



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Rt Hon Lucy Frazer KC MP

Minister of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for London

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

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Lord Cameron of Dillington
Chair, Land Use in England Committee
House of Lords
SW1A 0PW

28 November 2022

Dear Chair,

Thank you for your letter of 9 November to Rt Hon Michael Gove MP asking for a ministerial perspective on the land use questions and challenges that fall to this department. I am responding on the Secretary of State's behalf.

Government is clear that the purpose of the land use planning system in England is to promote sustainable development. This means that the system must deliver positive economic, social, and environmental outcomes. We recognise the complex challenges brought about by climate change and biodiversity loss combined with the need to respond to the housing crisis and enable economic growth. As set out in the Levelling Up White Paper and in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, we are bringing forward changes to the system so that it can more readily respond to these complex challenges. On the seven specific questions you raised, I am happy to provide answers in turn below:

1. What are your views on the broad challenges and opportunities of land use in England, and how do these relate to DLUHC priorities?

The planning system, including the National Planning Policy Framework, supports local authorities to manage land in their areas by providing a streamlined, cohesive framework within which locally-prepared plans for housing and other development can be produced. The planning system through national and local policy and regulation also sets the parameters for the buildings, streets and spaces that is then delivered on land. The recognised challenges that fall within my interests are: how to ensure we use land (which is a finite and precious resource) for the right purpose in order to deliver what communities need, while protecting and enhancing our natural habitats and built heritage, supporting agriculture and enabling appropriate economic activities in urban and rural settings (including jobs, energy, transport, waste and other public services and infrastructure). This will also require making balanced judgements about what change of land use and the resulting development is appropriate in what location.

Today we need to be even more holistic and sophisticated about how we use land as we face into the challenges of supporting economic growth, the journey to net zero and climate adaptation; all of which play out in land use planning. With DEFRA and colleagues across ALBs we are increasing the means to enable local authorities to address these challenges. Two current examples, through the publication of the National Model Design Code and pathfinder programme working with 25 local areas, we have provided the parameters for local authorities to use in addressing the use of land to meet issues as diverse as active travel,

sustainable urban drainage or BNG. Through our digital planning programme, we have developed a new platform for spatial data for local authorities to use in preparing local plans and policies. As we develop the policies for new-style, digital local plans, as proposed in the LURB, there is the opportunity to go further to deepen the role of local plans to address some of the issues outlined in this letter.

The planning system supports a flexible approach that local authorities can tailor to the specific nature and extent of the land use demands facing their local area – it is right that these decisions are taken at local level. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill sets out reforms to the local plan-making system. Plans will be produced more quickly, and the content of plans will be simplified. Plans will also enjoy greater weight in the decision-making process, reducing the opportunity for unplanned development to be approved. This will result in a more effective system that is easier to engage with, whilst providing communities with a greater say in how they want their areas to develop.

As set out in the Levelling Up White Paper, the planning system is a key enabler of the Government's wider mission to level-up the country and regenerate left-behind places. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill includes powers to support our approach to achieving this, which is through reforms to:

- deliver high quality design and beautiful places, and protect our heritage
- enable the right infrastructure to come forward where it is needed
- enhance local democracy and engagement
- foster better environmental outcomes
- allow neighbourhoods to shape their surroundings, as this is where the impact of planning is most immediately felt.

The Environment Act provides a big opportunity to refine the balance in land-use planning, through the introduction of mandatory biodiversity net gain, which is due to be implemented next year, and through Local Nature Recovery Strategies, which will assist local authorities in planning for nature. We are working closely with DEFRA on these policies, as outlined below.

2. The Government's food strategy, published in June 2022, included a commitment to publish "a land use framework that will reflect all our objectives for English Agriculture, the environment and net zero". What involvement has DLUHC had in the development of this framework, and what implications might it have for the work of your department?

DEFRA worked with DLUHC while developing the broad proposals and the strategy as published was agreed by the department through the usual collective agreement process. We will continue to work with DEFRA as the approach to the framework develops, and will assess potential implications for DLUHC as it does.

The National Planning Policy Framework already includes protections for the best and most versatile agricultural land and sets an expectation that Local Planning Authorities proactively plan in ways that protect nature and support mitigation of and adaptation to climate change. We have set out our intention to publish our vision for the revised NPPF, detailing what the new framework will look like and how it will continue to support wider government objectives.

3. During our inquiry we have heard about the problems caused by lack of joined up policy across government departments. How are you ensuring that policy is joined up with DEFRA? What land use matters, if any, are covered by cross-departmental structures?

We engage on a broad spectrum of issues. The approach adopted changes depending on the specifics being addressed. One example was the nutrient pollution 'Taskforce', which was co-chaired by Ministers from both departments, and which led to an announcement on the next steps for addressing this issue in July. We also work closely with DEFRA as members of the 25 Year Environment Plan Board.

We committed in the Environment Act to delivering statutory guidance for how local planning authorities should have regard to local nature recovery strategies. We are doing that jointly with DEFRA, and we will have firm guidance for local planning authorities to have regard to LNRSSs.

We are also working closely with DEFRA to make sure that we have the necessary secondary legislation in place to deliver BNG through the planning system from next year, and jointly working with the Planning Advisory Service to make sure that LPAs are ready to deliver from a capacity and capability perspective.

4. The Government has a target of building 300,000 new houses annually. Since 2017 this target has never been achieved. Is this target still Government policy and how do you intend that it will be met?

Yes, we remain committed to continuing to work towards our ambition of delivering 300,000 homes a year in England, as set out in the 2019 Conservative manifesto.

We are making strong progress, with over 242,000 homes delivered in 2019/20 – the highest number in over thirty years. And despite the pandemic, housebuilders were able to deliver over 216,000 homes in England in 2020/21. This shows great resilience despite the challenges faced. We still want to build more homes, of the right type and in the right places, but we know that increasing housing supply will be made more difficult because of the economic challenges we face.

To help achieve our ambitions, and as set out in the Levelling Up White Paper earlier this year, the Government will make improvements to the planning system. We have now introduced the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill and it is making its way through Parliament.

In addition to this, we have announced £10 billion investment in housing supply since the start of this Parliament, with our housing supply interventions due to ultimately unlock over 1 million new homes over the 2021-2024 Spending Review period and beyond. This includes an additional £1.8 billion investment announced at Spending Review 2021. We have also launched the £1.5 billion Levelling Up Home Building Fund, which will provide loans to small and medium sized builders, developers, self and custom builders and innovators (such as those using MMC) to deliver up to 42,400 homes.

The Government has also committed £11.5 billion of taxpayer funded grant to the latest Affordable Housing Programme. This is intended to provide tens of thousands of new homes across the country. A substantial number of these will be for social rent.

5. Can you tell us the likely direction of travel for planning policy? Are there any plans to move forward with previously proposed planning reforms?

Levelling Up means improving access to high quality and affordable homes across the country, and doing so in ways which meet the needs and expectations of local people, including delivering better environmental outcomes. As part of this, the [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#) will put the foundations in place for delivering this agenda and ensuring all parts of the country share equally in our nation's success. As well as delivering against some of the ambitions set out in the Levelling Up White Paper, the Bill also incorporates some of the proposals for planning reform outlined in the earlier Planning for the Future White Paper (August 2020), where they support our approach to Levelling Up.

The planning reforms in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill will give communities more control over what is built, where it is built, and what it looks like, as well as greater assurance that the infrastructure needed will be provided; all of which creates a stronger incentive to support development where it is needed.

There are five key principles which the reforms are based on. First, delivering high quality and **beautiful places**, restoring a sense of community and pride in place. Second, enabling the right **infrastructure** to come forward where it is needed, boosting productivity and spreading opportunities. Third, enhancing local **democracy** and engagement by empowering local leaders, increasing accountability and communities, having a genuine say in the changes which impact them. Fourth, fostering better **environmental** outcomes, protecting the areas people live. Fifth, allowing **neighbourhoods** to shape their surroundings, empowering communities to restore local pride in place.

In addition, we are taking forward a cross-government NSIP Reform Programme to help improve the performance of the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects planning process that covers certain major infrastructure projects in England and Wales, with an ambition to speed up timescales by up to 50% for some projects entering the system from September 2023. The two measures we are taking forward through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill will seek to speed up the delivery of nationally significant infrastructure by enabling shorter examinations of development consent order applications and regulations covering the decision-making process associated with non-material change applications. We also intend to publish a full NSIP Reform Action Plan, as well as consultations on further regulatory and guidance changes to improve the operation of the system, in due course.

6. What can you tell us about the Government's vision for setting up investment zones? What is that current state of that policy and when might we expect to see more details?

The Government is committed to supporting local growth and levelling up areas across the country. We are grateful for the Expression of Interest applications submitted by areas in England for Investment Zones.

The Government is refocusing the Investment Zone programme to maximise its impact by focusing on high potential projects in education and innovation, leveraging the expertise of local research institutions in areas that have been left behind. We will set out more detail in due course.

7. How do you envisage Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Biodiversity Net Gain being delivered on the ground? In particular, how will you ensure that local authorities have the resources they need to deliver these policies?

The Government consulted on the detail of secondary legislation and the implementation of a mandatory biodiversity net gain in Jan 2022. Alongside the consultation, the government announced £4.18M initial set up funding to support LPAs with preparation for mandatory biodiversity net gain. The Government has committed to funding all new burdens on Local Authorities arising from the Environment Act. This includes those relating to biodiversity net gain and the preparation of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS). Following the consultation, the Government is considering further new burdens requirements during the remaining transition period and once BNG is mandatory.

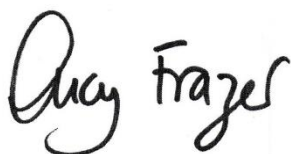
DFRRA has funded the Planning Advisory Service to provide support, tools, and guidance to support LPAs in preparing for mandatory biodiversity net gain.

Government is currently developing regulations and guidance to set out what an LNRS must contain and how it should be prepared. These have been informed by responses to our consultation which closed in November 2021 and our five LNRS pilots which concluded in May 2021. We still anticipate the preparation of Local Nature Recovery Strategies across England being able to commence in 2023.

We recognise that many local planning authorities, as well as the wider planning sector, are facing capacity and capability challenges. To ensure that local planning authorities are well equipped and supported to deliver development now as well as the changes set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, we have already started to work alongside the sector to design targeted interventions to support the development of critical skills and to build capacity across local planning authorities.

I hope you find these responses helpful, and I look forward to the outcome of your inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lucy Frazer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

RT HON LUCY FRAZER KC MP