Response to Planning for the Future White Paper

Q1: The three words that we most associate with the current planning system in England: As a Parish Council, we find the planning system to be **arbitrary**, **time-consuming**, and **byzantine**.

Q2: As a Parish Council, we are involved in the planning system by reviewing and commenting on planning applications in our local area as a statutory consultee.

Q3: N/A

Q4: As a Parish Council, our top three priorities for planning in our local area as expressed in our evolving Neighbourhood Plan are: protecting existing neighbourhoods from over-development, shaping new development to create a new inclusive Parish community, and creating a Garden Parish.

Q5: Our response to the proposals on Local Plans are as follows:

1. The proposed 'simplification' of Plans, taken together with the proposed zoning and accelerated timetable for Plan production, will work against meaningful local democratic and community input into planning decisions. We consider that it is essential that local people, through a local Neighbourhood Plan, should have the final say on the shape, character and design of development in their area, even when that development is mandated by higher tiers of government.
2. The proposed centralisation of key planning decisions through zoning lacks the sophistication and nuance needed to take account of local circumstances. Limited development may well be possible within 'protected' zones (eg through reuse of brownfield sites) and new development may not be appropriate in some areas zoned for 'growth' owing to local circumstances (eg transport infrastructure). We do not feel that centrally imposed zones should only be indicative of Government intentions and should not have legal weight in planning applications, unless possibly as a 'material consideration' to be taken into account.
3. The proposed 'zoning' scheme is unworkable unless developers are prevented from challenging it. Developer appeals will lead to confusion and contested decisions on narrow points of law, making the zoning system ineffective.
4. The proposals centralise too much power over decisions which should and practically must be taken locally, such as the scale of infrastructure needed, or the volume of housing required. This will lead to inappropriate and overbearing development in some areas and under development in others. Whitehall cannot micromanage planning across the whole of England.

Q6: Our response to the proposals for 'streamlining' the development management policies of local plans are:

1. The proposals centralise too much power over decisions which should and practically must be taken locally. This will lead to inappropriate and overbearing development in some areas and under development in others. Whitehall cannot micromanage planning across the whole of England.

2. A centralised system, leading to poor local decision-making, will lead to an erosion of confidence in central government and a failure to participate in local democracy. There will be no incentive to vote or volunteer for parish, town or other councils if Councillors have no effective control over the decisions which most affect local people.

Q7: Our response to the proposal to introduce a single statutory "sustainable development" test, replacing the existing tests of soundness, is as follows:

1. As a parish council developing a neighbourhood plan, we find the existing test of soundness to be both clear and helpful in guiding our work. It is a test similar to others found in English law and is well understood. A new test based purely on 'sustainability' cannot fail to be less certain and more vague, given the wide interpretation of sustainability issues. This will be exacerbated by the removal of statutory EU guidance on sustainability which has been part of planning law and thinking for many years. We feel the existing test of soundness, supplemented if necessary, by new guidance to replace EU Regulations, should be retained.

Q8: 8(a). Do you agree that a standard method for establishing housing requirements (that takes into account constraints) should be introduced? 8(b). Do you agree that affordability and the extent of existing urban areas are appropriate indicators of the quantity of development to be accommodated?

1. We do not agree that a Standard Method for calculating housing requirements should be introduced. We feel that housing requirements should continue to be calculated according to local requirements, not using an inflexible national formula. While clearly there should be guidance for calculating housing requirements, we feel local councils are in a better place, with the support of national government, to establish local need and to plan for it.

2. We do not feel that affordability is an appropriate indicator for calculating quantity of development in an area. Affordability is a complex concept which relies on a number of intangible or hard-to-define factors, many of them very local in character. The fact that an area lacks affordable homes is not necessarily a consequence of the number of homes in that area. Building more homes will not necessarily increase affordability. Affordable homes are best delivered by price-fixing and subsidy schemes in high cost areas, not simply increasing volume.

3. Creeping urbanisation should be resisted, not encouraged. In Aylesbury Vale, the clear demand for new homes is by increasing the density of urban town centre areas and developing central brownfield sites. A formula which simply looked at the extent of the urban area relative to the total land area will drive suburbanisation on greenfield sites, which is neither sustainable nor what buyers actually want.

Q9(a). Do you agree that there should be automatic outline permission for areas for substantial development (Growth areas) with faster routes for detailed consent?

1. No. This proposal is not realistic or workable. Granting outline consent presupposes that important infrastructure issues like transport, land use, flood amelioration, volume of development, impact on local services, etc, have been satisfactorily settled. Automatic consent will lead to impractical and burdensome development moving forward to detailed consent stage when in reality fundamental issues remain outstanding. We support the retention of the existing two-stage planning consent process so that local authorities can ensure the basic suitability and practicality of a development before detailed planning work

can proceed. Automatic consent also removes any element of local democracy and will cause considerable upset for local residents who have no way of expressing an opinion about large local changes.

Q9(b). Do you agree with our proposals above for the consent arrangements for Renewal and Protected areas?

1. While zoning may be useful as an indicator of central Government's intentions, we do not feel it should replace the existing local systems for planning control. These systems seem to us to offer appropriately balanced and structured arrangements for managing demand against local constraints and requirements.

9(c). Do you think there is a case for allowing new settlements to be brought forward under the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects regime?

N/A

Q10. Do you agree with our proposals to make decision-making faster and more certain?

1. For Parish Councils without significant permanent staff, the speed of planning decisions is already too fast. If local communities are to have meaningful and informed insight into large developments, local councils must have sufficient time to prepare responses. We do not support any reduction of the time available for local communities to respond to proposals.
2. That said, there are too many petty delays in the planning process. However, this can be better dealt with by adequately resourcing local councils to process applications, rather than creating a system of automatic approvals and punitive sanctions for delay.
3. Delegation of domestic planning applications from principal councils to Quality-Assured parish and town councils would free up capacity at principal councils for larger applications.

Q11. Do you agree with our proposals for accessible, web-based Local Plans?

Provided that access is maintained for the significant minority of older and disabled people who are not proficient users of online services, we support this proposal.

Q12. Do you agree with our proposals for a 30-month statutory timescale for the production of Local Plans?

1. Imposing a statutory deadline, with sanctions for not meeting it, does not seem to be a sensible way of ensuring the production of well-researched, sound, and effective plans. We agree that Plans do need to be produced in a timely way, to prevent speculative development and shape growth, but increasing the resources available to councils and enforcing cooperation with the plan making process by landowners, neighbouring councils and others seems to be a more effective way of reducing delays than arbitrary deadlines.
2. Account also has to be taken of the impact of major changes in the planning landscape during the process of preparing a plan, such as legislative changes, changes in land availability or regulatory action. If an authority has to effectively start again with a Plan, imposing an arbitrary deadline will not help the situation.

Q13. Do you agree that Neighbourhood Plans should be retained in the reformed planning system?

1. As a local council preparing a Neighbourhood Plan, we strongly support the retention of Neighbourhood Plans. They offer local communities' real power to shape and manage growth and change in their built environments and embody the principles of local democracy. NPs do not constrain or delay growth, they merely help developers to deliver better growth.
2. Removing Neighbourhood Plans would be a very damaging blow to local democracy and to local people, especially if accompanied by a centralisation of power in Government. It would also waste the very considerable resources already put into Neighbourhood Plans.

13(b). How can the neighbourhood planning process be developed to meet our objectives, such as in the use of digital tools and reflecting community preferences about design?

1. A distinction should be drawn between simple rural NPs and more complex NPs for urban and suburban areas. The latter require resourcing and support on a scale not far short of that needed by a District Plan. Currently, local councils are expected to produce a Plan with no more than a small grant from DCLG designed for the needs of small rural areas.
2. A modernisation of Neighbourhood Plan processes is much needed. The process is cumbersome and slow and requires repeated consultations. Only one statutory public consultation before the Plan is put to referenda should be required.
3. The Planning Inspectorate should be much more proactive and offer advice and support to Neighbourhood Plan groups in addition to that from principal authorities. Access to the Inspectorate would help Neighbourhood Plans to be more creative and influential in reflecting local opinion.
4. Often, the principal authority wishes the NP to be a 'mini-me' version of their district plan, against the wishes of local people. The Neighbourhood Plan is the only plan which has comprehensive input from local people, and which reflects their wishes. The system for producing Plans needs to reflect this creative tension.
5. A portfolio of digital tools should be made available to Neighbourhood Plan groups, perhaps through commissioned providers.

Q14. Do you agree there should be a stronger emphasis on the build out of developments? And if so, what further measures would you support?

1. It is a truism that developers will build-out developments that they wish to complete. The emphasis needs to be on ensuring, through the planning system, that developments are agreed which meet the needs of the market and local circumstances. This will better eliminate failure to build-out than attempting to force developers to complete developments in which they no longer have confidence.
2. In areas where the market cannot deliver volume housing needed to sustain growth, the public sector should be able to take a role, through development corporations etc.

Q15. What do you think about the design of new development that has happened recently in your area?

1. Stoke Mandeville has seen extensive new development in the last thirty years. On the whole, this has been small developments of formulaic suburban volume housing built to standard designs, with no real community facilities, green spaces or landscape elements. There has been no attempt to create community cohesion or build a sense of place. This is

an abject failure of planning which we are attempting to remedy through the Neighbourhood Plan.

2. The Neighbourhood Plan will include a local design code which will attempt to reinforce local distinctiveness and enhance a sense of place and community.

Q16. Sustainability is at the heart of our proposals. What is your priority for sustainability in your area?

1. As an edge-of-town suburban settlement, we are seeking through the Neighbourhood Plan to build local sustainability by creating a cohesive community which is not reliant, as we are at present, on commuting and car journeys on an everyday basis. We seek a community with its own local facilities and working spaces which has a reduced environmental impact and is more sustainable through appropriate local self-sufficiency.

2. We are seeking through our Neighbourhood Plan to facilitate a transformational change to become a 'Garden Parish', part of the wider Aylesbury Garden Town. This will mean preserving green spaces, landscape and heritage assets and creating a network of sustainable spaces for local people to enjoy.

Q17. Do you agree with our proposals for improving the production and use of design guides and codes?

1. We strongly support the role of locally formulated design codes to enhance and protect the character and sense of place of local areas. This is done very successfully in many premier urban landscapes and in Garden Towns, and we support the development of design codes on a much wider scale.

2. Critically, volume housebuilders must adapt their business model to enable them to embrace a much wider range and diversity of designs.

3. In Stoke Mandeville, we intend to use design codes for individual neighbourhoods to both protect the sense of place and community present in some and encourage diversity and eclecticism in areas threatened by utilitarian estate housing.

Q18. Do you agree that we should establish a new body to support design coding and building better places, and that each authority should have a chief officer for design and place-making?

1. Yes, in principle, provided that the new body is not a central office to impose designs but a professional college to support a diversity of codes and designs.

2. The relationship of the proposed new chief officer to his planning colleagues is critical – the mere existence of an officer does not guarantee that change will follow. The planning system needs to enforce the importance of good, locally influenced, design.

Q19. Do you agree with our proposal to consider how design might be given greater emphasis in the strategic objectives for Homes England?

1. Yes. Design, place-making and aesthetic considerations should be at the heart of planning, not an add-on. But adding design to the remit of these bodies, and to local plans, needs to be properly resourced.

Q20. Do you agree with our proposals for implementing a fast-track for beauty?

1. No. While we fully support a renewed focus on beauty and aesthetics, a beautiful proposal may still not be sound or reasonable. Planning applications need to be considered carefully on their merits. It is not reasonable to short-circuit proper consideration simply because a proposal is considered to be especially beautiful.

Q21. When new development happens in your area, what is your priority for what comes with it?

1. Stoke Mandeville has experienced 30 years of housing development without accompanying infrastructure and facilities. Roads are clogged, broadband is overstrained, there have been no new parks or green spaces, the school is too small and over-subscribed, there is no GP surgery and no local employment areas.
2. As development continues in the Parish, it therefore must address not only the needs of new residents but the legacy needs of the existing community. The planning system must enable a holistic baseline assessment of community need and ensure that new development levels-up areas which have historically lacked facilities and infrastructure.

Q22. Should the government replace the Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 planning obligations with a new consolidated Infrastructure Levy, which is charged as a fixed proportion of development value above a set threshold?

1. The current CIL and s106 system has manifestly failed to deliver adequate infrastructure and facilities in Stoke Mandeville, a high growth area within a strategic area of growth. We support the introduction of a new Infrastructure Levy provided that it delivers adequate funding for the delivery of necessary infrastructure.
2. The new Levy must take account of the varying cost of delivering infrastructure across the UK
3. Central Government must be willing to meet the cost of strategic infrastructure which cannot realistically be delivered through a development levy.

Q22(b). Should the Infrastructure Levy rates be set nationally at a single rate, set nationally at an area specific rate, or set locally?

1. We support setting the Levy locally according to a formula reflecting local costs and needs. The Levy should enable levelling-up of areas historically undersupplied with infrastructure and facilities.

Q22(c). Should the Infrastructure Levy aim to capture the same amount of value overall, or more value, to support greater investment in infrastructure, affordable housing and local communities?

1. More value. The current system has manifestly failed to deliver infrastructure and facilities at the required level.

22(d). Should we allow local authorities to borrow against the Infrastructure Levy, to support infrastructure delivery in their area?

1. There seems no reason why HM Treasury cannot advance funds to councils against future Infrastructure Levy funding. However, requiring councils to incur formal debt and interest charges for this purpose seems counterproductive.

23. Do you agree that the scope of the reformed Infrastructure Levy should capture changes of use through permitted development rights?

1. In principle, yes.

Q24. Do you agree that we should aim to secure at least the same amount of affordable housing under the Infrastructure Levy, and as much on-site affordable provision, as at present?

The Infrastructure Levy should be reserved for infrastructure and public facilities. Affordable housing is not infrastructure. Affordable housing needs to be provided under separate funding arrangements, or it risks being overlooked by the higher priority need for critical infrastructure.

24(b). Should affordable housing be secured as in-kind payment towards the Infrastructure Levy, or as a 'right to purchase' at discounted rates for local authorities? 24(c). If an in-kind delivery approach is taken, should we mitigate against local authority overpayment risk? 24(d). If an in-kind delivery approach is taken, are there additional steps that would need to be taken to support affordable housing quality?

See response to Q24A.

Q25. Should local authorities have fewer restrictions over how they spend the Infrastructure Levy? Q25(a). If yes, should an affordable housing 'ring-fence' be developed?

1. The Infrastructure Levy should be reserved for infrastructure and public facilities. While we support flexibility for local authorities to spend within a broad definition, we do not agree that funding ring fenced for infrastructure should be spent elsewhere.
2. We do not feel affordable housing should be funded by the Infrastructure Levy.

Q26. Do you have any views on the potential impact of the proposals raised in this consultation on people with protected characteristics as defined in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010?

1. People with protected characteristics are significantly more reliant on local infrastructure and services than other groups. Provision should be made to ensure that the additional needs of these groups can be fully funded by the Infrastructure levy where it is known that particularly large populations exist.
2. Design codes should ensure that built infrastructure and services are fully inclusive and accessible for disabled people. This should be a test of soundness for new design codes.

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