



The  
countryside  
charity

## ***Planning White Paper and Changes to the current planning system*** **consultations – Briefing from CPRE, the countryside charity**

### **Introduction**

The government published its *Planning for the Future White Paper and Changes to the current planning system* consultation on 6 August 2020. Its proposals mean a major upheaval of the planning system. CPRE has a long history of engaging with planning policy since the organisation was founded in 1926, and our vision is for the countryside and green spaces to be accessible to all, rich in nature and to play a crucial role in responding to the climate emergency. A healthy and democratic planning system is crucial to delivering that vision, but these damaging changes threaten our ability to the shape the future of where we live.

### **Widespread opposition**

- Over 260,000 people have signed petitions by CPRE, SumOfUs and 38 Degrees in opposition to the government's plans.
- In a poll commissioned by the Built Environment Communications Group (BECG) in September, only 4% of elected councillors stated that they believed the government's proposals would make the planning system more democratic.
- CPRE has convened a coalition of 40+ housing, planning and environmental organisations in opposition to the White Paper.
- A survey of local CPRE groups found that:
  - 83% believe that community voice would be significantly diminished if the proposals are implemented as currently set out.
  - 91% want the government to rewrite either major sections of, or the whole of the White Paper.

### **Key concerns**

CPRE has the following major concerns with the proposals in the *Planning White Paper and Changes to the planning system* consultations:

- Loss of local democracy
- Housing affordability
- Access to green space

## **Loss of local democracy**

A crucial feature of the planning system is accountability and the opportunity for communities to feed into plans in their area. The Secretary of State has stressed that local democracy will not be lost in the new system. However, restricting community engagement to the Local Plan making stage will result in members of the public losing their ability to scrutinise individual planning applications. This is effectively cutting local democracy in half. In contrast, developers will only need to successfully influence a local plan and will then have sweeping powers to build however and whenever they like on most sites.

The White Paper proposes a national approach to setting binding housing requirements (there is already a national approach to housing needs forecasts, but it is not binding on local authorities and can be varied according to local circumstances). This approach, as well as the proposed new forecasting method, is too centralised and does not sufficiently take into account the needs or environmental constraints of local areas. It is also likely to make it more difficult for local authorities to acquire land to build affordable homes, as large developers and land agents will bid prices up for land that is more likely to be developed under the new system. Much more priority needs to be given to helping local authorities regenerate brownfield sites and build more affordable homes to meet local needs.

## **Housing affordability in rural areas**

Furthermore, developers on small-to-medium sites are currently required to build affordable homes if the site includes 10 units or more. The government propose lifting this cap to 40-50 units. With this proposal expected to remain for a minimum of 18 months, this will leave many areas without the affordable housing needed for some time to come. The impact of this will be felt most acutely in the countryside and in particular small rural towns, where sites tend to be mostly in this small-to-medium bracket. This means fewer homes that people of lower incomes, including many key workers, can afford. This proposed short term change (in the *Changes to the current planning system* consultation) sits in direct contradiction to the longer-term reforms proposed in the *Planning for the Future* White Paper, which repeatedly calls for maintaining and improving the levels of affordable housing.

## **Access to green spaces**

A vital purpose of the planning system is to contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment. However, the government's proposals to introduce a zonal planning system would weaken protection of green space designated for growth or renewal, and offer no additional safeguards for those earmarked for protection. 'Protected' areas as defined by the new proposals will be those with site designations such as Green Belt, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and Conservation Areas, giving no consideration to the importance of undesignated green spaces near to where people live. Under the proposed zonal system, and in combination with centralised, high housing targets, these green spaces will be under increased threat of becoming a free-for-all for development. The result of which will be the loss of the crucial functions that green spaces serve to local communities in terms of health and wellbeing, in addition to its role in mitigating the climate emergency.