



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Planning and Productivity, HC 354 Monday 7 September 2015

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Evidence from witnesses:

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Jo Cox; Helen Hayes; Kevin Hollingrake; Julian knight; David Mackintosh; Mr Mark Prisk; Mary Robinson; Alison Thewliss.

Questions 1 - 122

Witnesses: **Brandon Lewis MP**, Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome, Minister. It is your first visit in this new Parliament and no doubt not the last, because we are seeing you again next week. This time we are having a one-off session into the Government's proposals on planning and productivity following the Government's document "Fixing the Foundations". Thank you very much for coming this afternoon. Before we get into our questions, I am just going to ask the members of the Committee to put on record any interests we might have. There are interests already in the Register, but some are not. I am a Vice-President of the Local Government Association. That may be thought to have a reflection on this particular inquiry. I will just go round the table, if members have anything to add to what is in the Register.

Mary Robinson: I have nothing to add to what is in the Register.

Kevin Hollinrake: Nothing to add to what is in the Register.

Julian Knight: Yes; nothing to add.

Mr Prisk: Nothing to add to my Register.

Q2 Chair: Fine. That has set us off.

Minister, just picking up on certain quite important announcements the Government have made, the Government have talked about potentially changing the arrangements where authorities do not get their local plans up and running and agreed by 2017. Is this a fundamental change of Government policy? When we produced our last report on the workings of the NPPF, we suggested that the Government put local plans on a statutory basis. Your response at the time was you were not convinced of the necessity to do that but would reflect on the situation. Is this announcement now by the Government a part of that reflection?

Brandon Lewis: Firstly, thank you. I am delighted to be the first of the ministerial team to come before the Committee. It feels like coming home again, to an extent. I am very flattered that you have invited me, effectively, twice in two weeks so, yes, you will no doubt see some more of me. Indeed, some of the issues no doubt we will touch on today will be things that run through over the next few months, with the Housing Bill, and, indeed, over the course of the Parliament.

When you put forward the report towards the end of the last Parliament, as I said at the time, we welcomed the report; it had some really positive things in it. It was a really good testament to the work Select Committees can do in terms of feeding in some of the ideas about how we can improve things and how we take things forward. It is fair to say to an extent there is an element of us having looked at that report and looked at what is happening around the country. I would make the point—bearing in mind you and I, Mr Betts, have had this conversation in the past about the statutory duty—we are not looking to impose a statutory duty, but what we are looking at is making sure that local people have that confidence that they will have a local plan in place. The flexibility is one of the things we are looking at: what we do in order to make sure that people have that opportunity to have that security as well. There is a nuanced difference between what you were looking at and where we are, but certainly it is the journey of travel. As we said at the beginning, local areas should have a local plan that involves local communities and that gives us good, strong, sustainable development—even more so if we build into that neighbourhood plans as well.

Q3 Chair: So there is not a statutory duty to produce a local plan, but if the local authority does not produce a local plan by 2017, the Government are going to do something about it. Precisely what are the Government going to do?

Brandon Lewis: We are going to be looking at that over the next few weeks. There is a whole range of things we can do in terms of looking at the flexibilities around the powers the Secretary of State does have. They are relatively limited at the moment; we may look at that. We may well in some areas be looking not at doing the local plan for an area and not at replacing the local plan process but, if the local authority are not getting on with doing a local plan, at instigating that plan happening for the community, but it would still be the community's local plan. There are other things we could look at doing about nudging and encouraging and looking at quite a specific, surgically-focused approach to certain areas. It depends on how far the area has got with their plan and what stage they are at. Bear in mind 82% of local authorities now have a local plan published. That is a really good step forward, but we have never made any secret about the fact we would like to see that touching 100%.

Q4 Chair: Can I say, Minister, I am not exactly clear what you are going to do, so I am not sure that most people out there—councillors, councils and members of the community—will be clear either? If I was in a community where the local authority did not have a local plan and it did not have one by 2017, what difference would I see in the process that would happen when the Government moved in in 2017 from what would happen as things stand now?

Brandon Lewis: In a full sense, I am not going to be able to answer that for you today because we are looking at a range of options and we are working with local government itself and other interested parties around that. We will be publishing some more details about that in due course. What I would say to local areas is: if you are one of the 18% of local areas that do not have a published local plan—some areas are fairly close to publishing; other areas are a lot further away—what we will be looking at and what some communities are calling for to be looked at is, if they have a local council they feel is not moving on with the local plan or is not delivering a local plan, how we make sure that that local community gets a chance to have a local plan put in place.

Q5 Chair: So the answer is you are going to do something, but you are not quite sure what it is.

Brandon Lewis: The answer is you are going to have to bear with us a little bit longer before we publish the details about how we will implement this.

Q6 Chair: When will we get the details?

Brandon Lewis: In due course. In plenty of time before 2017; I can assure you of that.

Q7 Chair: Right. No doubt, we may come back to this.
Brandon Lewis: Absolutely, yes.

Q8 Chair: But it is not going to be a statutory duty.
Brandon Lewis: We are not looking at a statutory duty.

Q9 Chair: Are you looking at any sanctions?
Brandon Lewis: I would not rule anything else out at the moment. I am not sure there is necessarily a need for sanctions per se, because what we can look at doing, as I said, is, if the local authority is either not going ahead with the local plan or is not progressing a local plan, effectively replacing the planning authority by making that local plan process start and go through. Therefore, there is not really necessarily a need for a sanction per se, other than the local authority itself being shown to have not delivered on its duty to its local community.

Q10 Chair: You have also mentioned the issue of the reviews of local plans, which is something else the Committee drew attention to. At the time, the Government's response was that reviews were something that you would encourage and were part of the process, but you were going to write to all authorities that had had a plan adopted prior to 2010 and draw their attention to the need to keep the plans under review. What is the change now that you are proposing from the response that you gave to the Committee in the last Parliament?

Brandon Lewis: We have written to those local authorities. We will keep a watching eye on that and encourage local authorities to keep their local plans up to date. In the planning system itself, there is a motivation to keep their plan up to date, particularly in terms of the five-year land supply, to ensure that their local plan is valid and current when they come to look at planning decisions. The system itself builds in an encouragement to do that, but we will certainly be continuing to motivate them and encourage them to get on with that.

Q11 Chair: What is the extra "targeted support" that the Planning Advisory Service might be doing to help local authorities?

Brandon Lewis: It is working with local authorities around getting those plans updated where they need to be updated. What we are also seeing now is planning inspectors, even with recent plans, allowing authorities to have a plan approved but subject to an early review, so it is making sure they are on top of that and keeping themselves current. It is a resource base that is there for the local authority to access.

Q12 Chair: That is something that the Committee suggested last time as well. We drew attention to the Dacorum example, but that was only one specific example. It is the whole idea that if a plan is basically there but for small elements of it, it can be approved subject to reviewing parts of it. That is something the Government is encouraging now, is it?

Brandon Lewis: Yes, that is exactly one of the things. It is part of the pragmatism—for inspectors to be looking at and using that pragmatic, common-sense approach to local plans.

Q13 David Mackintosh: Welcome, Minister. There are some parts of the country with a lot of growth where the growth in redevelopment is outpacing the production of the plans. Some of these plans are becoming footballs bounced around between local authorities, particularly in areas like the one I represent, where more than one authority is putting together the plan. We have a situation now where we have four authorities producing a plan together, two of which approve it and two of which do not. The two that do are putting the growth on the edge of their areas, which impacts on the infrastructure of another. Where we have that—where the plan is out of touch with the community and we have two authorities out of four that do not want that—does the flexibility you talk about come into that? Is there scope for that to be looked at? One thing it might be worth doing is just waiting until 2017 and having a conversation direct with Government about that. How does it work in those situations?

Brandon Lewis: There are a couple of points on that. I would say for the benefit of the entire Committee I cannot comment on a particular local plan for probity reasons. I appreciate you are not asking me to do that; just for clarity, I am speaking very generally.

It is quite purposeful. I have said to this Committee before, and I am pretty sure when I came and gave evidence towards the end of the last Parliament with the current Secretary of State in his previous role, we made the point that it is a duty to co-operate; it is not necessarily a duty to agree. There is a difference. It is really good to see local authorities working together to look at a more strategic approach—we encourage that, and I certainly would encourage that—but because it is not a duty to agree, if local authorities cannot agree but have made every endeavour to do so, then that is part of the evidence they will put forward as part of their local plan process and inspectors will look at that. There are examples around where inspectors have challenged authorities on their duty to co-operate and others where they have felt the duty to co-operate has been perfectly well adapted even if they have not necessarily agreed. It is a matter of making sure the evidence is there that that work has been done.

In terms of what local authorities are doing on their periphery, this is where it is good that local authorities work together to make sure that they are aware of the impact of a development in one area and the fact that that can have an impact on a neighbouring local authority. That is where the duty to co-operate is important. It is reasonable for us to expect that locally democratically accountable people use good common sense and have a very sensible approach to working for their area together on those matters, but, equally, as I say, it is not a duty to agree; there is a difference between the two. One of the things we are looking at at the moment—this is, again, something that was noted certainly by Mr Betts and the Committee in the past—is some more guidance around the duty to co-operate, but there is a fairly good breadth of casework now for local authorities that are interested in looking at this around areas within the 82% that have published, let alone the over 60% that have now adopted, where they have done this successfully and can look at what works and how to bring it together.

Q14 Kevin Hollinrake: Minister, how would you say the new mayoral situation will affect the duty to co-operate? How will that affect things where you suddenly have a mayor representing a number of different authorities? How will that impact upon these current rules?

Brandon Lewis: I take it you mean in terms of whatever powers are devolved to a new mayor in a new area.

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes.

Brandon Lewis: To an extent, I cannot answer that. That will depend on the agreement that is reached at the time of any particular devolution deal and what powers are agreed. These deals are going to be bespoke to different areas, so different areas might have different agreements. If a mayor is over a wider area and those authorities, as part of that devolution deal, agree to that strategic approach to planning, I can see the logic of that, but it has to be right for them and it has to be driven by those local authorities. These deals will very much be what comes from the local authority areas rather than from us, so that will be very much locally driven. If areas come together and take a view about having a strategic approach to an area—this particularly deals with Mr Mackintosh's point around that duty to co-operate across borders—then I can see the sense and logic in that. That is going to be very much a matter for those areas to work out what is right for them and come to us.

Q15 Kevin Hollinrake: Do you think there is potential for conflict between what the mayor's responsibility is in that strategic role and what the local authority might want?

Brandon Lewis: Potentially, if it is not done the way we are looking to do it. The short answer, to an extent, is “hopefully no”. That is because these new devolved deals with new mayors that come through are about moving more power from the centre to the local area. If that local area itself is going to have a more strategic approach to planning as part of that deal, then it is going to happen because that area has agreed to do that amongst themselves in the first place, so therefore there should not be that kind of conflict, otherwise they would not have come to that agreement, if that makes sense. I think that would be a powerful message for some areas. Housing markets do go across boundaries, in much the same way the economic boundaries vary from the almost arbitrary administrative boundaries of local government, as the local enterprise partnerships highlight, so I think areas that work together in that way will see a positive benefit for themselves. Putting aside any devolution deal, it is good for their areas to be able to come up with something that is—excuse the management phrase—a more holistic approach.

Q16 Jo Cox: Do you have a sense of the proportion of authorities that you expect not to have plans by the start of 2017?

Brandon Lewis: On the basis that there are 82% that are now published—and more local plans are coming through all the time—if I were in front of you a year from now, which will probably be the best time to judge what is likely to be through or not be through, I would like to think we would be looking at a very small percentage. Bear in mind only 18% now are not published, so hopefully it will be a relatively small number.

Q17 Mr Prisk: Minister, can we turn to the question of housing density and land allocation? The “Fixing the Foundations” report brings out a number of ideas, one of which is the issue of key commuter hubs. I have seen a lot of definitions of this. What is yours?

Brandon Lewis: To me, a key commuter hub is not a train or bus station that is several miles outside a town; it is that hub that brings together an economic area with a train station, a bus station or whatever it happens to be that is an economic hub of itself already. Many of these areas are areas that have an opportunity to develop—not at the expense of current usable employment land. We have made the point very clearly that an area will have to demonstrate, if they use employment land, that this is employment land that is not liable to be able to be brought back into employment use in a reasonable timeframe. It also gives an opportunity to some areas; I can think of my own constituency, where the train station, which is right on top of the town centre, could be an excellent opportunity to develop and see a

hub come through. We have seen some other areas in London; Crossrail is a really good example of where we have seen vertical space being used to the benefit of the economy and potentially housing as well. It is about looking at those. That is what I think of as a commuter hub: something that is a genuine hub, not an out-of-town station.

Q18 Mr Prisk: It is a transport interchange.

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely.

Mr Prisk: It is not necessarily wholly thinking about London or the South East—

Brandon Lewis: No.

Mr Prisk: But the interchange aspect is important. You mention the point about economic land. This is one of the tensions that you will be familiar with. The “Fixing the Foundations” report refers to the fact that sites where land is allocated where there is “no reasonable prospect” of it being used for employment use will be acceptable. You have just said that current usable employment land will be excluded. There is a tension in there for planners locally to make that determination. Is there a new set of criteria that we are going to be using, or are there existing rules? I have a supplementary on this, but I just want to test first of all: is it existing criteria about what is current and what is not likely to be happening in the future?

Brandon Lewis: No; it is based on the current rules that are there. It is already policy that the local planning authority should avoid the use of long-term protection sites that are allocated for employment use, but where there is no reasonable opportunity for it to be brought back into employment use—that is already there now. It is implementing that understanding of employment land.

Q19 Mr Prisk: And you feel that that is legally robust enough. I ask that because you will be familiar, for example, with the anticipation—now considerable—of the issuing of Government policy on permitted development rights. The same issue, for many local authorities, is at the heart of that. This is relevant to this point. When are we going to finally see the PDR announcement on this? It was offered in July and there were problems. When are we going to see the announcement on that?

Brandon Lewis: I am not in a position to make that announcement today. I would love to do it for the Select Committee today, but you will have to bear with us just a bit longer. The current regime is in place until roughly spring of next year: the end of May 2016. We are

looking to make an announcement around the future for permitted development rights relatively soon, but we have been looking at the feedback from the consultation we had and how it has been implemented and making sure we do that in a careful way. We have taken on board some of the points raised by local authorities—you have just outlined some of the issues around the challenges that are behind it—and we are also making sure that we are delivering the housing that we need. Particularly in London, it has delivered a substantial amount of housing that we need. It is an important measure that has been beneficial, but we want to make sure that we get the decision right and that we learn from what has happened in the last three years. In the not-too-distant future, but I will not be making that announcement today.

Q20 Mr Prisk: I will try not to hold my breath for much longer. You mentioned transport hubs in your own constituency; it would be similar in mine. If in Bishop's Stortford we were to see a commuter hub designated, one of the questions I think a lot of my constituents would have is, "Is the benefit not really going to emerge principally in London?" In other words, if this is a commuter hub in a market town near a major city, where does the benefit lie? I suppose my real question to you, therefore, is: what incentives are there for local planning authorities who are faced with that particular challenge, which is that there will be the opportunity for developers to make significantly different housing densities and types of development in the middle of a market town, where in many ways the economic benefit—the earnings and the employers—will not be there but will be some distance away, not necessarily just within a local planning authority distance but some counties and communities away? Where is the incentive for local planning authorities there?

Brandon Lewis: That is why it is important that local authorities, first of all, have that opportunity. Density levels are part of this, and it is around making sure there is a flexibility for local authorities, if they feel it is right for them, to have that opportunity to have a greater density around those kinds of hubs, as many other major cities and towns around the world do have, particularly to take advantage of the opportunities from those kinds of hubs. It is also to make sure they are looking at whether a site that is allocated for employment use does have a realistic and reasonable chance of being in employment use in the foreseeable future and being quite pragmatic and sensible about that.

Equally, if they take the view that there is land that is important for employment use, much like the permitted development rights point earlier, where councils can look at using Article 4. Local authorities,

particularly in London, have done that; they have made the case for a particular area to be protected by an Article 4 away from permitted development rights because it is an important employment area. We have worked with them to develop those areas in certain parts of London outside of the main restricted areas of the City, Canary Wharf and places like that. Local authorities can have that kind of input and should be aware of that. But equally, if an area has no reasonable prospect of coming back into employment use, particularly where there is a heavy demand for housing, it is a good opportunity to look at making best use of the land that we have. After all, one of the challenges we have not just in London but right across the country—as we have seen in press coverage not just over the summer but week-to-week all through the year—is the determination of people to protect the part of our countryside they love the most. If we are going to do that, we need to make sure we are making best use of the land that we have in our urban areas. This gives an opportunity to do that.

Q21 Mr Prisk: Given the huge difference between employment land and housing land values, clearly that will be tested. You are satisfied that the tests for that are legally robust.

Brandon Lewis: Yes I am, but this is one of the things that will be under review as we take the policy forward as well.

Q22 Bob Blackman: Just on a supplementary issue, in relation to local authorities that already have their published plans, which may allow for mixed-use employment and housing developments, what do you see happening to safeguard those employment uses as opposed to them switching everything over to high-density housing?

Brandon Lewis: In that sense, it is a matter for the local authority, but my experience has been—I appreciate this is predominantly anecdotal—that local authorities are fairly protective of their employment areas. One of the reasons we have seen the Article 4s being brought in in London around the permitted development rights is local authorities specifically looking to protect those employment areas. The local authorities themselves are very consciously aware of that, because they want places for people to work so they can live and work locally should they wish to. Local authorities have a pretty good track record on that at the moment.

Q23 Bob Blackman: One final issue from me in terms of that: do you see key commuter hubs being set up on the outskirts of London as a result of being at the end of current Underground lines and other such commuting areas?

Brandon Lewis: There is potential for key commuter hubs in a whole range of places. It might be a bit presumptuous of me to start outlining where they might be at the moment. I have not for one minute sat down with a map and mapped out where I think they might be. We are a little way off that just yet. London, because of the demand for housing in London and the amount of interchanges we have in London, is likely to be a predominant area for where we might see these coming through, but I can also think of areas I have seen when I have been visiting Manchester and other cities. Some of the areas around train stations I would have thought the local authorities will see as particularly appropriate for this kind of development. But as I say, this is a matter for local authorities to feed into.

Q24 Helen Hayes: Moving on to a related topic, which is further exploring the brownfield land proposals, what assessment of the impact of your brownfield land proposals has been undertaken?

Brandon Lewis: In what sense?

Helen Hayes: In relation to the loss of employment land; in relation to the impact on diverse communities; in relation to all aspects of the proposal. This is a big change to the planning landscape. How have you looked at what, perhaps, some of the unintended consequences will be as well as the objective of bringing forward housing development as quickly as possible?

Brandon Lewis: The brownfield land proposals will be part of the Housing Bill, so I will be going into more detail about that in due course and we may end up having another conversation about this in due course, which I am very happy to do. I am very happy to come back, if invited by the Committee, to talk you through some of the things in the Housing Bill as and when that time comes.

What I would say on the brownfield changes that we are looking at is what we are looking at doing is giving local authorities the ability to designate those brownfield areas in the sense of developing that principle for development. That is quite important for local employment, as it happens. It is hugely important and beneficial, potentially, for small and medium-sized builders in particular, not just in terms of how planning works but also in terms of their potential access to finance. It will be a matter for those local authorities ultimately to work out what is right for them. That comes back also to their duty to look at making sure that they are assessing all of their land in the right way and looking at employment land in the terms that we have just outlined, in terms of what is reasonable to be brought back in. A large part of this is about giving some certainty and confidence to people around development and where it can happen and

what can happen. That further helps areas that have this challenge between brownfield land and potentially green belt and greenfield land; if the brownfield land has that principle already outlined and the planning process is therefore slightly streamlined, it makes it more attractive than it would otherwise be, particularly when you are comparing the process to an area that does not have that in the first place.

Q25 Helen Hayes: How will the register of brownfield land work alongside existing requirements, for example, for heritage assessments, environmental impact assessments, flood risk assessments and so forth? At what stage in the process of giving outline consent will those issues be considered?

Brandon Lewis: This is why I made the point about the principle. That does not change. The detailed planning permission will still look at those issues. Let me give an example. A small or medium-sized developer that is looking to gain finance is a really good example of where planning permission in principle could be quite advantageous. If a developer can find some brownfield land that they want to develop but they need to get funding in order to build on that land, they can go to their bank. The bank might think the business case is really quite attractive and stacks up, and might be willing to support that development. This is particularly prominent for small and medium-sized developers, purely because the cash flow in the bigger developers is slightly different. The problem they then have is they have to go for planning permission, so even if that piece of land is in the local plan, they could still be turned down for development in principle. Therefore, the banks are very reticent to lend on what is effectively a gamble about whether you get planning permission or not.

By having that planning permission there in principle, they know that they can develop on that land; the question is the detail: what it looks like, what the infrastructure is, and all of the other points that you have just raised. That means it is much more beneficial for those small and medium-sized developers—this is one of the benefits—when they are going to a potential funding bank or whoever to get funding, because they know they can develop in principle. That makes quite a big difference in terms of that process and the accessibility to finance, as well as giving more certainty to the local community that that is an area that is zoned for development and it is brownfield, which, as we all know, is something that people are much keener to see developed in the first place.

Q26 Helen Hayes: Your written response referred to the granting of in-principle consent subject to “a limited number of technical details”. Are you able to set out what those technical details will be?

Brandon Lewis: I will certainly write to you with some of the details of those as we publish the Bill if that helps, yes.

Q27 Helen Hayes: Will community groups and local people have input into the designation of brownfield sites or the recording of those sites on the register? What provision will there be for community groups and local people to challenge the entry of land on to the brownfield register?

Brandon Lewis: Some of the detail of this we are working up with interested parties, including local government, at the moment, but, ultimately, these local registers will be made by local authorities. They will have to be consistent with the National Planning Policy Framework. Local communities feed into local plans and they feed into the local community, so, yes, the local community will have their say. The reactions we have had so far, certainly on some of the visits I have done recently, have been very positive, on the basis that people want to see brownfield sites developed before they see other sites developed, and anything that makes that easier, more accessible and more fluid gets a very positive response.

Q28 Helen Hayes: Is it the same as the site allocations process, or is it different?

Brandon Lewis: No, it is not necessarily the same. If these are brownfield sites, they could have already been allocated; they could already be in the local plan, but just being in the local plan does not mean you have planning in principle. That is one of the challenges with the planning process at the moment.

Q29 Helen Hayes: In my experience the design quality of a new development makes a huge difference to whether or not communities find it acceptable and tolerable. How will design quality be maintained when developers have the certainty at the in-principle stage that they will be able to go ahead and develop the land? I appreciate the point about the need for detailed consent. In my experience, a huge amount of the negotiation with local communities around design quality and the commitment that the developer will make takes place currently at the outline stage of development. The commitment is there in terms of the words that are written in your response, but I am not sure exactly what the mechanism is for ensuring that we have good design quality for new housing development under this proposal.

Brandon Lewis: You make a very valid and important point around design quality and the importance of that for communities. I have spoken at a number of conferences and, indeed, on the Floor of the House over the last year or so in this post and highlighted that there is a huge duty on developers themselves—of all types—to make sure they are building good quality in terms of design as much as quality of build. We all know we want to see more housing in this country. If you want to see more housing, either as a politician, as a local community or as a developer, the easiest way to do that is to have the community more accepting of development, and communities are accepting of good-quality development of an appropriate type in an appropriate place. So you make a very fair point around making sure the quality is there, but that is exactly what the detailed stage of permission would be about. There is quite a big difference, potentially, between the principle of being able to develop something here and what that something will look like and be like and the infrastructure around it, particularly in terms of that confidence around, “We can build here,” and, as I said as an example, access to finance. You are quite right; the detail has to make sure it is delivering that good quality. I think local authorities are very focused on that, but I also think we all have to continue to make the case that developers have a big duty in this as well.

Q30 Helen Hayes: Can I just press you on how exactly this is going to work?

Brandon Lewis: The detailed side of it will not change.

Helen Hayes: The in-principle granting of consent for sites on the register is designed to give certainty to developers in relation to their finance. I understand that point completely. However, then at the detailed application stage, there is still scope potentially for a local authority to go back on design quality grounds, or on other grounds of technical detail, again and again and again and say, “No; we are refusing this application because it is not good enough—because it does not meet those technical requirements.” I am not sure that, ultimately, the certainty that is supposed to be there at the first stage will be there if the safeguards that you are seeking to give assurance on really are there at the second stage—at the stage of the detailed application. Does the one not cancel out the other?

Brandon Lewis: When creating brownfield permissions in principle, the local authorities will want to look at certain sets of data. For example, an authority might say, “Area A over here is brownfield and we want this as one of our areas of outline planning permission in principle, and we think this is appropriate for circa 1,000 homes.” That is quite different to the detail of, “Do we think those homes should be apartments or houses; Tudor, Georgian, modern, Norfolk style, or

whatever kind of style of property?" That is something for the detailed stage of permission. That is quite different to having in-principle knowledge if you are developer or a community that that area over there is an area that is zoned for planning; if you are a developer looking for finance, or if you are a community looking at the area around where you live, that area is an area that has in-principle planning. That is quite different to the detailed stage.

If you bring too much of that detail into that first stage of in-principle, then you start to defeat the object of the in-principle planning, because you do not help that speed process. You start saying, "Yes, you can build here." At what detail do you stop around what those homes will look like and feel like? That is a matter for detailed negotiation with the developers, as it is today as well, in terms of exactly how they deliver them. It is part of the viability test that authorities will go through.

Q31 Helen Hayes: We will look forward to further detail on exactly how that maps out.

Brandon Lewis: Yes. This is something that will be coming through the Housing Bill.

Q32 Mary Robinson: Very often we have areas of existing development, MEDs, which sit within green belt or greenfield sites. Will these be renamed or reallocated as brownfield sites, or will they keep that designation? What impact would it have on them?

Brandon Lewis: I will have a look at that and come back to you, but I do not have any current plans particularly to re-designate. This is about getting the brownfield land that we already have and know about into that category of having 90% of it with planning permission before the end of this Parliament, and speeding up that process, rather than changing anything else that is already out there.

Q33 Mr Prisk: Just turning the question about detailed planning permission around, in the States there are very good and successful urban design codes so that in a particular area, if you want to build houses, this is the pattern you need to have; if you meet that standard, then the permission comes with it. Might that not be a better way of delivering the speed that you are looking for?

Brandon Lewis: It is an interesting thing. I am looking at some of the things that are going on in other places, like America, at the moment. It is also one of the things we have looked at in terms of, for example, the starter homes programme. Earlier this year, we launched the

template pack, which is effectively saying to areas, "If you have starter homes, they will at least be as good as this," which is designed by some of the best architects in the country. But again, local areas have the flexibility to look at something that they think is appropriate for them. There are opportunities for local areas. One of the challenges is we have a long history in this country of local authorities working on specific developments with developers and making decisions on specific allocations. That is quite a big cultural change, but there is potentially an opportunity there for people now.

Q34 Kevin Hollinrake: It was mentioned in your submission that you based this policy on some other countries that have successfully deployed a similar policy. I was just wondering what countries they were and how closely we had looked at how they operate.

Brandon Lewis: I will publish some of the detail when we publish the Housing Bill, but I have to say I have met today with my counterpart from the Netherlands, and we have been talking about some of these things and various other things to do with housing. Making sure we look at what is going on around the world and where it is successful, particularly where we want to get more houses developed, is a sensible thing to do.

Q35 Bob Blackman: One issue arises as a supplementary: how are you going to deal with disputes between local authorities where you are allowing in-principle decisions to be made but then one local authority is looking to move their development into another local authority to provide the housing? We saw an example of that in the last Parliament in Luton and the surrounding areas, where Luton was looking at getting housing developed in other parts of Bedfordshire. That is not uncommon; we have looked across the country at other particular areas like that. How will you deal with that particular issue? Then you get big developments taking place—and high-density developments as well.

Brandon Lewis: As you have mentioned Luton, I will specifically just point out I am talking very generally rather than about any specific local plans. I cannot comment on a specific local plan, particularly one that has been looked at in terms of JR as well anyway. In a more general sense, that goes back to the duty to co-operate issue. The challenge in some areas—you might think of some directly—has been around whether they have facilitated that duty to co-operate and whether that has worked between them. That comes back to the conversation we were having earlier on. I am not sure that this necessarily has a direct impact on that, because this is looking at brownfield land that is designated as brownfield land and giving it in-principle planning permission; it is not about re-designating different

types of land as brownfield, if that makes sense. Certainly, it is not about Local Authority A being able to designate brownfield land in Local Authority B's land. That would still be a matter for the home local authority, if that makes sense. So it would be part of their duty to co-operate if they are looking at local plans.

Q36 Bob Blackman: You get an in-principle decision, but that does not cover the density issue, does it? That is an in-principle decision that you can build housing, but the type of housing—whether it is town houses or multi-storey flats—would make a big difference in terms of finance.

Brandon Lewis: One of the things we are looking at is a standardised set of data for these sites. One of the things a site would potentially have on it is the kind of density it would have, which the local authority will look at in terms of giving that outline in-principle planning permission. This is what we are looking at and talking to local authorities about at the moment and this is what we will feed back through the Housing Bill when we get to that point.

Q37 Helen Hayes: On that point in particular, which is a new point for me, the density and capacity that is appropriate on any given site is influenced by all sorts of things, like the social and community infrastructure that is provided, the green and open space, the transport links and the proximity of places to work. All sorts of things determine whether, on the same area of land, you can build two storeys or you can build 50 storeys. How on earth is that process to work—that in-principle development is granted with a given density—unless some really quite detailed work is undertaken to underpin the appropriateness of that density for those sites in principle?

Brandon Lewis: Generally, local authorities will have a view in terms of their local plan around the kind of density per hectare they develop locally and what is appropriate in any given area. Bear in mind these will be local authority-led; these are not centrally imposed. We are giving the powers for the in-principle, but ultimately this will be a matter for the local authority and decisions about sites to be included will be made by local authorities. They will be looking at a given site.

If you do not mind, let me turn that in reverse. What I think would be difficult to deliver is having a system where you have the ability to have the plan in principle but no guide on how many you could build, whatever size that piece of land is. You could potentially end up otherwise in a position where the local authority say, "Yes, we give permission to develop here in principle, but we give no guide on the kinds of units we would expect on this site" and then a developer is back in the same position they were originally; they have no benefit

because they do not know whether they can build one house or 1,000 houses, which has a massive impact on the viability and, indeed, ability to borrow, coming back to my earlier example. Local authorities giving on a guide on the kind of number of units per hectare or the kind of number of units on that site is quite a logical thing, but that is very different to the detail of what those units would look like and in terms of the design quality you talked about.

Q38 Helen Hayes: So the local authorities will be expected to do the work to underpin the outline content on behalf of developers.

Brandon Lewis: Yes—which, in effect, they do as part of their local plan anyway.

Q39 Helen Hayes: I have to say I am struggling to understand how this is different from site allocations.

Brandon Lewis: The difference is site allocation does not give planning in principle. A local authority can designate an area of land in a local plan, but it does not mean that area has planning permission, and a developer can still be turned down for planning permission even on a brownfield site that has been allocated for housing.

Q40 Helen Hayes: They cannot be turned down on grounds of the use class, though. If they put in a housing application, the fact that it is a housing application cannot be grounds for turning down the application; there have to be other grounds within the application.

Brandon Lewis: There will be grounds for turning down, but they can turn down planning in principle on a piece of land that is allocated in a local plan at the moment. What we are saying is it will be for local authorities to say, “We want to help speed up the process on this piece of land and we think it is appropriate for this kind of area of units. We will give planning in principle, but you still have to come back to us on the detail.”

Q41 Jo Cox: Given that one of the quoted objectives of this policy is to get rid of delays, I am just wondering if you have made any assessment about how much this is going to speed things up.

Brandon Lewis: I will be publishing all of those kinds of details as part of the Housing Bill.

Q42 Jo Cox: The last thing we heard about in terms of unlocking development was that we were going to see details of a £1 billion fund. What is the timeline on that being launched?

Brandon Lewis: There is no timeline at the moment. Again, this is one of the things we are working through with the local authorities and partners at the moment and will form part of what we do with the brownfield land registry in the Housing Bill as well.

Q43 Jo Cox: Will we maybe see that this year? Is there no timeline at all?

Brandon Lewis: I am not going to take a guesstimate at the moment on when we will be publishing that.

Q44 Jo Cox: Who will be able to apply for funds from that fund? Again, can you give a bit of detail on that?

Brandon Lewis: Not at the moment, no.

Q45 Jo Cox: Will it include funding to help with contaminated land?

Brandon Lewis: Yes. The whole point of that fund is to help make brownfield land more viable and available, so, yes, it will be that kind of thing, but I would not want to prescribe specific things at the moment.

Q46 Jo Cox: We will look forward to more details on that. Will parties carrying out development on zoned sites be required to pay contributions towards local infrastructure to support an increased population or provide affordable housing?

Brandon Lewis: The changes in terms of the planning in principle do not have an impact in terms of whether there is an appropriate Section 106 agreement or community infrastructure levy payment. There is no change.

Q47 Chair: Just to pick up two points, the £1 billion is generally very much to be welcomed. I realise here it reflects back on a recommendation the Committee made in the last Parliament about dealing with contaminated sites. What is the timescale for this £1 billion? Is it £1 billion over several years or £1 billion a year?

Brandon Lewis: It is over a period of time—over several years.

Q48 Chair: What period of time?

Brandon Lewis: Over several years. Again, I will come back with the detail on that when we publish it.

Q49 Chair: Is it all new money, or does it include any existing funds available for this purpose?

Brandon Lewis: The brownfield fund will be coming from the money we raise from selling off the high-value properties. In that sense, it is new money.

Q50 Chair: It is all new money.

Brandon Lewis: Yes.

Q51 Chair: And when we have more details, we will be shown exactly how the money is going to be raised.

Brandon Lewis: Yes. As we said in the manifesto, this is part of the package of the benefits from selling the high-value properties.

Q52 Chair: High-value council houses.

Brandon Lewis: Yes.

Q53 Chair: Which are also going to fund the Right to Buy and housing associations.

Brandon Lewis: Yes.

Q54 Chair: Okay. We will have all that explained in more detail to us.

Brandon Lewis: Which again is part of the Housing Bill, yes.

Chair: We will look forward to this Housing Bill when it comes out.

Brandon Lewis: I am planning on being fairly busy for the next few months.

Q55 Chair: Can I just make clear again about this zoning and the brownfield sites that are going to be considered for housing? The decision to allocate those sites for housing is a local authority matter.

Brandon Lewis: Yes.

Q56 Chair: And it is the local authority's decision if those sites go on the register.

Brandon Lewis: Yes; whether they will put them forward for the register. What we will be saying to local authorities in terms of accepting them onto the register is we will be looking at whether the site is genuinely available and deliverable, whether it is free of constraints that cannot be mitigated, whether it is capable of development—i.e. the viability point—and whether it is capable of supporting five or more dwellings. Up to what scale is a matter for the local authority.

Q57 Chair: Okay. But the rest of that decision-making process rests with the local authority.

Brandon Lewis: Yes.

Q58 Julian Knight: Minister, in January, the Chancellor branded the compulsory-purchase laws in this country as “outdated”. I do not think anybody would particularly disagree with that. In the light of that, why do you need two attempts, effectively, to improve compulsory purchase processes? What specific options are you considering for the second phase?

Brandon Lewis: You make a fair point. I am not going to argue with the Committee on that. Let me just explain why we are doing this in stages. There is an issue around trying to speed up the process as quickly as we can. It is an issue about getting done some of the things that we think are fairly clear cut that we can get on and deal with, so at least we get some opportunity to speed up the process at the earliest opportunity, whilst then at a second opportunity we look at some of the longer-term wider reviews that we might do. We will be publishing fairly shortly a detailed response to the recent consultation on compulsory purchase reform. What I can say is there is pretty broad support for the measures, and I know the Committee itself has been fairly positive about these things in the past, so we can take forward some of the legislation. This will be, again, something we will be doing through legislation soon. Some of the things that have been put forward have come through the consultation itself; we are just looking at these in terms of some of the additional reforms that we might be able to do, but we are looking at bringing forward proposals during the course of this autumn.

Q59 Julian Knight: Can you give me a little bit of an insight in terms of what has been put forward?

Brandon Lewis: Not at this moment in time, but we are looking to publish this autumn, and I am very happy to write to the Committee as soon as we are ready.

Q60 Julian Knight: There must have been one particular item, though, that time and again they have come back and said, "Okay, you are dealing with the speed of the process and everything else like that, but this second tranche of reforms really should include..."

Brandon Lewis: There is a range of things. The main features included a review of guidance for acquiring authorities themselves on value for money. Some of the legislative changes focused on process. If you want to look at something in particular, there is the implementation of the CPOs and the payment of compensation, which is looking at the notice periods before entry to the property is taken, streamlining the Government's decision-making process, extending some of the relief available when High Court challenges to a confirmed CPO are successful, and allowing early advance payments of compensation as well. There is a range of things there and there are other things we are looking at as well, but, as I say, we will publish a bit more during the course of this autumn. I do mean autumn rather than winter.

Q61 Julian Knight: Thank you for that. Do you anticipate with this second phase of reforms that you are going to need primary legislation to enact them?

Brandon Lewis: I am not sure I would want to pre-judge that just yet. We might do, but we will have to wait and see.

Q62 Julian Knight: There is a lot of waiting and seeing, is there not, at the moment?

Brandon Lewis: Yes. It is part of the challenge when you have a Housing Bill coming in the next few weeks. I am afraid I do have to sit on a few things. If you can just have a bit of patience, we will be publishing the Housing Bill in October, so there is not too long to wait.

Q63 Chair: Is it definitely October?

Brandon Lewis: October.

Chair: This year.

Brandon Lewis: You say that like we have had this conversation before, Chairman, but, yes, October 2015.

Q64 Mary Robinson: Looking at the proposals that will enable the Government to legislate to allow major infrastructure projects with an

element of housing, how do you expect that local communities will be engaged in this scheme?

Brandon Lewis: Local communities will still be engaged. I expect the number of schemes that have housing in to be relatively limited—bearing in mind we only have about 15 per year on average coming through that scheme in total, if you then take the number of those that might have a housing element to them it is a relatively small number of proposals—but there is a lot of consultation. It still goes through consultation with local communities in the way a planning application would as well. We are not planning on changing that process; it is purely around allowing some of those that go through that system to have a housing element to them. At the moment, they are precluded from going through it, so this might well open up some to be able to have some housing element to them. As I say, bearing in mind there are only about 15 a year anyway, it will be a relatively small number that are being dealt with in the first place.

Q65 Mary Robinson: Inevitably, it will be seen as being a centralised decision though. Looking at the Localism Act and the involvement of local communities, how will things like health, education and transport needs and those aspects of the local authority's remit be dealt with?

Brandon Lewis: Local authorities submit local impact reports to the Planning Inspectorate that detail any impact of a proposed development. That will carry on as it is at the moment and, as I say, making sure the local community is fully engaged and consulted in the process, as it is at the moment.

Q66 Mary Robinson: In terms of the consultation, who, or what bodies, do you expect will be consulted?

Brandon Lewis: Local authorities have a role. They feed in. As I say, they feed in some of the impact reports as well. The consultation with the local community has to be strong otherwise, when it goes forward for consideration and examination, it will be challenged, which is exactly as the process is today for major infrastructure projects.

Q67 Mary Robinson: You have spoken about the small number of these projects with housing associated with them. How much extra housing would you expect to deliver?

Brandon Lewis: That is difficult to judge at the moment, but, as I say, because there are only about 15 projects a year that go through that infrastructure planning regime anyway, if you then allow for how many of those might have a housing element, in terms of the number it will not be all of that 15 on average; it will be a smaller number than that.

It will be a relatively small number of applications. But bear in mind these are major infrastructure projects, so there is always the potential for some of them to have a housing element. If they do have a housing element, I can foresee that being a large number of houses but on a small number of sites. That is why it is important that both local authorities and communities have that say. As I say, in the process as it works at the moment they are consulted and involved, and the process will not change.

Q68 Mary Robinson: In areas such as Manchester where a lot of this is going to be devolved to the mayor, is there going to be any conflict in terms of this centralised decision making as the devolution process is going through?

Brandon Lewis: No. This is a process that has been in place for some time; this is not a change. What this is doing is allowing some of those large-scale developments that at the moment are precluded from having a housing element to them to have a housing element should it be appropriate. This is a facilitative thing rather than a centralisation.

Q69 Helen Hayes: What weight will be given to local authorities' impact statements within the decision-making process? Unlike other elements of infrastructure, housing is peculiar in that it generates additional burdens on local authorities in terms of some of the local authorities' statutory responsibilities for providing school places, providing public health services and so forth. Are the local authorities' impact statements simply representations into the planning process or will any additional weight be given to them in relation to the impact on statutory functions of local authorities?

Brandon Lewis: The impact assessments they put in are given weight. We are not changing the system. What we are looking at doing is allowing some of those applications that come into the system to have an element of housing, which at the moment they are not. That is the only change. We are consulting with partners in local government and other interested parties at the moment to just look at the details of some of this before it is implemented. The changes will be to primary legislation. We are looking to bring this forward in the Housing Bill, so there will be more detail in the Housing Bill, but I just would stress again we are not changing the process; all we are doing is allowing housing to be an element within applications that come through that infrastructure scheme for planning.

Q70 Helen Hayes: I am not understanding why that is not a change in the process. Housing applications are normally locally determined and they will be determined as part of a national—

Brandon Lewis: Yes, but you asked about local authorities putting forward their impact assessments. They are already part of the system now, in terms of the national infrastructure planning regime. That will not change; they will still have weight in the way they do today. Those 15 applications on average that come through have an impact on local authorities, because they are major infrastructure developments. At the moment, though, you cannot have something come through the system that has any element of housing. All we are doing is allowing them to have an element of housing. The fact the local authority will still feed into that system its local impact assessments will remain as an important part of that process.

Q71 Helen Hayes: National infrastructure has an impact on local areas—agreed. It does not typically have an impact that generates the need for additional services to be provided locally because there is an expansion in the population as a consequence of new housing development. That is the difference.

Brandon Lewis: Yes, other than that national infrastructure projects can have an impact on a local area. For example, it could be a nuclear facility that has an impact on the area in terms of workforce and employment that then needs housing. What this would do is allow an area like that to potentially have housing as part of that, particularly if it is ancillary for some of the staff on site and that kind of thing. So, yes, but that is why it is important that local authorities' impact assessments are part of the process and will remain so. The point I am making is they do have that power now. They are used to it; they know how it works, and that is not changing.

Q72 Mr Prisk: Just quickly, if I may, on that, where a new power station is built, if a new settlement is deemed to be required alongside that, that would fall within these new rules.

Brandon Lewis: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that if the developer of that piece of national infrastructure wants to include housing within that site, it can do. At the moment, it cannot; under the new regime, it will be able to. We will publish the details of this in the Bill. At the moment, if something like that goes ahead, it would have an implication for needing potentially more housing for workforce anyway. If it is elsewhere then it is dealt with as a separate planning application; it will only be if it is within the same application on the same site in the same development.

Q73 Mr Prisk: So, conditionality and being ancillary are critical to this.

Brandon Lewis: Yes.

Q74 Chair: If a nuclear power station is going to be built somewhere where there is not one and you are going to need a workforce of several thousands, would the housing requirements that follow on from that nuclear power station all be considered now as part of this consideration of the major projects and not be considered by the local authority as part of its local planning process?

Brandon Lewis: Potentially, the housing element could be taken through the national infrastructure project, but that is what we are working through with local authorities at the moment. As I say, this is something the detail of which will be in the Housing Bill.

Q75 Chair: That is quite a major change, is it not?

Brandon Lewis: Bearing in mind there are only 15 applications a year on average, in terms of the number that can come through, it is relatively small.

Q76 Alison Thewliss: Could I ask if there would be any thought given to the designation of types of housing that might come as part of that? Say it was a large hospital complex; might there be keyworker housing associated with that as part of the planning process?

Brandon Lewis: The development in itself would have to classify as major national infrastructure, so it would have to be quite a large-scale development in the first place, but the point of the change is to make sure that, if there is a potential housing element, it can benefit from going through the national major infrastructure planning framework in the first place. What type of housing it is is very much a secondary issue. Whether it can go through the process is separate to the planning decision that is made on it by the Planning Inspectorate, which would take into account all of the things they usually do in terms of any planning application. Again, we are consulting with partners on this as part of what will be in the Housing Bill.

Q77 Alison Thewliss: It seems to me there could be an opportunity there to designate that. If it is keyworkers that are going to come and work in whatever this facility might be, they might not be the best paid, but you might have an opportunity there to say, "As part of this development, you are going to need people living nearby," and designate that appropriately.

Brandon Lewis: I understand the point you are making, but that is a slightly different issue from whether something can be part of that national planning infrastructure. That is a matter for the individual application—whether a planning inspector would approve it or not, or

take a view on the type of housing. I would not want to pre-judge a decision maker's view on that. I understand the point you are making.

Q78 Mr Prisk: Turning to individual planning applications and the efficiency of the system, something like 75% of all major applications are dealt with within 13 weeks, and 70%, we understand, of minor applications are dealt with within eight weeks. Some people are asking what exactly you see as the problem. Is it the system, or is it individual planning authorities within the system?

Brandon Lewis: In terms of the performance ratio?

Mr Prisk: Yes.

Brandon Lewis: It is just making that clear point about the fact that some local authorities—actually, to be fair, all local authorities—have really picked up their game over the last few years. A good point is, as you say, over 80% of minor applications are decided on time. It is just making sure there is that confidence there for people coming through the system that development applications will be processed efficiently and effectively, and the local authorities are getting these through the system as quickly as possible, so we start hopefully to move away from people complaining that one of the challenges for delivering housing is the planning system. If the planning system is efficient and effective, it can deliver good-quality housing in good time.

Q79 Alison Thewliss: Just to pick up on my colleague's point there, if the planning system is reasonably efficient and approvals are being made in reasonable time, is perhaps the issue more about land and the need for remediation on brownfield sites? It goes back to the point about the need for the fund, that there are other things inhibiting the granting of applications other than officers perhaps not having enough time.

Brandon Lewis: There is a whole range of things, in the sense that, if you look at the planning system right the way through to delivering houses—this comes back to the core point—I would argue there is no one single thing you can do that suddenly changes the entire system. It is about making sure that you are looking at every facet of it and making sure, in every area, you have the framework correct and as supportive, or as efficient and effective, as possible.

I am personally particularly keen on making sure we do everything we can to encourage more small and medium-sized companies—not just sites—into building, because there has been something like a 75% drop-off in the number of small buildings. To put that in context, at its peak, something like 15,000 homes a year were built on small sites; it is now just under 3,000. Planning permissions themselves are going up; they hit just over 261,000, which is great. The system is delivering planning permissions. We want to make sure they are in as efficient and effective a time as possible, because one of the barriers to entry can be the cost and bureaucracy of the planning system, particularly for those small builders.

It comes back to the point I was making earlier on about having that plan in principle as well. That is why I am very focused and very keen on making sure we do what we can to help small and medium-sized builders. This is one of those things that can do that, particularly having that focus on minor sites. To pick up on the earlier point that was made about communities being accepting and positive about development, often they are much more accepting and positive about small-scale development. This is one of the real challenges for large-scale development.

I have a good example in my own constituency, where developers are developing out what will eventually be about 850 homes, but it is with one developer, which means that will take them the best part of 15 years. If that was broken up and had lots more smaller sites, it would be developed a lot more quickly, which would help our housing supply and help the local community, so I think those smaller sites are very, very important. Making sure the local authorities have that focus, are very clear about the importance of small sites and are giving good quality service to small developers is quite an important message to send out there as well.

Q80 Mr Prisk: Do you accept that, very often, the problem rests not with the local planning authority but with the other statutory consultees—national agencies and local? If so, what is the Government doing to speed their decision making up?

Brandon Lewis: Yes, in short. You make a very fair point. I am looking at that as well, and looking at what we can do around statutory consultees. As I said before the general election—and I appreciate I am slightly biased, because my boss now, the Secretary of State, was the

person who put together the NPPF in the first place—when he and I gave evidence early on, a few months ago now, around how the NPPF was working and delivering, I think the policy for planning is in a good place. We are seeing how that locally driven system is giving those permissions, as I just outlined, but I did say before the general election there is still more we can do around the process.

Anecdotally as well, you will often find that people say that the planning process takes too long. There are certain facets of that I think we can speed up, for the benefit of the local authorities as well as the people who want to develop the houses we want to see. You make a very fair point about keeping an eye on making sure it is as effective and as swift as possible, whether it is through the local authorities or through the statutory bodies.

Q81 Mr Prisk: The Minister seemed to be in a minority when it comes to the decision about the designation target now being 50%. When we looked at the consultation, it was quite clear: I think 38% of respondents said that there was a case for raising it above 40%. If the consultation indicated the majority of views did not agree with this change, what is the reasoning for it?

Brandon Lewis: We are ambitious to make sure we get good, speedy, fast and efficient planning.

Q82 Helen Hayes: Planning departments in local authorities in recent years have experienced cuts in their budgets, second only to the cuts made in cultural services. Are you confident that, particularly with an expected and much needed increase in the number of applications for new housing in particular, even the most efficient local authorities have the resources to process those applications and to interrogate them properly, so that we do get really high-quality decision making?

Brandon Lewis: You make a very good point: it is about good-quality decision making as well. Yes, I am, but I do think there is a need, and I will take this opportunity to just make what I think is a really important point that comes to the core of this. Local authorities do need, in some cases, to change the way they work and how they view their planning departments.

A good local authority—and there are many—understands that its planning department is effectively its economic development department as well. When a local authority is looking at the community at large to

make sure it has good-quality housing to supply the housing need for the future and good-quality development for economic and employment purposes for the future, it needs a good planning department to do that. If it wants to look at it from the internal point of view of its own finances, council tax, business rates, new homes bonus—all of these things—need a good planning department giving good-quality delivery for the future. Whichever way it looks at it, it should see its planning department as an absolutely vital part of the local authority. There is work to do on local authorities to get them all into that place, to see it in that way.

There is also a lot more that local authorities can do around sharing services, sharing management. Local government has done a phenomenal job in the last few years about sharing chief executives, sharing across HR departments, legal departments, waste and waste collection, parking and things like that—a whole range of services—but it has not really moved down that road anywhere near quickly enough or varied enough with planning. There are a couple of reasons that is important. Firstly is obviously economic pressure, around making sure it is efficient. I do not have a lot of truck for local authorities saying that they cannot afford a strong planning department. They have gone up to roughly £21 billion in reserves in the last few years; they should be looking at how they prioritise the funding they have and see it as a core, important department.

It is equally about how they can share, because there are two benefits to that, not just the cost efficiency of sharing in a way they simply do not at the moment. In an area like mine in Norfolk, we have a multitude of planning departments. That has an added challenge in terms of HR and personnel. I was a council leader in a very small local authority on the edge of London, and, to attract really good planners and a strong planning department, we had a couple of challenges. One was the financial challenge of being next door to London, where the salaries are very different; the second was being in an area that has very limited numbers of big, exciting planning developments when you are next to London and Thames Gateway. Good planners want to be where the action is.

If you are sharing, you can give a much wider opportunity for business and work satisfaction to the planner, and, by working on a bigger scale like that, give opportunities for smaller local authorities—and many districts are in this kind of position—to have some of the specialities

they need, which, when you are working in a sole local authority area, is very difficult to justify because you simply do not have the workload to cover it. Both economically and in terms of delivering good-quality planning, local authorities can go a lot further in that kind of shared management and shared delivery of planning across authorities, and potentially using the private sector as well.

Q83 David Mackintosh: Relating to certificates of local development, how does the fast-track certificate process relate to your proposals for automatic planning permission on brownfield sites? What minor development proposals will this cover?

Brandon Lewis: On that one, I am going to say we will be publishing some more details in due course for the Housing Bill, but the ethos behind them is similar to that in the brownfield sites, absolutely.

Q84 Kevin Hollinrake: My questions relate to the ending of the zero-carbon new housing commitment. I think 30% of energy usage is in the home. These commitments were brought forward in 2006 and were due to be implemented in 2016. I know these potential new rules will not have been universally popular amongst developers, but many businesses really invested heavily in the expectation that these new rules would be implemented. Do you not think that sends a wrong signal to industry generally?

Brandon Lewis: No, in short. Let me explain that a bit more widely. We do have highly efficient new homes being built at the moment and the standards have improved by just under a third, 30-odd per cent, in the last parliament. Going further now with zero-carbon homes would have added costs of something like £3,600 per unit to an average semi-detached house, and we just want to make sure that the industry has some breathing space. Having said that, the reason I say no is that some of the developers who are building to that level anyway—and I have spoken anecdotally to some developers who have said this—will carry on building to that kind of quality because that is part of their marketing, and they will sell that as a high-quality home.

That is a matter for them; that is great, and the people buying those homes will take that view, but, when we are looking to see more homes delivered and we have high-quality homes being built, we want to just make sure that the industry has a bit of breathing space to catch up with some of the new standards. Some local authorities already have them in place, and we have allowed that transition period for them to

keep their code level for properties, but we also had local authorities starting to look at code level 6 and code level 5, and then you are talking something like £25,000 to £30,000 per unit. Bear in mind, even with the vast construction, I saw some units that have had a lot of publicity recently, over the last couple of weeks, that are looking to deliver new first-time-buyer homes, and they are going to be coming in at £150,000 to £160,000. To put extra cost on top of that at a time when we want to make housing more affordable would have been a bit of a challenge, but we will keep this under review.

Q85 Kevin Hollinrake: You will accept that some businesses and developers will have business plans based on these rules, and they are going to have to tear these plans up at the moment.

Brandon Lewis: Not necessarily. We are not stopping them from building to zero-carbon quality. As I say, I have spoken to a few developers who have made the point that they have got that business plan laid out, and they will make that part of their marketing pitch: "Buy one of our houses, because it gives you this." That is good for the consumer as well, in terms of their own living costs. I am not going to override a decision of a developer to go down that road. That is good if they want to push their own building quality.

Q86 Kevin Hollinrake: These rules tied into the 2020 rules about the European building performance directive, as a stepping stone to the UK's ability to deliver near-zero-energy homes by that point in time. Does this knock us off track in terms of that objective?

Brandon Lewis: No. We have to do a report every five years, and our next report is due in 2017. We look for standards for buildings to be cost-optimal; that is why we keep them under review, and, if there is a change at that point, we will be expected, as a member state, to take appropriate action, but I am confident at the moment that the standards we have are strong.

Q87 Kevin Hollinrake: Have you done an assessment of how it will affect the market? Will it be in a positive way, in terms of more properties being built or in terms of the average house price for the properties being built?

Brandon Lewis: There is the potential there. It is more the other side of the argument, about having another regulation. If we look at what has happened across the border in Wales, where the cost of

housing, through regulations, is somewhat higher than ours, and the building levels are dramatically lower than ours, it is an indication that everything we do to make it more costly, bureaucratic and regulatory to build a house is something we should be discouraging wherever we can. Particularly, to the point you just made, if some developers are looking to go down this road with their own business case anyway and to continue that way, then market forces driving that kind of quality is fine because it means developers are looking at it and building it within their business plan.

Ultimately, though, for us to go and put another £3,000 to £4,000 of cost on to a house, once you compute that through to finished sale cost, would be unhelpful at the moment. If you go to that next stage of code level 6, we are talking something like £25,000 to £30,000, potentially, per house. That is something that, at the moment, is just not sustainable.

Q88 Kevin Hollinrake: As it says in your submission, the consumer just will not pay that extra for a house. Again, it is about creating that level playing field if we want to get to where we want to get to by 2020.

Brandon Lewis: Yes. As I said, in terms of the buildings being cost-optimal, and our standards and the quality of homes on that front, we are in a very strong place already, but that is why I make it very clear that we will keep our standards under review. Through building regulations, we have a lot of tools at our disposal to make sure we build good-quality homes, not just in design, which is hugely important, but in terms of building quality and efficiency as well.

Q89 Helen Hayes: In my experience, having worked as a planner with the development industry over many years, the industry has been very responsive to changes in the regs around carbon standards. The cost of responding to changes in regulations over time has been largely in terms of research and development, so they are one-off costs that then come down over time. What we are hearing now from the development industry is that the removal of the zero-carbon standard means, firstly, that lots of organisations that have invested in new technology in order to meet higher standards feel that that investment has been wasted, and that the lack of certainty around the Government's intentions on future carbon standards has thrown the industry into something of a chaos and a lack of certainty. What we all know is that a lack of certainty around

regulations is very bad for business. I just wonder how you answer those points and that feedback, which is coming quite strongly, in my experience, from the industry.

Brandon Lewis: We have also had the industry lobbying us around not bringing in things that add to regulation on homes, so there are always going to be people with different views on this. We simply take the view that, at a time when we are trying to get more homes built and make them as affordable as possible, when the standards are there and building regs give us the standards we want to see—with a review coming, which we will do for 2017—it is not logical for us to be increasing the cost of building in this country. The point you make around development and the kind of thing that some of the large developers do, that they will continue to build to the business models that they have already outlined as part of their marketing pitch, is quite different to what hits the worst hit already in the building industry, which are the small and medium-sized builders.

Q90 Chair: Do you think it is logical that, when the Treasury does its cost-benefit analysis of such matters, it takes into account the costs of bringing in higher-standard homes on the building industry, but does not take account of the benefits to the consumers who buy the properties?

Brandon Lewis: The point is, if you look at the quality and the fact we have got highly efficient homes now, the consumer is benefitting from that.

Q91 Chair: Yes, but the Treasury's assessment does not take account of that.

Brandon Lewis: No, but, equally, what the Treasury's assessment looks at is: what is the cost of delivering a new home? I appreciate zero carbon is slightly different, but, if you look at the cost of potentially going up to something like code level 6, you are looking at a substantial on-cost on a house. Even with zero-carbon homes, at £3,500 or £3,600 a house, that is potentially a substantial amount, particularly if you are looking at some of the entry-level homes. If you are somebody who is looking to be buying a home or delivering a home for circa £100,000, and you are putting £3,000 to £4,000, let alone £20,000 to £30,000, on the cost of the home, that is quite a percentage change in the cost of the home, and, at the moment, thanks to changes the Chancellor made, potentially more than the stamp duty on the house.

Q92 Chair: Right, but the analysis still does not take account of the benefits.

Brandon Lewis: The consumer can obviously take account of the benefit in the analysis for them and the decision about whether they buy one property over another.

Q93 Helen Hayes: I just wanted to turn briefly to the subject of the proposal to remove the need for planning consent for upward extensions in London. I wondered when you expect to be able to share your proposals on upward extensions in London and whether you plan—either the Government or the Mayor—to consult publically on them before they are finally brought into practice.

Brandon Lewis: We are working with the Mayor to develop and bring forward some proposals. I am not in a position to share the details of that with the Committee today, but I certainly will commit to sharing them with the Committee as soon as we have developed them further. We are consulting with the Mayor at the moment.

Q94 Helen Hayes: You cannot share anything further on the process, if not the content.

Brandon Lewis: Not at the moment, no.

Q95 Helen Hayes: Do you have thoughts yourself on how those proposals might take into account examples, of which there are many in London, where there is very large disparity in height between neighbouring properties, and the question of detailed design guidance and its role within the planning system?

Brandon Lewis: You tempt me to move away from the statement I have already made, which is that, no, I am not in a position to go into great detail at the moment. You make a fair point. I am not sure if I am agreeing with you; you made the point, but you may not be saying you agree with it. I think there is a logical thing to be looked at. You gave the example that there are places in London where you have very high properties with, literally in between them, a lower property. Making it easier for people to develop to come up to an equal height, creating more rooms and space in London, is a very logical thing to look at, but, as to the detail of the applications, I will publish some proposals to the Committee as soon as we have developed them a bit further.

Q96 Helen Hayes: I can think of some examples where that logic might not seem quite so straightforward in terms of the history.

Brandon Lewis: That is why we are working through this with the Mayor at the moment and we are not rushing into doing anything too quickly.

Q97 David Mackintosh: Moving onto local enterprise partnerships and enterprise zones, what guidance do you provide to LEPs on co-operating to bring benefits to disadvantaged communities across boundaries? How do you gather evidence on what has proved to be effective?

Brandon Lewis: I am going to do effectively what I hear a lot about in America; I think the American equivalent is pleading the Fifth. The Secretary of State, I and Mark Francois, the Minister for Devolution, can give you here next week far more detail on local enterprise zones than I will within my remit. I have experience of local enterprise zones from being a Minister of the Department, and I have a local enterprise partnership and an enterprise zone in my own constituency. They do work quite differently in different areas, potentially. One of the benefits is that they can work on what is right for them locally.

I come back to a point I made much earlier this evening around breaking away from that administrative boundary that was pre-set by somebody with a pen many years ago in local government and working to a proper economic boundary. One of your own members, one of my predecessors, Mr Prisk, was very much a part of putting this together some time ago, so I am slightly conscious of making too many predictions around local enterprise zones in front of one of the people who designed them and brought them forward, but it is very much for those local enterprise partnerships themselves, working with local partners, to develop what works for them, again, locally—going back to the point I made earlier on, what is right for them locally—and then to put that to us. As I say, you will have an opportunity to speak to both the Minister for Devolution and Secretary of State next week on that.

Q98 David Mackintosh: I take the point that it is not your key area and, admittedly, I did work with Mr Prisk and you in a previous capacity on enterprise zones. One thing I would just feed back is that, whilst the Department for Communities and Local Government is very good at enterprise zones, there is an issue about other Government Departments perhaps not taking their responsibilities in terms of land

availability seriously. It is a message worth taking back to other colleagues.

Brandon Lewis: That is a fair point and I will do. Thank you.

Q99 Mary Robinson: The availability of land for housing is something that will be key to all of this, and the One Public Estate programme has gone some way towards addressing it. It is designed to allow local authorities to work with central Government and other local agencies to make land available from their own estate. How will you encourage Departments and local authorities to release their surplus and underused land for new housing?

Brandon Lewis: We are working across the Government, across Departments, at the moment, through meetings I have with colleagues, but we also have an implementation taskforce, which represents various Government Departments, that is meeting and talking on this issue. We will be making some more detailed announcements on that as part of the spending review in the autumn statement.

Q100 Mary Robinson: Will this be encouragement or coercion? Will there be incentives?

Brandon Lewis: I have to say there is a unified view across the Government that we want to make sure we are delivering the housing that this country needs and making really good use of the land that we have, coming back to the point I made earlier on around making good use of land that is out there. There is a real challenge in making sure that we get good use out of some of the public-sector land, not just Department land, but looking at the land that the NHS trusts and local authorities have access to, and every other part of the public sector.

That works on two levels. One is making sure we are delivering the housing that we need, and we set ourselves an ambitious target for that in terms of releasing that public land. It is also about making sure that we are encouraging different parts of the public sector—local authorities are a good example of this—to make good use of the assets they have, whether it is about releasing certain areas of land for development, whether it is using land for rental, which of course helps the council's own income stream as well, but making sure it is delivering the housing it needs locally and being very consciously aware of the land that it has and how it is using it.

Q101 Mary Robinson: You have set a target, as you say, of 150,000 new homes to be built on this surplus public-sector land. Just how ambitious is the target? Is it something that is realistic between now and 2020?

Brandon Lewis: It is an ambitious target, but I do not think we make any apologies for that. We need to deliver more houses. I have said quite openly on the record that we have not built enough houses in this country for several decades now, and we need to do our bit at every opportunity. Delivering the kind of housing we want to see is about making sure that, in every facet, on the supply side as well as the demand side, the framework is right, and delivering some public sector land as part of that is important. We set ourselves a target in the last Parliament of about 100,000, and we exceeded that, but we want to go further.

That also does mean involving the whole of the public sector. I am really pleased to be joint-chair, with the Mayor of London, on the new London Land Commission as well, which is looking at some of the land. TfL are looking at their estate and how they use it, which also plays into the transport hubs and making sure we are making really good use of some of those opportunities there. It is about taking a pretty holistic approach to this, being more imaginative about how we use the land we have and making sure it is being properly used, whether it is by Government Departments or by agencies and, indeed, local government itself.

Q102 Mary Robinson: The target must relate in some way to an assessment of the land available. How did you set the target? Has some sort of assessment taken place?

Brandon Lewis: If you bear with us, we will be going into more detail as part of the spending review about what different Departments are doing and how we are going to deliver on that 150,000. That is another one where I am afraid you are going to have to bear with us just a little bit longer.

Q103 Mr Prisk: I have two brief supplementaries on this. First, does the system now allow Departments to retain receipt, in whole or in part, or is the money still transferred back to the Treasury? I have always felt that allowing Departments to retain some of the receipts encourages them. The second question is perhaps looking at it from the other way. Making land available for providing homes does not have to

mean selling the freehold. In some ways, Government is better able to ensure that it gets the most homes from surplus land by retaining ownership and being a development partner. Does the system also permit for that? If it does, the chances of getting more land to come forward and having good value for the taxpayer are great. First, is retaining receipts permissible within the system? Secondly, is there a recognition that selling of the land is not necessary, in some cases, in order to get the homes built?

Brandon Lewis: On the first part, yes. As you outlined, that has been the system that operates in the Government, but all these things are under review in terms of how the system operates. It is slightly different for other parts of the public sector. For example, if it is an NHS trust, then that is an independent body, and I want to encourage them to use their land as much as I do any given Government Department, but their land is their land and the receipts from that are theirs. I still think is an important part of the public sector, and the same with TfL, as I touched on a few moments ago.

In terms of what we do with land, you make a very good point on that. It is why I was very keen that we developed direct commissioning. We announced it in the autumn statement last year, and we are now moving forward with direct commissioning on the site at Northstowe, which is ex-MOD land in Cambridgeshire, and working with the local authorities there to develop what could be 10,000-plus homes. We are master planning that and directly commissioning that. Whether it is direct commissioning in terms of physically building the houses or direct commissioning in terms of then commissioning somebody to build it in sections and master planning it, it does give a whole range of opportunities. There are similar opportunities in areas like Ebbsfleet and others. We did say Northstowe would be an area where we would test out this kind of direct commissioning. I think it is an opportunity for us to look at making sure we have—coming back to the point I made earlier—a really good quality of master planning, a really good mix of tenures, if we think that is appropriate, whether it is starter homes, the private rented sector, affordable housing, social housing or housing for the straight private market.

That really good mix means—I have used this phrase, I think, even in this Committee, before—we are not just building great big housing estates, but we are actually building a community hub with a heart to it. That is one of the really important opportunities, even at Ebbsfleet as well, which is not quite direct commissioning, but we have the UDC there

and some Homes and Communities Agency land at Northfleet. It is a really important opportunity, and it is important we make that work, to show that it can be done, and at a good quality and good speed. It is also an opportunity to try to show that you can build homes without necessarily taking 20 weeks to build a house. That is a big impact on housing supply, if we can speed up the delivery, and that does then open up opportunities on other pieces of Government land to look at that kind of option, yes, absolutely.

Q104 Kevin Hollinrake: The principle behind this is to release surplus public sector land. Is it possible to compel those organisations to publically identify those sites as being public? There might be a redundant site and nobody knows who owns it. A local developer might spot that land and realise that. If this is a Government initiative, they can help to be your eyes and ears and to get this land back into use.

Brandon Lewis: Yes, absolutely. There are two sides to that. One is that, if areas have got land they want to develop or think is appropriate for development, whether it is a Department, an agency or a local authority body, etc., we are keen to work with them. Whether it is through capacity funding for large sites, garden cities, housing zones or various other opportunities there, we will always work with them, either directly or through the Homes and Communities Agency, which does work very closely with the local authorities and partners on these kinds of developments.

Yes, I am very keen to get the message out there that, if it is a Member of Parliament who knows of an area in their own constituency where there is a piece of land that is clearly public sector land, has not been used for 10 years and everybody seems to have forgotten about it, they should let us know. Equally, I spoke to the new chairman, now Lord Porter, of the Local Government Association about this very issue recently. It is for local authorities and councils as well, and I would say to the general public, if anybody is reading *Hansard*, please do, if you know of areas, feed into us through Members of Parliament and local authorities around those.

I would go further. It is not just looking at those disused pieces of land, and I have no doubt people will be able to think of some in their own constituencies potentially, but also about making sure we are using the estates in a rational way. If, in an area, we find there is an agency or Government office of one type or another that has a four-storey building

and is using one floor, and half a mile down the road there is another one using half a floor or something, and that kind of thing, let us look at that, so we can start to make sure—touching Mrs Robinson’s point around the One Public Estate programme—that we are using land we have efficiently and effectively right across the country.

I make no bones about the fact that local communities, local Members of Parliament, councillors and residents will often be in a really good position from which to spot those kinds of opportunities, whether it is land or building use, to make sure that we are taking account of it. Sometimes there will be very good reasons for that to be as it is, but there is no harm in us making sure we challenge that.

Q105 Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, if they were compelled to identify them. Just moving on from that, public sector organisations have a responsibility to get best value for the taxpayer. I think we would all agree that what we are really short of in the UK is more affordable homes, but most homes are delivered by an 80:20 ratio of open market to affordable, as a rough figure. If you removed that responsibility to get the best price on that land, you could deliver a lot more affordable homes: 20% open market, maybe, to 80% affordable. It would mean the receipt to the taxpayers was much lower, but there would be an overall benefit in terms of the numbers of affordable homes we were able to provide. Is that something that the Treasury might consider?

Brandon Lewis: We always have these kinds of issues under review. I sense the response from the Chairman, but we do always have these kinds of issues under review. One of the issues local authorities particularly could also look at, in terms of how they are using their own estates as well, is that they have to ensure they are getting best value. They can assess, in terms of best value, whether that best value is taking account of the added value to their community from using property and land within their area for housing. There is a strong feeling right across the Government—the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have been very clear about this—that we will be doing our bit and being very ambitious around making sure we make as much public-sector land available for housing as we can. We have set that target of 150,000, which is ambitious, but it is important we hit that and, if possible, even exceed it.

Q106 Mary Robinson: Very often, local authority and public sector land will be disused land in the middle of communities. It may not be used for any particular purpose, but it is often valued by the people

who live in the environs of that land. What protections would you put in place in order to safeguard those parcels of land that are centred within communities?

Brandon Lewis: Ultimately, that is a matter for the local community. We can encourage local authorities to make sure they are making good use of their land. If they take a view that that piece of land is particularly well used and appropriate in the use it is currently in, that is a matter for them, but we have a real shortage of housing in this country, and local authorities need to bear that in mind. What we cannot afford to do is all agree that we need more housing as long as we put it somewhere else.

Q107 Chair: I was reading the National Audit Office's report into a previous target the Department had to see the building of 100,000 new homes on surplus public sector land. The National Audit Office said there was no basis the Department had for assuming that the 100,000 target was a target that could be reached. The Permanent Secretary got a really hard time at the Public Accounts Committee when she went there trying to defend the policy. Can we be sure that the 150,000 target is based on more robust evidence than the 100,000 target previously?

Brandon Lewis: We exceeded the 100,000 target in the last Parliament, and I make no apologies, as I said earlier on, for being ambitious that we need to go further. We need to deliver more houses; we need to make sure we are using the public estate as efficiently and effectively as possible. More details around some of the numbers will be there as part of the spending review in the autumn statement.

Q108 Chair: Would it be reasonable, then, to ask the Department to produce an annual report on progress towards this target, how many houses have been built during the course of a year, what those houses are, how many are affordable, how many are owner-occupied and how many are rented?

Brandon Lewis: I am not planning on producing it on an annual basis in that form at the moment, although I have no doubt that you will challenge me on it a year from now regardless, partly because of what that does not account for on a year-to-year basis. If I can use an analogy, the Right to Buy is a really good example of this. From the sale of a house to when a replacement comes in, bearing in mind the reinvigorated Right to Buy is a one-for-one replacement, we have allowed three years. If, in the first year, I am answering that question, and let us say, for example, some Government land is released today, the reality is

that getting that through a planning process and building on that land next year is a separate issue. Coming back to you and writing to the Committee in a year's time about the land that has been identified and released is a different matter, but having what was built out would give a false representation. If you are looking at what is assessed and what has been released, then giving you an update in a year's time is a reasonable thing to do.

Q109 Chair: The actual target, then, to be clear, in this Parliament is not to actually build the 150,000; it is to release land on which 150,000 homes can be built.

Brandon Lewis: It is to release land on which 150,000 homes can be built. If we are direct commissioning, we have more control over when those properties are built, but, if we are not direct commissioning, then that is a matter for the local market.

Q110 Chair: Conditions could be put on the release of the land, could they not?

Brandon Lewis: There are opportunities for that, but there are conditions with any planning application anyway.

Q111 Chair: In disposing of the site, the landowner could put conditions on as well.

Brandon Lewis: Yes.

Q112 Chair: The Government could look at putting conditions, then.

Brandon Lewis: Bear in mind not all sites are Government-owned, but conditions can be put on sites, yes.

Q113 Chair: Taking the lead from CLG, will it be an initiative of CLG to encourage other Government Departments who are releasing land to do that?

Brandon Lewis: The problem with doing that in a blanket approach is there will be different nuances on every site.

Chair: Or to consider doing it on each site.

Brandon Lewis: Considering putting some conditions on sites about build-out rates is not an unreasonable thing to look at, but it would depend on the individual site and the individual package.

Chair: Yes, I understand that.

Q114 Julian Knight: Minister, earlier you bemoaned the lack of integration of planning departments and cross-border co-operation between local authorities. With that in mind, will you be requiring the newly created combined authorities to develop long-term strategic plans, and what processes will they be expected to follow?

Brandon Lewis: That depends. Different areas, as they go through, will be negotiating different things about what they want. That will be very much a part of the negotiations in terms of what extra things the areas want to take on board as part of their combined authority or, indeed, as part of their devolution deals.

Q115 Julian Knight: There are certain prerequisites, though, to devolution. In my own constituency in Solihull, we are told quite clearly that there is no devolution without, for example, an elected mayor. Would something such as strategic planning be also a potential requisite before they obtain these powers given from the centre?

Brandon Lewis: Devolution deals do give an opportunity for local areas to work more strategically. Greater Manchester is a good example; they have very much wanted to see that taken on board, but that is not at the moment a prerequisite.

Q116 Julian Knight: With any sort of devolution that extends to planning, do you anticipate problems? We are both Members of Parliament who represent constituencies next to large urban areas and large urban conurbations. Is there not going to be an enormous difficulty in terms of having planning across combined authorities, more so than there would be when it comes to just, for example, integration of planning departments?

Brandon Lewis: I am not sure that it should see any more difficulty because they have been a combined authority. If anything, I would think that, if areas were coming together with a common purpose across a combined authority, it would make it easier for them to come to agreement about their common area, so, if anything, I would think it has the potential to make life somewhat easier. In my constituency, I have an urban conurbation in the middle of me and to the side of me, and a

quite sparse, watery area to the other side of me. One of the big challenges is for the areas around those urban areas that are growing and looking to grow, and that is part of the duty to co-operate.

Areas need to work together on that kind of thing. I would have thought, as a combined authority, when areas were coming together and having that grown-up conversation about working together for the interests of a wider area, that the ability to then come to an agreement about their housing provision, if anything, would be easier, rather than more complicated.

Q117 Julian Knight: I hope so. How do you think they would work together with adjacent local authorities as a combined authority who will be affected by their plans?

Brandon Lewis: In what sense?

Julian Knight: In terms of the Greater Manchester example you just mentioned there, Minister, if that is going to impact on a local authority next door—say in Cheshire or to the north of Manchester—I am just wondering how you anticipate these combined authorities working together with these local authorities.

Brandon Lewis: With the local authorities that are outside the combined authority?

Julian Knight: Yes.

Brandon Lewis: The duty to co-operate is still in place when they are developing their local plans, so that would develop in the same way as it has done.

Q118 Chair: Minister, we have discussed some quite important issues today about planning policy. These were trailed by the Chancellor in his Budget and then formally launched by the Business Secretary in the document “Fixing the Foundations”. Does that at least give the impression that planning policy is now driven by other Departments in Government?

Brandon Lewis: Planning policy has an impact across a range of Departments, potentially. Various things we do through planning are impacted by or have an impact on other Departments, but, no, the planning section is part of the productivity plan, but it is not the only thing in the productivity plan.

Q119 Chair: There was not much more in it, was there?

Brandon Lewis: It has an outline in there. We have also had the rural productivity plan, which the Secretary of State for Defra launched just a few weeks ago as well, which builds on the same things for rural areas. Defra is a logical Department for that to have an impact and effect on. I think it goes to quite the opposite; it shows a very joined-up approach from the Government. We are working together to make sure we are delivering it, as we are across the delivery of public sector land as well. What you are seeing is a very joined-up, cohesive and determined approach from us, right across the Government, from the Chancellor and the Prime Minister right the way through to every Department, to make sure we are getting the structure and the framework right to deliver the houses we want to see built across our country.

Q120 Chair: Minister, on that point, thank you very much indeed for coming this afternoon to answer so many questions from the Committee. You have promised to write to us on a number of points as well.

Brandon Lewis: Yes. As I said earlier, if I am invited, I am very happy to come back and discuss some of the Housing Bill things further in due course.

Chair: Yes. We will probably take that offer up as well, and we look forward to seeing you again next week.