications are passed. Always the high-profile ones get the attention. The thousands of applications that come in and are dealt with professionally and passed or rejected never make the headlines. It is always the ones that are contentious. Unfortunately, sections of our communities will always appeal against something. They will always launch a protest group as soon as we suggest change to anything. However, if you can communicate with those people, you can work it through.

Unfortunately, we are also living in a time of permissions by appeal. The first time that you turn something down legitimately, you know the appeal has already been written and is ready to be submitted.

Q32 **Chair:** If we did not have contentious applications, we would not need planning committees, would we, but of course that is right. Mr Stafford, can I invite you to come in? You have heard a fairly gloomy view from our other two panellists. What is your view on the extent to which local authority planning departments are supportive of the need for this development and the extent to which they will be unempowered by it?

Sam Stafford: I read this morning that only 20% of local authorities have adopted a plan in the last five years, which is pretty telling and a pretty damning indictment of what is purported to be a plan-led system. The new Government have struck upon the right diagnosis as to why local plan coverage is so poor and has been getting poorer over the past few years. That has led to interminable questions around the number of homes authorities should plan to build, and how unmet need is distributed from the larger cities. The new Government have made moves in the NPPF consultation to try to deal with all three of those and stated an explicit commitment to universal strategic planning coverage by the end of the Parliament, which is a laudable commitment and one that most people in the profession and in the sector will hope that they succeed with.

However, the pressure that local authorities have been under, not just from a financial point of view but with what one of the previous contributors called the "pickling" of the planning system with the revocation of the RSSs without any expression of national spatial priorities—and I believe I am right in saying that England is unique among Western liberal democracies in not having a spatial plan. Outwith that and any regional tier of planning to knit together land use priorities at a regional level, local authorities are having to make decisions not just of local significance but of national and regional significance while dealing with the implications of a localism agenda that told them that they were in control over absolutely everything. That is the root of many of the ills and dysfunctions of the planning system, and hopefully we will be in a better place in five years' time.

Q33 **Chair:** Finally from me, Councillor Wright, what suggestions would you make for measures to promote growth in housing construction while minimising the pressures on land supply?

Councillor Wright: First, before we build any more new homes—we are talking about the environment in this Committee today as well—we have issues already in the built form that we have. What do we do with the land surrounding some of our built communities, especially with regard to flood mitigation and other issues affecting us? That has to be taken into consideration. I live in an area where we have 80 different communities all surrounded by arable land or land of some kind. That causes part of the problem now with regard to the existing houses. On top of that, we have to look at how we free up some of that land sustainably and in a way that is not detrimental to existing or new development to allow that to be acceptable.

The local plan process is a good way of doing that. I would like to add to the figures you just quoted that 54% of all district councils have a plan in place. Bear in mind that district councils are responsible for most of the planning decisions. A further 23% are working on one that was last enacted between 2015 and 2019, but of course a lot of those local plans now, if they are in the process of being made, are stuck at regulation 18 stage. Because of the proposed increase in numbers, they cannot go any further. Therefore the plans that would provide some of this protection

and free up land supply through the local plan process cannot progress until we have sorted out the uplift in numbers and what that does to their five-year land supply.

Q34 **Chair:** That is recent, whereas this lack of plans being in place has been going on for years, in fairness.

Councillor Wright: The position is different across the country. In some areas it is clearly laid out where that land is, but in other areas it has been in dispute for so long. Districts and all local authorities are bound by their authority lines. Therefore, you can have some very contained local authorities that simply do not have the land available. It is an issue that has varying degrees of difficulty.

Q35 **Chair:** It does weaken the argument that local authorities are being undermined when they do not have local plans in place in the first place, doesn't it?

Councillor Wright: It only weakens it if there is a real reason for that. There are various reasons why local plans are not in place. If people want to hang on to land and not bring it forward, how do you prove a five-year land supply? You can do this only through a call for land. If you put the call for land out and it is not responded to, there could be people who hang on to the land knowing full well that not bringing it forward leaves the local authority exposed on its five-year land supply. Basically, it is a builder's charter.

Q36 **Barry Gardiner:** I will pick straight up on that. Land banking is clearly a problem. Cut the profit from the uplift that you get from agricultural to developed land and you would undermine how developers game the system at the moment, would you not?

Councillor Wright: You would, and it is something we put forward through the NPPF responses. I have actually run a roundtable on the whole issue of—

Q37 **Barry Gardiner:** Is it a recommendation that you wish this Committee would make?

Councillor Wright: If the Committee could look at hope value uplift or anything of that kind, yes, it would be useful.

Q38 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you for that. Dr Ellis, your association was asked by the Committee on Climate Change to do a piece of research with the CSE and you came back and said that most local plans are not fit for purpose when considering carbon emissions. You said that many of the local plans that are in production are not even considering mitigation and adaptation measures. How do we remedy that?

Dr Ellis: The Department two years ago said it was considering a comprehensive approach for assessing the carbon in local plans. We have recommended how that can be achieved. It is not conceptually that complicated. The Committee on Climate Change agrees with that. Nothing in the NPPF consultation would implement that.

Our conversations with the Department have not been unfriendly about it, but it is absolutely critical because unless you get a carbon-literate local plan-making decisions within the sixth carbon budget, there is no way that this nation will deliver on the Prime Minister's laudable recent announcement on reducing carbon emissions. That is one of the great challenges. You have to decouple growth from its environmental and carbon impacts and that decoupling is technically perfectly possible. I was in Essex where authorities are doing it. The problem is that national policy thwarts the innovation of those local authorities trying to deliver, for example, the passive house standard or equivalent.

The Government are still pushing forward with future homes standards 1 and 2, which have a marginal increase in carbon performance for housing and are based entirely on a proposition about grid decarbonisation. That locks the people who live in those houses into fuel poverty because it is not a fabric-first approach.

The point here, I suppose, is that the Government could do multiple things and pull multiple levers, and of course could have done in 2016 when zero carbon was lying on the table. They have not done that because of an idea that the industry is not capable of innovating to build to sufficient standard. I am meeting loads of small and medium-sized developers that will build to that standard if they are given a fair regulatory playing field. That is absolutely what we need.

Q39 **Barry Gardiner:** You were in the room when I was speaking with the witness from Green Alliance earlier. We talked about document Z and the whole business of assessment of whole-life carbon emissions and embedded carbon in construction. Would you like to see that taken forward and put front and centre in our approach to this?

Dr Ellis: It has to be. Otherwise, you cannot solve the paradox that we need the growth and we need the homes. Unless you effect that decoupling, all that we will have is a busted carbon budget, which as a planet we cannot afford.

The NPPF is critically unprepared for climate change in relation to heat, as you have heard. It is also critically unprepared in relation to flood risk. You talk about 1.9 metres by 2080 and the new surface water flood maps. There is pressure all the time not to implement schedule 3 and to make sure that surface water flooding is not subject to the sequential test in planning. The Department has been under pressure to increase the stringency of and the accuracy of all those tests.

Q40 **Barry Gardiner:** That was the point of my questions earlier about the Sendai framework and disaster risk reduction. Would you like to see this Committee making recommendations on those things in its final report?

Dr Ellis: It is vital economically and environmentally, because lenders are beginning not to lend. The insurance compact applies only to homes built after 2009, 25% of all the flood resilience projects in this country got cancelled last year, and 80,000 homes that would have been

protected by flood defence projects now will not be. The list of the communities affected is dramatic.

You cannot magic a world in which 1.5 million homes are built until you have solved the infrastructure problems vital for their future resilience. There is no magic way of doing that. This is a sequencing issue. Yes, we need the homes, but do not invent an undeliverable target until you have the mechanisms and the standards necessary to deliver them sustainably.

Q41 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you very much. Councillor Wright, I would like to come back to you and perhaps also to Mr Stafford to talk about the resources that local authorities have, particularly if you look at what the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management has said about the availability of ecologists in planning departments. Its latest report said that only one in three planning departments has a full-time qualified ecologist as part of the team. What are those resource constraints and those skills constraints? What do the Government need? What should we recommend to make sure that we can meet that need, which will only grow with 1.5 million more homes?

Councillor Wright: It is about having those trained people available in a world where competition is great and people will go wherever the money is, basically. Across central Lincolnshire, which covers roughly 900 square miles, we have one ecologist, and we are pretty lucky that we have that, because some local authorities struggle to get any at all. Quite often it is about buying in that advice on a consultancy level. We employ one. We would like to employ far more than that because of the amount of work that is coming downstream not just on the permissions but on the BNG side. The amount of work that is generated is phenomenal.

Q42 **Barry Gardiner:** Mr Stafford, do local authorities have the regulatory and legal powers that they need to ensure compliance?

Sam Stafford: If the NPPF is to be reformed and the Government are going to get anywhere near building 1.5 million homes within the Parliament, there will need to be a significant uptick in planning applications next year and they will need to be determined in short order. The trend has been for applications to take to take longer. That is a consequence of local authority resourcing but it is also a consequence of the increasing role of the statutory consultee in the planning process as planning has been grappling with more and more technical considerations—carbon and the drive for net zero is a more recent one but flooding and ecology and the role of the statutory consultees in infrastructure provision and so on have become more important.

Q43 **Barry Gardiner:** Let me put this back to Councillor Wright. What I was pushing for was more something about the regulatory powers that local authorities have and whether you feel that you require further powers to enforce the environmental protections properly when the NPPF comes in.

Councillor Wright: The problem starts with the NPPF. What are we going to enforce? It is a missed opportunity. It does not cover an awful

lot of what we would probably look for. It is not so much the gift of powers; it is what that will do to us as local authorities. For instance, if you want the power over enforcement of BNG-accredited land, for instance, that you will be responsible for monitoring and enforcing for 30 years, that considerable resource is not accounted for in the NPPF or in any—

Q44 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you. Finally, Dr Ellis, am I right in interpreting your earlier remarks that basically we should start with the national strategic spatial plan and work up from there—so working in one direction from the national strategic plan, and in the other from locally based plans coming up to meet it?

Dr Ellis: That would be the ideal. It is how many other successful European nations do it. Spatially, we work, in effect, without the key data at the moment. You can have that structure of planning, but one thing is missing, which is that this country does not have a sustainable development strategy and has not had one since 2005. Where is the vision behind that strategy?

Barry Gardiner: Could you perhaps write to the Committee with the good examples where this is done well in other jurisdictions and with the recommendations that you would like to see us make to implement that?

Q45 **Chris Hinchliff:** We have heard quite a lot about the need to accelerate the planning process, but given that there are environmental limits on growth, as we come up against those, is it inevitable that planning applications will come into conflict with more and more environmental regulations and therefore that applications will be slower?

Dr Ellis: Yes, there is that conflict. The conflict is not inevitable, but you would have to build to an exponentially better standard than the standard we build to at the moment.

Can I say in support of this idea that people are not a source of delay? That is called democracy. Democracy is not delay, unless I am living in the wrong country. In 2023-24, the percentage of major applications decided within 13 weeks or an agreed timescale was 90%. I have spent too many years on planning reform and I know the private sector has frustrations, which are perfectly legitimate. However, the idea that this is all planning's fault or that the system does not consent enough property and land or that there is a source of chronic delay in the system—people get 21 days to comment on a planning application. They get two periods of six weeks on a local plan. That is all. The issue is building trust and consensus and having a proper conversation about our future. That is called democracy and that takes time.

Chair: Mr Stafford, could I ask you respond to that question from Chris Hinchliff?

Sam Stafford: In response to Hugh's point, yes, 90% of major applications are determined within 13 weeks or agreed timeframes, but when you take out the extensions of time, which the former Secretary of

State sought to shine the light on around 12 months ago, that figure drops to, I think, 19%. HBF members wait, typically, a year to get planning permission, which is a fundamental drag anchor on growth ambitions, especially for smaller members.

Planning is complex. It is beholden on a range and variety of actors. You heard in the first session about the siloed mentality around policy formulation. Well, there is a siloed mentality around development management as well, and I respectfully contend that that needs rethinking in the consenting regime.

Q46 **Cameron Thomas:** I will pitch this question first to Councillor Wright, and then Dr Ellis and Mr Stafford might like to add their thoughts. The proposed changes to the green belt might lead to an increased planning burden for local authorities. What resources would those authorities need to effectively implement the grey belt and changes to the green belt?

Councillor Wright: To start with, we need people who can understand the changes, especially with the definitions that are applied at the moment to grey and green. Straightaway, there is an issue of trying to get to grips with that to work out what it is and to avoid some of the pitfalls that are possible, as you heard in the first session, with regard to the definition and how that could possibly be abused, especially with regard to grey belt and the degradation. There will be that monitoring. In an awful lot of this country, unfortunately, our residents do not understand the difference between green belt and greenfield, but where there is proper green belt, there will have to be an even more thorough investigation of that to start with to make sure that it is documented correctly.

After that, it would just depend on the applications that came through but, as we know, most planning authorities at the moment say that they are understaffed and find difficulty in acquiring trained planners. I am afraid a Government announcement to say, "We will create so many", does not cover a time span. For a planner to become trained, to go through their degree and their masters, to get the experience and understand an area and the constraints and opportunities within that area takes a long time. This will not be a quick fix.

Dr Ellis: I only add on grey belt that the only group of people who seem overwhelmingly supportive are KCs and the legal profession because, in my experience of planning reform, if you do not get your definitions right, you end up with a great deal of legal argument.

On the wider issue about green belt, I recommend that the Committee looks in detail at green-belt designation, because it is not a monolith. Particularly in the north, green belt was designated around many industrial communities that were about to touch and it is a fragmented set of designations. You can spit across the green belt between Leeds and Bradford, as you can in Nottinghamshire between Nottingham and Derby. Between Dronfield and Chesterfield, we are getting close. It is hard to see

how you can do grey belt or big releases without compromising the essential quality of green belt.

That said, what really puzzles me about it all is that you can release green belt now through a local plan process, and it happens all the time. I do not understand why we needed to change it, because that process seems to work reasonably well. The bigger question about whether we have a green belt in this country should be a national conversation, to be honest.

Sam Stafford: I take issue with Hugh's claim that the process for allocating land is working perfectly well, because the average time it takes to adopt a local plan is seven years. If that is the average, I contend that in non-green-belt areas it might be three or four years and in green-belt areas it is closer to nine or 10 years. Grey belt is at root a recognition that the country's housing need, as was stated in a press release when it was announced, cannot be met on land entirely within the urban area and is a way of reframing in the public consciousness what green belt is and the need to build on it. Sites that make a limited contribution to the green belt can come forward ahead of those time-consuming local plan processes.

In specific answer to the question about local authority resources, once the language is tightened in the definition between the NPPF as consulted upon and the PPG as consulted upon, once those two things speak to each other a little better perhaps in the published version, the process of identifying grey belt will be relatively objective in so far as when its release can be justified. The subjectivity comes in defining what limited contribution means in so far as the five tests are concerned. Some further guidance or template from the Government on the process of undertaking a green-belt assessment and the judgments that get towards a significant, moderate or limited contribution pursuant to the five tests would make a meaningful difference to the transaction of the planning applications that it may precipitate. That is a point made in the HBF's consultation response.

Q47 **Cameron Thomas:** Thank you. The NPPF has proposed reforms to planning application fees equivalent to an uplift of about 40%. How should the money that accrues to local authorities from higher planning application fees be used? For example, would it be ringfenced for environmental improvement and climate change adaptation measures or reinvested into support for local authority planning departments?

Councillor Wright: For a long time, we have sought an uplift in planning fees to reflect the true cost of planning applications and the appeal process and everything that follows on from it. It is not always just the simple application.

There does not seem to be anything coming through from the NPPF that seems to link that uplift to environmental protections. It will be down to each local authority to make sure that it is ringfencing the money with regard to the planning process and all it entails. On how you would

decide whether a percentage of that could be used for matters other than the actual cost of applications, I would like to see the evidence of how much is expected to be made profit-wise, after you have paid for the planning process, to be spent on anything else. There is not a lot at the moment to suggest that there would be an excess of money in the system.

We need to employ more planners. We need to make sure that the planning process is as speedy as it can be while still being accurate.

Dr Ellis: By the time you have paid for the digital transformation that we are planning for and the restoration of the service, there will not be much headroom for anything else.

I will add one thing about a younger generation of planners. If you want to recruit new planners into the system, this nation has to make up its mind whether it wants to do democratic planning or not. There is so much anti-planning agenda. I meet a lot of young people who say, "Why on earth would I want to go into that?" If you are advocating planning as a highly skilled professional visionary and a profession that can talk to and reflect community aspirations, it is a high-skill enterprise and it will take time to put that resource and that ambition back.

Sam Stafford: Until not just development management but the entire planning service is put on a self-sustaining financial footing, talk of ringfencing is something of a red herring. Even when fees go up, authorities may still be able to reduce the money going into the planning service from central funds, if you see what I mean.

The consultation on the increase in planning application fees was 18 or so months ago. Even with that increase, there will be a £260 million gap between application fees and the cost of development management, notwithstanding the costs of plan making, enforcement and other planning services. There is clearly a need to think about this again, but not in a way that simply puts application fees up arbitrarily, for them to disappear into social care without any meaningful uplift in qualitative or quantitative outputs.

The NPPF consultation talks of locally set fees, which HBF is a little wary of. However, I am convinced of the need to think about that development management service in the round because the planning application itself is only one quarter of a process that needs to take in meaningful pre-application advice, the application itself, legal agreements, section 106 agreements and then the discharge of conditions. All four of those elements are fundamental to the issuing of a planning permission. The statutory consultees that I mentioned before need bringing into that process as well for qualitative and quantitative service improvement.

Yes, the conversation about fees and authority resources needs to continue, but it would be better reimagining it from first principles rather than adding extra percentages on every few years for them to disappear into other council priorities.

Q48 **Blake Stephenson:** I want to ask about the importance of delivering infrastructure to build sustainable communities. How confident are you that the infrastructure that is required to support 1.5 million houses will be delivered? Maybe I can start with Mr Stafford.

Sam Stafford: We probably need to split that infrastructure. Hugh talked about flood risk resilience. We probably need to talk about energy generation and energy transmission as well. We probably need to think about the big pieces of kit and national policy statements, which the Government have committed to review within 12 months. I would probably split that infrastructure in its broader sense into issues of national significance and then maybe the infrastructure that you might associate with an individual planning application, which is more of the bread and butter and day-to-day headaches that HBF members come across.

I am interested in Richard's thoughts on this, because the delivery of the infrastructure that both existing and new residents would want to see as part of any major development is fiendishly difficult, whether it is dealing with county highways or Highways England on A-road upgrades, junction improvements and that kind of that thing, or with Network Rail around new stations, or with school places and GP surgeries. The system is fragmented to everybody's discredit because it looks to the general population as though these things are not planned for coherently. To the unsophisticated eye, that is probably a fair assessment.

Blake Stephenson: It sounds like you are not terribly confident, but perhaps Councillor Wright has some observations.

Councillor Wright: If I could briefly come back to the previous question, it is disingenuous to suggest that money achieved for planning applications goes into general funds because, as Dr Ellis pointed out, it is the most democratic situation we ever sought out. I invite you all to North Kesteven to see how we get young planners. We actually grow our own. We are obviously doing something to attract younger people.

Am I confident the infrastructure will be delivered? The answer is no. It is as simple as that. Nothing has come forward in the revision of the NPPF to facilitate that. Again, from the point of view of the already built environment, we already have a lack of infrastructure with regard to flood resilience and our utilities. If we are looking to put a plan in place or suggest new housing coming forward, there is a disconnect between the local plan process and our utilities, for instance. Before we even talk about GP surgeries, schools and highways, there is the fact that we can have presentations from water companies about their business plan and we can tell them that we have a new local plan about to come into force and they still do not align because there is no duty to co-operate, which is desperately needed.

Developers in the main have the right to connect. Sometimes mitigating situations are put in place where the infrastructure might be requested on top of that, but you end up with an infrastructure system that is already

overburdened. Then we see in the news that water companies are admitting to sewage discharges on systems that new houses are allowed to connect to because they are not required to put that infrastructure in place to start with. That is before we even get on to road infrastructure, GP infrastructure—all the softer things. I am talking about the basic infrastructure. I have seen nothing that will change that situation.

Dr Ellis: I wish I was more confident. We organise infrastructure provision and housing in this country, on a European scale, fairly catastrophically poorly. Interestingly, we lack a master developer role and that is why the debate on the Government's interest in development corporations and new towns is interesting. Without that master developer role on a scheme level, it is difficult to generate the co-ordination that you need. It is possible, but it will take a great deal of time as a nation to get back to having a national spatial plan, which basically sets out what goes where.

It is interesting to hear the talk about where most of this growth will take place. The idea that it will follow the current economic trend into the south-east is interesting because that reinforces a paradox that will not go away environmentally, which is that the south-east has environmental limits that we are now banging our head on. In that sense, I am not confident.

But there is one other, much bigger issue, and it is much more difficult. The expectation is that the private sector will be the biggest generator through development values of infrastructure at a scheme level through section 106, and there are limited headroom values. Even with land value capture, which I am a great supporter of, it is not a magic money tree. The lessons of the new towns and other major infrastructure successes in this country suggest that the national Government have to back an investment programme in social rent or an investment structure to modernise our national grid. If the expectation is that the private sector solely will drive that in this framework, it is extremely unlikely.

What I am really worried about is development being allowed to proceed before the necessary infrastructure is delivered, because infrastructure first is probably the most golden rule of good town and country planning. In that sense, again, this will take time, but we do need master developers to build out at scale. Development corporations could be transformational there.

Q49 **Blake Stephenson:** Given that there is so little confidence that the infrastructure either will be delivered up front or will follow, what are the biggest environmental risks that we should be alive to?

Sam Stafford: Like I said before, the NPPF, as Anthony Breach said, is in the round reversing the December 2023 changes, and the Environment Act, the habitats regs and everything else is as-is. I am not sure I detect a net change in the three legs of Alister Scott's stool. Reversing those changes is positive, certainly from an HBF point of view. I hope that, having done so, the new Government can turn their attention to the

functionality, the cross-departmental working, the sense of purpose, horizontal working—or whatever the Whitehall wants to call it—to try to knit some of these disparate strands together in the spirit of that win-win letter that the two Secretaries of State sent to environmental NGOs in July.

Dr Ellis: As a one-sentence answer, climate mitigation. We will lose places on the east coast. All the professionals know that. We all know it from a flood risk point of view. The NPPF has staggeringly been blindsided by the climate crisis on adaptation. The money that we will need to defend ourselves has to be found. That means a reassessment. Investing in resilience is the best pound of infrastructure spend you will ever make for this country.

Councillor Wright: Split responsibilities between MHCLG and DEFRA were mentioned earlier. I will add the EA to that, because we have huge issues there. We can have an area that is planned out, but we know that flood mitigation is not taking place. We are told all the time that a huge amount of investment is needed, but it does not seem to be starting. In parts of Lincolnshire there were breaches from Babet and Henk and going into this winter they have not been repaired. We already have existing issues before we even start to add to the built form. The biggest single threat environmentally is flooding but there are so many others.

Chair: We can certainly sympathise with that in Chesterfield.

Q50 **Anna Gelderd:** I have questions about the economic emphasis of the NPPF and how that compares with environmental concerns. To what extent do the reforms effectively support economic growth while simultaneously protecting and improving the environment?

Dr Ellis: This is difficult. Let me give a practical example in the NPPF for us as an organisation. Unless I have missed a meeting, we are now back on a focus on GDP growth through housing as a macroeconomic instrument in this country. Let us leave aside whether massively expanding consents will result in a massive expansion in delivery. I am deeply sceptical about that. The challenge is a balancing measure about social value and the creation of different forms of economic value. You heard about that from a previous witness.

As a practical measure, what I am really disturbed about is that communities create enormous amounts of social value when they are enabled to do so. Let me give you an example. My town in Matlock cannot afford its flood defence and is not getting any. You can, as lots of communities have done, undertake slow-the-flow rewilding exercises on the floodplain. No local authority currently allocates land in their local plans to do that. If you want to give people an opportunity to have agency, which is critical for their mental health in a town like ours, where we have had two deaths from flooding in three years, part of the NPPF has to be about that social value—that people question.

I do not see that necessarily as incompatible with a drive for GDP growth, but it is fairly strange that it is invisible in the NPPF. It is such an amazing opportunity for place. It really is. What is the urban policy and what is that vision? The interesting thing is it does not cost anything and it does not necessarily upset the development community, because we are building resilience. What is not to like? The disappointment is that there is not the diversity of economic approach.

Councillor Wright: There does not have to be a conflict. It can be planned if you plan correctly for where your economic growth is. It is that balance. When we talk about providing land for housing, we have to think about why we are building the houses in the first place and what kind of place we want to create. There is a balance to be taken there.

It is then about making sure that we invest correctly across the piece. Hugh mentioned the social value. We do not want to build places just for people who can afford to move into them and can afford certain levels of jobs—or even just people who move into an area to commute—and therefore take house prices out of the range of people who have lived there for many years.

In our area we have tried to balance that. We managed to get our local plan review through before the ministerial statement of December 2023, which we would like to see reversed, so we were able to plan for economic structures, green infrastructure and also higher standards of thermal insulation in our housing developments. You can plan around some of it, but it is such a fine balance that we have to look at the economic effect on the environment, what we are trying to protect and how we are trying to protect it while keeping that balance. It is difficult one. We can do it to a certain degree, but I cannot see much coming through from the NPPF that gives us any more tools.

Sam Stafford: I am not sure I have much more to add. Anecdotally and personally, Clive Betts, the former Chair of the HCLG Committee, once told me that in the Netherlands, planning is seen as part of the solution and in the UK, planning is seen as part of the problem. I think that is something to work towards reversing.

Q51 **Anna Gelderd:** Perhaps I will come to you first, Dr Ellis, with my next question. I am interested to hear some good examples of successful housing projects that have achieved both economic growth, and improved ecosystems and biodiversity.

Dr Ellis: Yes—*[Interruption.]*

Anna Gelderd: Mr Stafford, Dr Ellis has indicated he would like to speak first, which he is welcome to do.

Dr Ellis: Sorry, I was going to be enthusiastic for a minute.

Anna Gelderd: I am glad to hear it.

Dr Ellis: Look, we can do this. It was a joy to be in Essex last week with authorities who are building at passive house standard or equivalent and

upholding policies in their local plans to do that, and to be with the medium-sized entrepreneurs and developers who are capable of taking that on and the small ones who want to do it. What an opportunity for economic renewal. What an opportunity for creating new markets. What an opportunity for a genuinely green economy. However, you do that only with a regulatory framework that pushes hard on energy performance and on resilience.

To be clear, we were so good at this as a nation. We transformed housing after the first war and built the classic three-bedroom council house with a front and back garden capable of supporting six months of food production. To be honest, the domestic architecture in this country has not gone in the right direction after that.

That is not an issue about any particular detailed design. I am just talking, I suppose, about why this is always cast in a problematic way when many other nations, particularly the north-west European nations, are capable of getting this regulatory framework right. They say, "That is the direction of travel. We will have genuinely zero carbon homes." We could have done it in 2016. You asked the question about how much carbon has been emitted from abandoning 2016 targets. For me, this is a pro-growth agenda. It is a different kind of growth.

Anna Gelderd: Thank you very much for that. Mr Stafford, did you have an example you wanted to share with us?

Sam Stafford: I would not want to highlight any particular HBF member's scheme for fear of putting other HBF members' noses out of joint, other than perhaps to point out that one member did once tell me that nobody gets up in the morning with a desire to make a bad place. The poor ones do the rounds on social media every now and then but they are very much in the minority. The overlap where successful schemes are created is where key stakeholders work in partnership in a clear and consistent policy environment. They are the golden rules, as far as I am concerned.

Anna Gelderd: Interesting. Councillor Wright, any successful projects that you want to share with us?

Councillor Wright: I can write afterwards to put the skin on the bones, but I have examples. One is Mansfield District Council's sustainable urban drainage solutions, where they have looked at the problems with flood mitigation. You have Crawley Borough Council with the town centre heat network, which is about reducing carbon. South Cambridgeshire has the Waterbeach new town, which is about sustainable new homes and a minimum of 25% biodiversity net gain, which is phenomenal. Cheltenham Borough Council has the Golden Valley development, which is about high-tech, high-skilled jobs while maintaining good environmental standards.

Can I throw a bad one in as well? The ministerial statement severely affected West Oxfordshire District Council and stopped it putting its plan together, which was roughly the same as the central Lincolnshire plan.

Another good example is our own plan, where we set the thermal efficiency of new homes—not worrying about whether they put solar panels on, but getting the insulation levels beyond the Government's recommended level and taking them to the highest level we can.

Of course we say that we cannot expect every developer to build a passive house, but the evidence from the Passive House Institute says that if you build at scale, it increases the cost by only 4%. Can we afford to do it? It is there. We build our own council homes to passive house standard, but within the local plan area they must build to a higher thermal efficiency than anywhere else.

Q52 **Anna Gelderd:** Finally, how might the proposed changes to the planning system impact the UK's ability to meet national and international nature recovery commitments?

Dr Ellis: We have heard a number of times—and it is accurate—that there have not been any changes to the NPPF to deal with those wider issues about nature recovery. However, this country has an incredibly degraded biodiversity and environment. It does not have to be like that. Development and biodiversity are compatible when done brilliantly.

It worries me that nothing in the NPPF addresses the fact. Let us be clear about it. As a planner, the current NPPF framework is not fit for purpose on nature and the environment. The fact that it has not changed gives me no comfort at all. The measures you would need to do that are to go back to the beginning of it and give it a proper definition of sustainable development, because it does not have that as a document.

Councillor Wright: On nature recovery and, for instance, BNG, I am concerned that we have set up a system that decides where you can have nature recovery. The idea was to improve the area where the development was and, instead, offsite credits create that somewhere else. That creates a monitoring and implementation problem for local authorities, as I said earlier, but also, is that dictating where we improve nature or will the developers be allowed to do that through crediting because they cannot produce it on site? Is that the real purpose of BNG? Can we call that nature recovery?

Sam Stafford: I am not necessarily sure I share the same concerns about offsite BNG as have been expressed this afternoon, provided that that offsite contribution is leveraged with others to maximum impact and benefit. In that regard, I think it will come to be seen as somewhat regrettable that BNG was introduced before the local nature recovery strategies. I think I am right in saying that the west of England has recently published the first local nature recovery strategy. They could have had a more co-ordinating role in the offsite BNG credit market, as well as providing a platform to deal with nutrient neutrality, which is emblematic of dysfunction in that environmental regulatory regime. We have not talked about that this afternoon.

Yes, the expediting of local nature recovery strategies and their relationship to whatever universal strategic planning coverage looks like could be of significant benefit in this space if we are talking about this towards the end of the Parliament.

Q53 **Chris Hinchliff:** We have heard quite a lot about land supply this afternoon. Housing, of course, is only one of the demands that we have on our land at the moment, alongside food security, energy security, transport, nature restoration targets for woodland cover. As has been alluded to, we already have exceptionally fragmented and degraded ecosystems in our country. On average 14,000 hectares of land are taken from undeveloped land into developed land every year.

Taking that whole context into account, do you feel that the Government's current policies relating to land use are coherent? Dr Ellis, I will start with you.

Dr Ellis: They cannot be because they are not expressed in a coherent land use strategy and we have already heard we are waiting for that. That is quite a depressing list, but the thing that strikes me most is that from the 1970s in this country there was quite an interesting debate. There were land White Papers that expressed the need to fundamentally deal with a declining resource and how you democratically decide how to use it.

The first step to that is understanding and data, all of which exists but is not mapped collectively at the moment. That will be an amazing resource. England as a nation has always been resistant to any national planning. Here is the reason why. If you map all those constraints together, it has enormous political consequences that nobody wants to see, particularly if you map the land we will lose. There is about to be, in the next 10 to 15 years, an enormous realignment in the land market based on investment in flood risk areas.

The fact that the nation has no strategy is like flying a jumbo jet towards a mountain in the fog and smashing up your radar. That happened when we smashed up regional planning, interestingly. If we cannot agree a reasonable approach to the basic data, once we have the data in the strategy, then we have to decide what to do with it. That is a fundamental question about whether we continue to develop from Bournemouth to Cambridge in the golden arc that the Treasury has on its wall, or whether we think about the rest of the country.

Councillor Wright: I agree with what Hugh says. There simply is not a land use strategy. I would like to explore the area of NSIPs. Lincolnshire provides 30% of the country's vegetables. It will soon be covered in solar panels. Yes, we have to transition away from fossil fuels, but at the moment there is nothing about a cumulative effect. We simply see numerous applications coming in—more and more each month—and we talk about thousands and thousands of hectares of land being covered because there is no cumulative strategy to this at all. It has not been

looked at. It has not been considered. There is not a strategy. It is just land being used and that has to change.

Sam Stafford: I will emphasise what I have said before. The local plans presently are the only spatial expression of land use priorities and they have to deal with matters of regional and national significance, as you have heard. The system operationally, from a more intellectual or academic point of view, in so far as what we are trying to achieve, can only benefit from giving spatial expression to these various competing national priorities and being a platform for people to talk about them, understand them and be aware of the trade-offs.

Q54 **Chris Hinchliff:** That was a fairly clear, if anxiety-inducing, set of responses. As Barry has alluded to, we will set out a report with recommendations. Would you like to see the Committee reflecting in its report any key recommendations relating to getting a coherent land use strategy in place?

Dr Ellis: Absolutely. That strategy is vital, but it must be developed as a conversation with people, not just as a technical exercise. We can argue about structure and we are good in planning at arguing about procedure, but we are not good at establishing the purpose. The recommendations of this process—it is such an important inquiry—should be about the purpose of the land use planning system. I cannot tell you, sitting here as a qualified planner, what it is.

I can tell you what I would like to see in the recommendation, which is to go back to the heart of the NPPF and reconstitute a meaningful definition of sustainable development, which is deliberately disempowered in the NPPF by saying that the sustainable development goals apply only at a very high level. That mechanism was introduced by the civil service to make sure you could never challenge any decision against the 17 goals. If you put that back and have a sustainable development strategy based on 2005, 90% of which is still pretty good as a strategy, you will begin to have a clear and common objective about which you can have a conversation with people. Without that you have structure without outcome and that will not work.

Councillor Wright: I totally agree. To use an expression, it has to be from the ground up. It has to be through consultation and through people who understand the situation rather than being pre-written and followed by another consultation on a few minor points just to say that consultation has been carried out, which unfortunately is my jaded view on most consultation. It needs to be there.

It needs to be written as well, if we are talking about democracy, in a way that your average person can understand. I do not mean a dumbing down of language. I mean a strategy that people across the country can buy into, because that makes the whole situation much simpler and we do not end up with protest groups who do not understand the fundamentals of what is trying to be achieved.

Sam Stafford: A spatial plan for England is a laudable and meaningful objective that everybody should be advocating for. I would also create a royal commission on the future of the green belt to make that fit for the 21st century, which everybody needs to coalesce around to make everybody's lives better.

National development management policies can have a role. The example that Richard was talking about of that legal challenge in Oxfordshire to the ability of local authorities to go at a faster pace than building regs in the net zero space is emblematic of the fact that the Government are not going fast enough and are not clear enough about their intentions for the regulatory framework. I advocate getting that into building regs so that it is one less thing that planning has to deal with.

Also on my wish list would be horizontal co-ordination across Government. Richard mentioned the Environment Agency. A few years ago Natural England unilaterally put holding notices across 74 local authorities because of the nutrient neutrality issue, yet I read this week that the Environment Agency has not declined a permit for an industrial poultry unit in the Severn and the Wye, which is a level of dysfunction that serves as a massive discredit on everybody involved. They are on my wish list.

Q55 **Sarah Gibson:** I am conscious that we are running over time, but I want to talk a little bit about something that we have touched upon, which is the community engagement side of it. Councillor Wright mentioned the issues around legislation inflicted upon communities and local governments. Having been a member of a local government for a long time, I share your concerns.

Will these changes to the NPPF encourage or discourage local communities from participating? Will local communities have access to the necessary information and support to play any meaningful part in planning decisions? If not, how can this be addressed? At what stage should communities be involved? I will start with Councillor Wright since I have referenced him and then move on.

Councillor Wright: The point of consultation should be as early as possible so that you can engage people fully rather than them thinking it is a done deal. Planning is one of the most inflammatory things that most of our residents ever see us doing. They do not concern themselves with the rest of what local government does. Planning normally gets them agitated.

We have a trust issue. For instance, if you are in an area that has a local plan and you have gone through the numbers and gone through the call for land, all of a sudden you have to try to explain to them why you have these extra houses that you now have to build. They do not see a Minister's signature on that. They do not see, with respect, any MP's signature on that. The local planning authority will suddenly inflict these houses on them. We have to make sure that we communicate that. It is

very much down to the local authority to get that communication effectively out there as early as possible and as widely as possible.

In the main, most of us do that. It is just that quite often, being reactionary to new policy or regulation, there is seen to be a breaking of trust. We have told them one thing one month and are now telling them another thing. Quite often it perpetuates this situation of everybody saying that local authority planning is broken because things happen that people do not like. That is that is the reality of it.

The answer is to communicate as early as possible and as effectively as possible and across the different mediums as well. We find that most effective. Do not ignore anything. We need to make sure that we engage people across the generations. Quite often, the people we need to communicate with are the younger people, because we are creating situations for them to deal with in the next 40 or 50 years.

Dr Ellis: There is a legal answer about the Aarhus convention and the fact that we have legal responsibilities to get this right, but building on what has been said rather than repeating it, culturally, what I encounter as a professional planner is that people are a problem. There is a deep-seated, rooted idea that people are a problem. It runs right through all parts of the body politic of this country. I am not convinced that Whitehall has sufficient understanding that people sometimes are a reality with their own aspirations, needs and places, or that the diversity of experience in places in England is different. The NPPF makes no reflection of that whatsoever with its single, one-size-fits-all idea.

Ultimately, the proposition we have, as an organisation looking for a pro-housing, socially just future, is to ask the question: is this a democracy or not? If it is a democracy, people have to be fully involved, as has been described. Technically, that is fairly straightforward to do. The private and public sectors can be good at it if they have resources.

However, if you do not get it right—and this is my problem—and if you introduce the new housing target into the current regime, you will have a period of planning by appeal, which all of us as professionals understand will last between two and four years. Planning by appeal is the worst form for building consensus and trust. If a mission is missing, it is a democracy mission. If you want to find out how to play it out more powerfully than any other, it is planning, where that democracy issue bangs against local people's aspirations.

The previous Labour Government had a policy—to be clear about a recommendation—called people's involvement in planning the Government's objectives. A fine document it was too. Bring it back, please. Make it clear that the people's voice, even when I do not agree with it and it annoys the hell out of me, is still a democratic right.

Q56 **Sarah Gibson:** So the argument is earlier and more meaningful engagement. Mr Stafford, do you have anything to add?

Sam Stafford: This is such a fascinating topic that I could talk about it all day. What question are we asking? There have been a couple of live examples of this over the past few weeks and months. You had the Norwich-to-Thetford pylon brouhaha through Norwich, Suffolk and Essex. What question are we asking the general population there? What level of democratic involvement are we talking about?

The Government have been elected to decarbonise the grid, which means finding a way of getting power not from the Trent valley around the country but from the North sea around the country. That requires a connection from the North sea into the south-east. What question are we asking the general public? Are we asking the good people of Norfolk whether there should be a grid connection along that route or are we asking them what colour they would like the pylons to be?

The Minister was asked this morning about intervening in a planning application in Swale for large-scale residential development on the basis that it is in the national interest. I go back to the point about Swale determining a planning application that is in the national interest without any spatial expression of it.

We could talk about this all afternoon, but without a cascaded proportionality in planning with some spatial expression of national, regional, local and neighbourhood priorities, it is very difficult to talk to people about it. Richard made the point about agricultural land versus solar generation. These are national conversations that we are expecting local councillors to have. Until the system has that proportionality to it, it is just embedding further conflict and antagonism.

Sarah Gibson: I think we have answered the second part of that question more than the first, to be honest. We quite clearly need better engagement and earlier engagement.

Chair: Thank you, Sarah, and thank you to our panel. We have come to the conclusion of the first session of this important inquiry with a huge amount for us to think about. Thank you very much to our three panellists for your excellent contributions.