



Policy Briefing: Five Radical Ideas for a Better Planning System

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Authors

Professor Yvonne Rydin
 Dr Yasminah Beebeejaun
 Dr Marco Bianconi
 Juliana Borowczyk Martins
 Dr Ben Clifford
 Dr Claire Colomb
 Professor Harry Dimitriou
 Michael Edwards
 Dr Jessica Fern
 Professor Nick Gallent
 Dr Robin Hickman
 Dr Lucy Natarajan
 Dr Tse-Hui Teh
 Professor John Tomaney
 Dr Catalina Turcu

Why radical change is needed

The planning system has changed significantly over the last five years. Regional planning has been abolished and emphasis thrown on the smallest 'neighbourhood' level. Policy guidance is produced via a single National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which falls short of a spatial plan for the country as a whole. The current system doesn't connect regional and local planning, and planning tools favour market-led urban development.

There is growing criticism that the system lacks strategic direction and is not fit for purpose. Given the continued government drive for deregulation, compounded by shrinking local authority budgets, now is the time to call for an improved approach to deliver a sustainable future.

The five radical ideas for change comprise a package that should be implemented as a whole. Together they can deliver better economic, social and environmental outcomes. This is illustrated by a topical policy issue in each case.

1. Planning should be for well-being and not just growth

Well-being should be the key principle of planning. Planning needs to rediscover its original purpose of delivering fairness and promoting collective well-being. It should delink from the narrow measure of GDP that gives no consideration to how rising income is shared out, where it came from, or consequent negative environmental impacts. It should not rely on a discredited 'trickle-down' theory or the assumption that all public goods can be funded from the profits of private-sector development.

What this would mean for Garden Cities:

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR PLANNING

- Planning should seek to deliver quality in our urban and rural environments in line with broad public goals; a system orientated to profit cannot deliver this.
- Planning should seek to develop strong city and regional economics, aim at a fairer society and facilitate the transition to an environmentally sustainable future through reductions in carbon emissions, adaptation to climate and waste-less use of natural resources.
- Planning should operate democratically through the participation of communities in full and open dialogue; the principle applies at all scales and to all stakeholders.
- The planning system should be fully equipped with the range of tools and resources needed to enable the effective implementation of agreed policies and plans.

- Their location would not be determined solely by economic factors or the availability of land through the market
- Location would be determined by factors such as the potential for sustainable living
- They would offer a high quality local environment in areas of housing need as well as in areas of market demand
- Not dominated by private sector housing developments but rather providing for all sections of the community in terms of housing and social needs
- Good design would support low carbon lifestyles, sustainable water management and enhanced provision for biodiversity.

2. Planning powers must be radically devolved

Ensuring a legitimate planning system is a pressing concern. Genuine decentralisation of planning powers as part of a wider reinvigoration of direct, participative and representative democracy is required. This will involve a move away from the ad-hoc deal-based system that characterises current central-local relationships in the direction of enduring and stable frameworks based upon the principle of subsidiarity.

The issues that affect the UK have a national, regional and local dimension and these all have to be reflected in the planning system. There is a pressing need to:

- set a national framework through a spatial plan for key issues such as a rebalanced economy, housing supply, national infrastructure and the response to climate change
- recognise the democratic right of cities and regions to shape their future directions; and
- have regional and urban frameworks for strategic planning matters based on democratic decision-making.

What this would mean for green belts:

- Communities able to consider how land in their regions and localities should be used to accommodate urban growth and change
- The ability to allocate new land for protection from development if existing green belt is considered suitable for urban development
- Full and open debate on land development needs and aspirations and how open space provision could be met
- A shift in emphasis away from protecting green belt land from development at all costs towards allocating land to meet a range of important regional and urban needs.

3. Planning should recognise the benefits of regulation

A good planning system should be proactive in delivering the right development and infrastructure in the right places, at the right time, and take a positive and engaging approach to producing a vision for the future. But planning also needs the power of regulation in order to be able to implement policies, prevent harm, control externalities, and maximise social and environmental benefit.

Regulation allows for the preservation of amenities and the protection of the environment. Through regulation, planning can also help improve the quality of development. Deregulation is currently preventing this. Furthermore, it is undermining the ability of local authorities to provide more affordable housing in high-pressure areas and to deliver proper strategic plans for town centres.

Planning regulation is not a barrier to economic growth as evidenced by the fact that in 2014, 88% of all planning applications were granted permission. Rather planning regulation as a system ensures that developers meet certain agreed standards and empowers planners to negotiate improvements to schemes for public benefit.

What this would mean for tackling the housing crisis:

- planners' ability to influence the nature of new development seen as a positive intervention, rather than a 'barrier to growth'
- local authorities able to ensure the provision of affordable housing in all new development
- regulation complementing a renewed programme of council house building, allowing local authorities to plan effectively to meet housing needs in their localities
- developers benefitting from increased transparency, simplicity and certainty in the planning system arising from clear regulatory policies.

4. Land reform is essential, including local land ownership and land value capture

Since nationalisation of development rights in 1947, the financial benefits of development have become increasingly concentrated in the hands of private landowners, and there has been a gradual erosion of public planning, with many 'permitted development rights' returned to those same owners.

The ambitions of 1947 have been all but lost – a system of planning that was known and renowned around the world is now effectively broken. In order to change this situation, three things need to happen:

- there needs to be a reiteration of the collective ownership of development rights in the UK
- more effective and consistent mechanisms should be introduced to capture and share the benefits of land value uplift
- land reform is needed to enable communities, where appropriate, to take direct control of local land assets for the purpose of community development.

What this would mean for place making and transport infrastructure systems:

- mechanisms to create new opportunities for timely infrastructure investment and broader investment in place making
- greater control over land ownership at the local level and regional funds for public transport infrastructure generated through land value capture
- greater potential for creating urban settlements that meet communities' needs while respecting the environment
- greater possibility to plan new urban development locations and to encourage more sustainable patterns of travel as well as socially successful residential settlements
- local priorities, such as safe cycle routes or a broad range of community assets, being adequately resourced.

5. The planning system must be democratic

The planning system – through spatial planning at national, regional and local scales, regulation of development proposals and proactive proposals for new development – can only operate in the public interest if it is democratic.

Ensuring the full involvement of local communities, alongside inputs from key stakeholders, is essential. This must be complemented by transparent decision-making. This requires the following measures:

- planning department budgets, community grants and the education of planners should all reflect that engaging communities requires skills, time, commitment and resources
- the tendency for neighbourhood planning only to benefit communities who already 'have' or 'can' results in inequality; engagement strategies which actively give a voice to marginalised communities and encourage a greater diversity of voices can help counter-balance this
- conflicts between different local viewpoints are inevitable, but a democratic form of local planning will be equipped with ways of responding to these in the public interest
- above all, the planning system has to convince local communities of their ability to deliver urban change for their collective benefit.

What this would mean for neighbourhood planning:

- Local governments with access to a substantial and dedicated budget for supporting disadvantaged communities in preparing neighbourhood plans
- Local politicians, community organisations and NGOs to take the opportunity to engage in full and open discussion of development needs and aspirations at regional and local level
- Professional bodies and planning educators both prioritising the development of skills necessary for supporting engagement with communities at all scales.

BACKGROUND

This document has been prepared by the members of the UCL Bartlett School of Planning in conversation with their colleagues and is the outcome of ongoing discussion and debate. It is our collective view that the future of the planning system is in need of urgent debate, conducted within and between political parties and across society as a whole. Only in this way, can disagreements on important issues be resolved. In such debate academic inputs of evidence, knowledge of international practices, evaluation of past policies and their impacts, and alternative framings and explanations all play a vital role. This is what we offer and propose.

Summary

- Planning should seek to deliver quality in our urban and rural environments in line with broad public goals; a system oriented to profit cannot deliver this.
- Planning should seek to develop strong city and regional economies, aim at a fairer society and facilitate the transition to an environmentally sustainable future through reductions in carbon emissions, adaptation to climate and waste-less use of natural resources
- Planning should operate democratically through the participation of communities in full and open dialogue; the principle applies at all scales and to all stakeholders.
- The planning system should be fully equipped with the range of tools and resources needed to enable the effective implementation of agreed policies and plans.