

Written evidence submitted by Ashford Borough Council [FPS 016]

Response to The Future of the Planning System in England Inquiry – Call for Evidence

Is the current planning system working as it should do? What changes might need to be made? Are the Government's proposals the right approach?

The planning system is plan-led and rightfully so. The Local Plan process needs to drive change in an area, in a way that is transparent. Doing so ensures local communities and stakeholders, including developers and land agents, can all be aware of what is being proposed and can comment accordingly. This can help shape a plan as it evolves.

However, over the last few years, the planning system has placed far too much emphasis on the delivery of housing above all else. This dilutes the importance of other significant planning issues – such as need to generate jobs and diversify the local economy, and the need to ensure supporting infrastructure is delivered to support growing communities to sustain themselves, but also ensure they can be successfully integrated with existing communities. This all needs to be balanced against the need to protect and conserve the environment and ensure we all do our utmost to tackle the negative impacts of climate change.

It is a combination of all these elements together to ensure development is delivered in a sustainable way and is what the planning system is truly concerned with. Yet, this wider message is currently getting lost with ever more emphasis and pressure being placed on the delivery of housing alone.

This is not to downplay the importance of new housing and the benefits it can bring. You will already be aware that there is a strong, consistent and successful track record of housing delivery within the borough of Ashford. We have embraced sustainable housing growth in the past and continue to do so. Our recently adopted Local Plan (2019) provides a policy framework to deliver around 16,872 homes and 11,100 jobs by 2030.

The Council are proud of what we have achieved in terms of assisting the delivery of growth and investment within the borough. We recognise the important role we play in helping to achieve the Government's objective of 'boosting the supply of housing', particularly in the South East region. We have and will continue to play our part. Equally the Council has helped to create communities that are more than just housing developmenst but incorporate a wide range of complementary facilities and uses.

However, it needs to be understood that achieving this level of growth, on a consistent basis is a challenge. It takes time and resource to ensure a consistent strategy is delivered, but building this consensus with the local stakeholders is crucial and makes sure that any strategy remains fits for purpose and ultimately deliverable on the ground.

It is therefore concerning that the proposed changes to the planning system, which seek to emphasize the current 'top-down' identification of housing numbers are being promoted both through the recent 'Planning Changes' consultation and the current 'White Paper' proposals.

For Ashford, the proposals will lead to around a 25% increase to our already challenging housing target. As a methodology, it seems to greatly impact those authorities that have delivered their past housing needs – making it ever more challenging to ensure balanced housing growth is achieved moving forward, as the target figure merely increases over time.

Such an approach seems inappropriate and seems to benefit those authorities which haven't produced Local Plans, or have significant constraints such as those areas with significant areas of Green Belt or areas which are coastal and are subsequently protected by European environmental designations.

This issue is exacerbated as the penalty for the non-delivery of housing merely leads to the reduction of the planning weight that can be given to the Local Plan, which in turn erodes the very nature of the 'plan-led' system. Local Plans need to remain a pillar on which the planning system is based, otherwise LPA's are disincentivised to produce Local Plans to the detriment of everyone involved in the planning process and this then removes certainty from the system all together.

A system that is so focused on housing delivery, as opposed to the identification of sustainable development sites, is the wrong emphasis. After all, Local Planning Authorities are able to identify areas of land to be allocated in Local Plans and grant planning consent, but we are not then able to ensure delivery on the ground (in the vast majority of cases). Housing delivery is largely in the sole control of housing developers. Yet it is the LPA's ability to control future developments that is then placed at risk.

We therefore propose, as a matter of urgency, that the current and proposed planning system removes the binding nature of housing delivery from the local authorities and places developers under more scrutiny. Penalties for not delivering sites which have permission but have no evidence of deliverability should be imposed. These could be:

- *Shorter time periods for implementing consents or removal of consent*
- *A tax system charge on full consents from a set time period (such as Council Tax)*
- *Refusal of further consents for developers with extant permissions on deliverable sites.*

This view is supported by evidence. Over a 5 –year period (2015-2020) an average of around 1400 dwellings were granted permission annually within the Borough, but less than 800 dwellings were built out (see table 1 below). We, as Local Planning Authority, are fulfilling our requirements in the granting of consents and having an up to date plan in place. Yet the developers are not delivering at the rate needed to maintain parity with the national 5 year housing land supply test and makes meeting next year's housing delivery test a significant challenge.

Table 1: Permissions Vs Completions

Year	Dwellings with consent	Dwellings completed
2015/16	967	1022
2016/17	1556*	696
2017/18	1277	577
2018/19	1154	880
2019/20	2003	746
Five Year Average	1391	784

**not including Chilmington Green Outline consent for 5,750 dwellings*

What approach should be used to determine the housing need and requirement of a local authority?

It is acknowledged that identifying housing needs is a highly difficult process, particularly to establish an approach which is infallible. This has always been the case, even when Regional or Structure Plans identified the figures for each relevant LPA, at their respective level.

However, our view is that housing targets must:

- take account of the role of the area in its wider regional or sub regional context,*
- be cognisant of the local circumstances or constraints,*
- be consistent with the spatial profile of the area and the nature of the settlements contained within,*
- take account of the infrastructure or ability to expand/create new infrastructure to sustain new growth,*
- be realistic – i.e. that the ability for the market to actually deliver development in a sustainable way has been considered.*

It is also accepted that affordability should be factored into the wider discussion. However, to suggest that housing developers will significantly over-supply housing as a means of reducing their cost seems a flawed premise and this remains a significant concern about the current planning system.

Adopting a more nuanced approach, which balances the above factors, would provide Local Planning Authorities with the ability to input into the process in a more refined way and subsequently identify a housing needs figure which is fit for purpose. This will ensure that Local Plans are not undermined, almost as soon as they are published.

In our view, the current and proposed system is too much of a ‘tick box’ approach that removes the ability to ‘balance’ all the competing considerations (as referenced above). Planning is a highly subjective discipline, with a number of often competing factors in play at the same time, and at face value, these issues often compete with each other. It also has a significant spatial dimension which further complicates matters.

This context needs to be accepted and understood when looking to review the planning system. The idea to simplify the system is welcomed. But an overly simplistic approach will do far more harm than good.

We are certainly supportive of the ability to input into this process in a constructive and positive way and welcome the opportunity to comment on the recent consultations and also the opportunity to submit this statement to the ongoing Inquiry.

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