GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

A LIBERAL DEMOCRAT APPROACH TO PLANNING

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Wera Hobhouse MP and Councillor Adele Morris

We have a chronic shortage of housing across the country, and especially the type of homes people with lower or even middle incomes can afford. We need all types of tenures, built by both the private and the public sector and through both large and small developments. Many councils are now keen to start building homes again and need to have the freedoms to borrow to build, and to decide how to manage the loss of homes through Right to Buy.

We have to get homes built however, planning isn't just about housing. It's about making sure our areas grow in a way that best meets the needs of our communities, now and in the future. That means having or building the right infrastructure to support sustainable development, and thinking ahead to accommodate changes in our way of living and working. For example, more and more city office premises are offering hot desking, shared workspaces and 24 hour opening for international businesses, whilst at the same time more people are working part time or from home.

In the cities we are seeing an increase in licensed premises and mini supermarkets opening in mixed residential and commercial areas, whilst in rural areas we are losing the pubs, local shops and post offices that provide the social infrastructure for our communities.

We are conscious of the poor air quality in our cities and towns, and are moving towards electric and even driverless vehicles. However, this needs the provision of alternative fuelling sources to be thought through carefully. Our new homes need to be within easy reach of public transport and employment, or designed with an older population in mind. Schools and health facilities also need to be within easy reach – especially if we are going to get people walking and cycling more. And we need to think about improving our environment to make it safer and more pleasant for pedestrians and cyclists. All of this comes under the remit of the planning system.

There are no hard and fast rules about how a community should evolve, and rightly so. National planning policy, which sets the guidelines for development, needs to ensure that it creates an environment where communities and local politicians can have a strong voice in the process.

However, the recent revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the reforms proposed in the 'Right Homes, Right Places' white paper put more emphasis on councils delivering to targets. The new method of calculating housing need using ONS figures, the introduction of the housing delivery test to punish local authorities for not delivering their housing numbers (despite the fact that it is mostly caused by stalled sites, rather than a lack of permissions granted) and the need to revisit local plan housing numbers on a five year basis mean that planners are under immense pressure from central Government.

This booklet is intended to be the start of a conversation about how we, as Liberal Democrats, might approach planning matters. We have examples of good practice and good ideas from across the country, and while all articles are the personal opinions of the authors, we hope that you will find it useful in your work in the community – whether a local activist or a council leader.

Wera Hobhouse is MP for Bath and the Liberal Democrats Local Government Spokesperson

Councillor Adele Morris is the Liberal Democrat lead member for Planning at the Local Government Association

A LOCAL PLAN FOR HOUSING WITH RESIDENT BUY-IN

Councillor Jayne McCoy

Sutton is an outer London suburban borough that has historically had low housing targets, as sites suitable for development were sparse and it was curtained by areas of Green Belt.

The housing crisis was beginning to be felt in the borough as households were being priced out of central London, and existing residents were unable to afford properties to meet their needs - either for adult children to move out of the family home, growing families to expand, or older residents wishing to downsize. Our housing waiting list was growing longer.

The Liberal Democrat-run council was ambitious to grow the local economy to revitalise its metropolitan town centre, capitalise on the London Cancer Hub opportunity, and increase the local employment offer.

In 2016 the council decided the time was right to produce a new local plan aimed at meeting the increasing pressure for housing and ensuring the infrastructure was in place to support the economic growth plan.

The issues to be addressed

A huge amount of evidence had to be gathered as part of the work involved in drafting a local plan. This evidence was vital for shaping the narrative we took to our residents.

The annual projected demand for housing was far in excess of the land available, there were competing demands for industrial space and to support any growth we would need more schools, more health facilities and significant transport improvements.

The other major constraint was the low-rise suburban character of the borough where many residents felt more akin to Surrey than a London borough.

Honest conversations

Sutton's residents are savvy, engaged and with a large number of residents' associations. Those residents' associations expected to have their say on a new plan, but we wanted to ensure all our residents had the chance to engage in shaping the future of the borough.

We launched a consultation programme aimed at reaching beyond the usual suspects and encouraging all residents to get involved. Badged as Sutton 2031 (reflecting the 15 year span of the local plan) every household received a postcard inviting them to engage in the consultation.

The postcard included details of local engagement events and the link to the online consultation.

Before the Issues and Options consultation stage we engaged in informal pre-consultation at our local area committees. Here well-briefed councillors talked through what the plan sought to achieve and how residents should get involved.

The Issues and Options consultation saw a large number of engagement events laid on across the borough by strategic planning staff with information boards setting out the key issues and challenges and having conversations with residents about their views. This team also attended every local area committee explaining the issues, answering questions and getting feedback both formally and informally from residents. The presentations were tailored to the area so local issues could be seen in the context of the broader pressures.

We also held special engagement events with businesses and with young people.

Key to the engagement was having honest conversations about those broader pressures. We explained that we could not close our borough to incoming households, but also highlighted that existing residents were also facing housing pressures.

Residents had a good understanding that to support an expanding population required additional schools and health facilities, and we showed how this increased the pressure on limited brownfield sites.

We did not dodge the Traveller site issue and this provoked a huge amount of concern that we had to manage. We explained that limited sites meant intensification, but that through the local plan we could direct that intensification to the right areas, and gave examples of how intensification could regenerate and improve an area with good quality place shaping. We also talked about how an improved economic offer would benefit residents.

What residents value

As a result of this intense engagement we received over 4,000 responses to the Issues and Options consultation stage of the local plan. Given the statutory consultation documentation was somewhat unwieldly, we were hugely pleased with the response.

We received a clear steer from residents. They valued the suburban character of the borough and whilst being willing to accommodate additional housing, they were nervous that they would lose this character.

They strongly valued the green and open spaces in the borough, recognising their importance as green infrastructure supporting healthy living and place-shaping. They also supported invigorating the town and district centres to ensure their continuing viability.

Building a narrative

Based on this strong feedback we built a draft plan that incorporated a narrative about our ambitions for the borough.

We aimed for moderate growth that could be accommodated through intensification around our town and district centres, invigorating them whilst protecting the suburban areas around them.

We required high quality design and place-shaping that would enhance the borough and make regeneration both attractive and to the benefit of the residents affected. We drew a red line preventing further loss of green space on the understanding that access to quality open space became more important as the population grew.

The only very special circumstances that permitted some take of green space were clearly set out in the plan to meet the need for a secondary school and expanding the existing Traveller site further into the Green Belt, once proved that there were no deliverable alternatives. We incorporated added protection for heritage and conservation sites.

As a result the consultation on our draft plan elicited significant support from residents.

The benefits of a resident-backed plan

A number of resident groups engaged at the 'Examination in Public' by the inspector and although they were challenging some points we saw this as positive engagement. The points made were helpful in supporting our policies on where intensification was and was not appropriate, on restricting heights, and highlighting the value of green space. The high level of resident engagement throughout the consultation stages and support for the final draft plan strengthened our case too.

The result was approval by the Inspector with only a couple of significant amendments involving release of some Metropolitan Open Land for industrial purposes and reducing our aim for affordable housing from 50 per cent to 35 per cent on individual sites, whilst maintaining the overall requirement.

More important since approval of the plan is that we have a strong case to push back against developers whose plans do not meet with the high expectations of our residents, and we have seen significant success at appeal stage with our decisions upheld.

Residents are now aware of where greater development is to be expected, and they have organised themselves to ensure they are involved in shaping that development, which we very much welcome.

We developed our plan on the understanding that the borough does not belong to the council, or to the politicians, it belongs to its residents.

Whilst accepting there are external pressures that have to be accommodated, we must still ensure that the borough remains a pleasant place to live and work, and our residents are therefore best placed to direct the shape of their future borough. By giving residents this power they are able to approach new development proposals with a view of how to improve it rather than oppose it.

Jayne McCoy is a London Borough of Sutton Councillor and is Deputy Leader and Chair of the Council's Housing, Economy and Business Committee

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Councillor Chris White

Structure plans weren't so bad

I sometimes mystify colleagues – especially district council colleagues – by declaring myself to be a 'structure planner'. By this I mean that I did my planning apprenticeship on a county council and then became the Vice-Chair of a regional assembly, which was given the task of merging the old regional plans with county structure plans.

County councils at least were democratically elected and were able to look at a large area and consider a wide range of issues, which included key county council services like education, transport and highways. The structure plan (or regional spatial strategy in its later years) was then the basis by which district and unitary councils developed their local plans (the names varied by ministerial fiat), which had to comply with the overall concept, especially in terms of housing numbers.

There were often huge rows. Was the development west of Stevenage a logical and sustainable extension of an urban settlement or an outrageous, even imperialist, incursion into virgin green fields? Were the housing numbers justified? A question which could lead to arguments so arcane that medieval theologians would have paused with admiration from their discussions about angels on the tip of a needle. Were there sufficient roads? What do we do about public transport at all given that we can no longer control it? And where do the Gypsy and Traveller sites go?

The questions have not gone away but the concept of a higher tier authority with a democratic mandate holding the ring between rival settlements, and occasionally making hard decisions that they don't like, is missing – and missed.

Duty to agree?

It has been replaced in part (in small part) by the duty to cooperate, under which any district or unitary council has a duty to cooperate with its neighbours and where relevant the county council. The moment I looked at this piece of coalition legislation I understood immediately that the lawyers would relish the lack of definition. Duty to answer emails? Duty to meet? Duty to agree?

We were assured that there was no duty to agree. So we have had for the past few years the nice philosophical distinction between working together and working together with the same aim in mind. This is indeed a distinction that will often require counsel's opinion.

The temptation of some councils is to try and place the emphasis on bilateral meetings with their neighbours, no doubt with the aim of diluting any common stance which might be taken by their neighbours genuinely cooperating with each other. It is hard to see how bilateral meetings are cooperation in any meaningful sense.

The county councils are also a little lost in this process, forever in danger of being seen as the difficult partner. Or indeed being the difficult partner in not sharing (for instance) school admissions data in a way which can give a reasonable clue as to where new schools should go.

Ideally the Whitehall rush to 'simplify' and 'devolve' should be reversed and each area (county in many cases) should have something more akin to the London Plan developed by the Mayor of London. City regions are, of course, heading this way.

Doing the best of a bad job

In the meantime, districts and counties need to do the best of a bad job and sit round the table and work jointly: this means commissioning housing needs studies, agreeing common objectives. And it probably means recognising that the duty to cooperate has morphed, as is must do, into a duty to agree.

In all areas this is going to be tough but structure planning was never easy. There will need to be reassessments of housing numbers and these will need to be upward, given the housing crisis. Affordability will also need to be agreed and genuinely delivered – meaning the reappearance of social or council housing.

But how do we deal with the Green Belt?

This does not mean that the Green Belt is killed off as a concept. The revised NPPF says:

- Green Belt serves five purposes:
- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas
- to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another
- to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment
- to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns
- to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land[1]

1 [1] NPPF 134

We would all agree with that (I think) but that does not mean that every last hectare has to be set in aspic. On the contrary, NPPF adds:

Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance their beneficial use, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land.[2]

So Green Belt is a living asset which can be enhanced, especially for sport and recreation. What Green Belt is not supposed to do is drive younger people out of the area and drive up house prices for those lucky enough to turn up in a Green Belt-bounded area three decades ago.

Interestingly, when residents these days are asked about the top priority in local planning, they don't put Green Belt at the top of the pecking order. Issues like the suitability of housing and the availability of infrastructure are just as likely to be preferred.

This perhaps gives us a clue as to what we must actually do when wrestling with how to tackle rising house prices in Green Belt areas. It might even make co-operation and joint working that bit easier.

Chris White is a St Albans District Councillor

2 [2] NPPF 141

GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

Councillor Steve Jordan

Setting the scene

Cheltenham's location has always made strategic planning difficult (as if it was ever easy!). The town has a population of about 115,000 and has the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) on the eastern side and Green Belt in most other directions, intended to stop Cheltenham merging with Gloucester 14km to the south west and Bishop's Cleeve 7km to the north.

The Cheltenham Borough Council area is tight to the urban boundary as is Gloucester City and we have Tewkesbury District Council between us. There is a history of Tewkesbury putting things Cheltenham doesn't like on its boundary!

Cheltenham and Gloucester are a similar size and realistically act as a single economic area with the M5 running between them, although house prices in Cheltenham are about 30 per cent higher than the equivalent in Gloucester. They also both have their own distinctive history and identity.

Given all the above and despite the Gloucester and Tewkesbury having a different political leadership we took the view that the only sensible approach was to have a Joint Core Strategy (JCS) between the three councils.

It is fair to say we had quickly ruled out major development in the AONB so did not include Cotswold District in the JCS area. We agreed in 2008 to start work on the JCS to cover 2011 to 2031 and it only took nine years to put it in place – but we got there!

Development options had been bought up for virtually every field around the town and groups opposing development and sprung up in each area often with Lib Dems in the lead. It is important that everyone, particularly those opposing the plans and the local councillors representing those areas were included in the discussions throughout the planning process. However, one of the difficulties of the three councils working together was to ensure everyone is included.

Cheltenham has a serious issue with lack of genuinely affordable housing as well as lack of potential employment sites. So the threat of development next door is a key issue in a number of wards, but across most of the town the concern of the 'silent majority' is more about how their children will be able to afford to find a home.

Assessing the need

The key starting point was to try and get a genuine assessment of the actual housing need. The JCS employed a leading expect on demographics who projected future population growth from all sources. The fact this was done in an open way with all the documents published did help enable a sensible discussion on the housing numbers actually needed. This methodology did get considerable support and was subsequently adopted across all the Gloucestershire councils.

The demographic projection came up with about 31,000 homes needed across the JCS areas within the 20 year plan period. A key difficulty was how to deal with economic growth. Economic projections often seem hardly worth the paper they are written on and sometimes appear as mindless optimism set against what was actually happening.

In this case where any extra development is likely to be in Green Belt trying to keep a grasp on reality is clearly important. In the end the JCS paid three companies for economic growth projections to assess likely numbers of jobs created and then took an average.

This allowed us to come up with a number of homes we felt was 'sound' at 33,000 although the inspector eventually supported 35,000. Interestingly the latest government guidance on assessing housing need comes up with a very similar figure.

Deciding how many homes are needed is one thing, but agreeing where they go is quite another. It is often said that there are enough brown field sites to meet demand. While we have pushed 'brown field first' at all opportunities, realistically in Cheltenham brown field sites were never going to be sufficient as there aren't enough of them to meet demand locally.

The original intention was to come up with a housing number for the JCS area as a whole and to have a shared five year supply. However the planning inspector insisted each council should have its own five year supply, thus losing some of the advantage of working together, but at least with sites adjoining the Cheltenham and Gloucester areas being added to their local numbers.

However whichever way you looked at it, allocating some Green Belt sites to meet the need was inevitable and we have a number of urban extensions across the JCS area planed in what is now former Green Belt.

Finding solutions

One of the advantages of the NPPF is that it introduced the concept of Local Green Spaces (LGS) – partly at the insistence of Martin Horwood while he was Cheltenham's MP. While Green Belt is intended to prevent urban sprawl the designation doesn't imply the space is accessible to the public or even green.

However, LGS designation is specifically to protect green areas of special value to the local community. One thing we have done in Cheltenham although not so far in Gloucester or Tewkesbury is a borough wide LGS review. This has been particularly helpful in areas likely to be taken out of the Green Belt to allow development. It has allowed local communities to put forward the areas they particularly value so these can be incorporated in master planning exercises and then protected, and was something recognised by the planning inspector.

The JCS was finally agreed in December 2017. It could have been done quicker as we added some time to understand the implications of the NPPF when it first appeared. Also the planning inspection was due to be done in 12 months but took three years. But equally it does take time to take people with you so there aren't many shortcuts.

In summary you need an honest conversation about what the community overall needs and it is important all sections are listened to not just the loudest. Local councillors have a key role in representing the concerns of their communities and making sure they are listened to. Where development is needed the LGS designation is a useful tool in still protecting green spaces local people most value.

Electorally it is interesting to note that in 2008 when work on the JCS started, a new Liberal Democrat administration was elected in Cheltenham with 20 of the 40 council seats, and with half the council elected every two years that has steadily risen to 32 out of 40.

Steve Jordan is Leader of Cheltenham Borough Council

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE – CHALLENGES FOR THE NEW LIBERAL DEMOCRAT ADMINISTRATION

Councillor Philippa Hart

Greater Cambridge - comprising Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire – is second only to London in how much it costs to buy somewhere to live. The area has been told to expect its population to grow 28 per cent by 2031. South Cambridgeshire comprises over 106 villages and no towns. The settlement strategy in the past 20 years has concentrated on new settlements which have put us at the mercy of big developers, been slow to deliver and which suck services away from our existing villages. Where they have been built, for example Cambourne which has delivered homes young families can afford to live in, the birth rate is higher than in parts of India!

Meanwhile, although they are often the locations of choice for rural businesses, in our older villages there is a story of accommodation stagnation, where the older and affluent live in under-occupied large houses and younger families live increasingly in low cost and social housing.

The average age in some of our villages is over 60. Under-occupation means that villages which have had the least growth have a fraction of the number of people living in them than a hundred years ago. Middle income families who used to be able to afford to live in South Cambridgeshire's villages are struggling to afford to buy the houses in them. There is virtually no rented sector.

The new Liberal Democrat administration at South Cambridgeshire wants to move away from talking about 'affordable housing' to housing which is affordable for everyone to live in.

Liberal Democrats will expand the definition of key workers so that we address signs of social imbalance caused by the housing market. We need to house the teachers who teach in our first class schools; the nurses, junior doctors and ambulance men and women who work in our first class hospitals. We need to employ officers at the district council who do not have to travel from where they can afford to live outside the county in order to come to work.

The workforce needed to drive growth in the tech and bio-medical science sector are key workers too; it is already clear that a concentration solely on building homes for local people in our existing villages will not supply that workforce.

Employees in this sector have portable skills which could mean that they may not want to buy homes in South Cambs, but instead wish to rent good quality market houses and flats near to where they work.

So what are South Cambs Lib Dems looking at?

We are looking to deliver well-connected places in which car is not king. We must ensure that we build the homes that are needed where they are needed including near employment sites. This may mean a focus on apartments.

We need to start building council houses in greater numbers, ensuring that our housing stock is diverse, future-proofed and delivering rain water harvesting, renewable energy, car charging points, cycle stores etc. Design will be at the forefront of our thinking, moving away from a lazy home counties vernacular to homes which are beautiful and functional, neither of which is the opposite of affordable.

We also need to look at market rental including 'Rent to Buy', financed and delivered by the district council.

Included in this building programme should be life time homes to enable multi-generational living and retirement villages to enable older people to downsize.

Responding to investment planned by major companies in the tech and bio-medical sectors but the paucity of nearby suitable accommodation, we are talking to our major employers to allow them to bring forward key worker housing on land next to or near their premises for the exclusive use of their own workforce.

We will address slow delivery by looking at different modes of construction including modular, built to a high standard and advanced finish and assembled as a finished product within a few days being on site. We also want to work with SMEs to deliver smaller sites.

The South Cambs Lib Dem Group is currently putting together its joint housing strategy with Cambridge City in which these aspirations will be expressed. The acid test will be delivering the homes we need.

Philippa Hart, South Cambridgeshire District Councillor

USING PLANNING POSITIVELY

Councillor Adam Paynter

We recognise new development in Cornwall is necessary and essential to meet the social and economic needs of our growing population. Affordability of commercial rents, housing rents and high house prices (average house price is nine times the average annual wage) means that we are not meeting our economic potential.

The private market is not working for everyone. The majority of development over the last decade has been driven by speculative proposals, based upon opportunity rather than planning. Some is poor quality development and when it is imposed on communities it is often not welcome.

The Cornwall Local Plan sets out the spatial distribution of the growth and determines the quantity of new jobs and new homes (38k and 52.5k respectively) needed up to 2030.

Since adoption, in November 2016, we have turned a corner and have a plan led approach, but the planning system is still inherently weak and vulnerable to government tests of delivery. We can't rely entirely on the private sector. The planning policy framework is wide ranging. These are a few ways that we are using it positively:

Self-build – an important (and growing) component

Historically, many people built their own homes in Cornwall but over time, planning policies reduced the supply of suitable small plots. Our local plan provides for a more dispersed pattern of development, allowing for organic growth where it supports or enables the local provision of appropriate services and facilities.

We are proposing a new community-led approach to encourage small scale self-build on sites outside of but adjacent to the existing built up area of towns, villages and other small settlements. The aim behind this approach is to give eligible residents the opportunity to build a home at a price that is more affordable than a home on the open market.

Under this approach, permission would be granted for small schemes of six dwellings or fewer where the freehold of at least half of the developable land (excluding any infrastructure) is transferred at zero cost to the council as serviced plots through a Section 106 Agreement. Cornwall Council would then make these plots available to eligible applicants for a lower cost; applicants could then self-build (or commission) a home for their own permanent occupation.

Future control would be secured through the land transaction, with a penalty if the homes were sold within an initial period of five years. After five years, the homes could be sold on the open market, subject to an ongoing restriction that they are lived in as a primary residence. Any monies raised through the sale of the plots would be recycled into other affordable self-build schemes.

In Cornwall a third of our housing supply comes from small sites and we know that 90 per cent of planning permissions on small sites are delivered within 5 years. We also know that communities are supportive of growth which is small scale and proportionate to their places and where it is local people that benefit from it. Growing this supply provides choice that meets community need.

We have 213 local councils in Cornwall, each one containing many villages and hamlets; if each parish built two schemes this approach could deliver 2,500 new homes, in addition to those that we have already planned for. At scale across the UK this could help address the gap in housing need and supply.

Communities grasping the nettle through Neighbourhood Development Plans

There are 112 neighbourhood plan areas in Cornwall, which means that over half our parishes are engaged in plan preparation. 33 of those plans have progressed beyond consultation draft stage and so hold weight in decision making, and 20 are adopted.

Neighbourhood plans work best when communities plan positively for growth. This also fosters a better understanding of the planning system within communities and enables them to engage more effectively with it. Working intensively with communities we are able to help them translate their aspirations into planning policies that will deliver the development that meets their needs and retains their sense of place.

An example of innovative local policy within neighbourhood plans is the principal residence policy, which has been included in six of the adopted plans and requires new housing development to be restricted to permanent residential use, rather than second homes.

This restriction is applied by condition and requires future occupants to occupy the dwelling as a primary residence and to provide evidence that they are doing so if requested. This evidence could include residents being registered on the local electoral register and being registered for and attending local services such as healthcare, schools and so on. This policy has been upheld at appeal and we'll continue to monitor its effectiveness.

Cornwall Council – investing in the future of housing

Having got the local plan strategy in place, Cornwall Council has also got in on the act by taking a commercial role in bringing some new development forward creating an Investment Programme, initially circa £600 million. Investments will focus on delivering the homes, commercial space and social infrastructure needed to fulfil the Cornwall Local Plan and Strategic Economic Plan.

The strategic case for this is both in terms of delivering the development and infrastructure Cornwall needs as well as creating investments that will give the Council a revenue return to support vital services. It will be funded by debt and will not impact currently on vital council spending. We shall actively seek grants and investment from others to increase the benefits for Cornwall.

Conclusion

Planning remains a complex process and although the policies work (we are winning over 85 per cent of appeals compared to less than 50 per cent pre-plan) the success of a plan is measured by what happens on the ground. Despite the complexity of the process we are finding that where there is a will there is a way. We are wrestling some of the important delivery away from the development industry and back to community focussed and community based solutions.

Adam Paynter is Leader of Cornwall Council

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOMENT

Councillor Adele Morris

Community led, not developer led

Major planning applications will almost always generate concern from the local community and in some cases lead to a targeted campaign against the proposed development. This is a perfectly reasonable reaction as many people are nervous of the impact on existing residents, including school places, doctors' surgeries and of course traffic and parking problems. However, we need to find a way to make development acceptable to our communities because we have to get more homes built, along with the extra school places and health provision that comes with an increasing population.

First and foremost development should provide what our areas need, as identified through local plans. A robust and viable plan should form the basis for all local planning decisions, and gives everyone some certainty about what growth is expected in an area.

Early engagement (not tick box consultation!) in a major development proposal is vital – long before an application is actually submitted. Letting developers know straight away what is and isn't important to the local community can help them formulate a better application. And if discussions about infrastructure happen at this stage, they can lead to more positive outcomes.

For example, on one large development the applicant agreed to fund a bus service to alleviate concerns that there would be an increase in traffic. Others have included health provision and even schools within large developments.

Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy

It's essential that we understand that planners are there to facilitate growth and developers and landowners are just like any other business people who need to make a profit. However, there is an obligation for development to contribute Section 106 (S106) or Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds to mitigate any negative impacts and towards the provision of new or improved infrastructure, schools, health facilities and affordable housing.

Some authorities have devised their own methods for calculating S106 obligations, using a 'toolkit' so that developers can see from the outset how much they will be expected to pay. Of course there will always be site and area specific differences, but councils can legitimately request these payments in a legally binding process.

Shockingly, a council recently had to return hundreds and thousands of unspent S106 to the developer, and others have come close to running out of time. To avoid this some councils produce a regularly updated, publicly available S106 register recording individual details of each payment, including a description of what it is for, the current value and spend by date.

If a spreadsheet is used, it is recommended that s106 monies with less than three years to the spend-by deadline are highlighted in amber and those with less than 12 months are highlighted in red. It is further recommended that local accountability (parish councils or area committees), member accountability (audit and governance committees) and the local media, are encouraged to look at this information on a regular basis.

In 2010, the government introduced CIL, which allows authorities to set a 'per square metre' tariff on developments. Seventy-five per cent of the money collected is to be spent on wider infrastructure projects as set out by the local authority, 25 per cent is to be spent on community projects identified through a neighbourhood plan or 15 per cent in parishes or areas without a neighbourhood plan. Affordable housing is still a separate S106 contribution – typically an agreed percentage of the development, according to local policy and viability – and there is provision for additional S106 monies to be collected to mitigate any specific impacts of a development on the immediate area. It is up to the authority to agree what process will be used for allocating the money, but communities should be part of that decision making wherever possible, and especially when setting the priorities for the local spend.

One way of helping communities to support development is to encourage them to think about the improvements they would like to see in their area, and to formalise this into some kind of 'project bank'. Neighbourhood planning groups or parish councils are well placed to do this, but equally it can be done informally with community groups and local councillors or campaigners.

Development viability

Since the introduction of the NPPF in 2012, viability has been included as a material consideration when deciding a planning application. This has led to an increase in developers using this as a reason for not providing policy compliant quantities of affordable housing and other local S106 contributions. (CIL contributions are not negotiable). A number of agencies sprang up to assist developers in crafting viability reports that show they could provide little or no affordable housing or other contributions. It has taken authorities a while to catch up, but many are now getting to grips with this. In some areas developers have been paying too much for their land, and this has encroached on the level of profit they will make. A few authorities have introduced viability Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs), setting out their requirements and how and when they will assess viability.

For example, the Mayor of London has set out specific criteria for calculating the 'bench mark land value' so that it is the developer who loses out if they pay too much for the land, not the local authority. Some authorities are not interested in knowing the profit on a scheme if it is policy compliant on affordable housing, whilst others want it to be policy compliant on multiple areas.

But it is important that authorities and councillors (on planning committees, cabinet members and leaders) understand the real situation with viability, and on large developments it is recommended to have the developers' appraisals independently assessed. For example, on a multi-million pound development it can make a huge difference just by tweaking some percentages here and there. Some authorities employ viability consultants for this (and charge the developer) and others employ in house valuation experts. There are only so many ways to cut a cake and sometimes there are reasons why a site is not viable that have nothing to do with land value.

All of these financial contributions can help an authority to invest in the infrastructure that is needed to support growth. But the money alone is not enough, and proper planning is essential to make sure this is done in the right way. For example, school expansions need to have space to expand into, or new sites to build on and new schools need operators. Similarly with health provision, community centres, new parks and open spaces. Land has to be allocated somewhere for these facilities.

Increasing density

Inner city areas are under immense development pressure, and constrained sites mean building upwards. This can cause real conflict, especially where there are areas of established low-level housing and/or heritage or conservation considerations. And it can be more difficult to control the impact of a series of individual, unrelated tall sites than one large scale regeneration project. In these situations it is essential to manage the expectations of your local community.

I have been a councillor since 2006, representing one of the fastest developing wards in the country. I will object to certain elements of planning applications when I don't believe they would lead to good outcomes for the local area. But I also sit on the planning committee and approve developments (including in my own ward) where I believe they meet the appropriate policies, or as close as they can get to meeting them. Many councillors and activists are afraid to support development, but I would encourage dialogue with your residents because development is going to happen, with or without their support.

My version of Liberal Democrat planning policy would give greater support to the role of communities and local authorities in developing their area, and less opportunity for developers and landowners to bypass their obligations to the community. It would promote high quality design standards and push harder on environmental sustainability. And it would foster an environment where our communities can thrive for generations to come.

Adele Morris is a London Borough of Southwark Councillor and the Liberal Democrat lead member for Planning at the Local Government Association

CHANGES TO THE HOUSING MARKET ARE NEEDED

Councillor Keith House

What do we need?

At long last housing has moved to centre stage of national policy. The need to reach 300,000 homes a year is shared across the political parties. Yet there remains a risk that the right will see this as only about home ownership, and the left will see this as only being solved with more council housing.

For Liberal Democrats a different view is needed of the stage: seeing housing as being about people and families, and meeting their needs. Home ownership is a challenge to the under 40s in a way it rarely was to the over 50s just 30 years ago. Genuinely affordable rented housing that has become scarce and barely even a safety net is no answer for the future.

Liberal Democrats know we need more homes of all tenures, and to meet special needs too: homes for downsizing active 80-somethings, care facilities for those with support requirements, housing for students, for travellers, for those passing through our towns and communities.

'Where' and 'how' are the characters on this stage that remain pushed out of the limelight by those that agree the need, but prefer to say 'not here'.

England won't get to 300,000 homes a year without all councils doubling their delivery rate. 'Where' is the planners' question. Densification of urban land, with three or more storeys being the default, urban extensions and new towns will all play their part. Greenfield development is needed and it need not result in coalescence of settlements. England is big enough to protect our national parks and ancient woodlands, our heritage and to stop towns merging into urban sprawl. These decisions should be made by local communities with government only intervening where councils refuse to meet need.

How do we get there?

'How' is easier than it first looks. First, the context. Private housebuilders have a model that makes delivery of more than 150,000 homes a year unlikely. Social landlords, even with new entrepreneurial spirit, are unlikely to deliver much more than 50,000. Councils can fill the rest, building and delivering for all tenures.

There is no shortage of opportunity for local councils to take the lead to deliver the housing needed in their area.

Councils can already through housing companies deliver homes for sale and market rent, and can use housing grants to deliver 'council' housing, or use their Housing Revenue Account where they have one.

One model being rolled out in Eastleigh Borough to tackle affordability is through the council acquiring land and working in partnership with housing associations and the private sector to build market rent homes, owned by the council, with lifetime tenancies and the option to convert rent to purchase taking partial account of rent paid. This gives the chance of stability to plan careers and families, and create a pathway to home ownership, and can accelerate site delivery without disturbing private developers' business model.

Changes to national policy that would improve delivery

1. Allow councils directly to own housing stock for sale or rent, abolishing the separate Housing Revenue Account.
2. Allow borrowing for housing of all tenures through the market, or from government, in the same way borrowing is available for other investments based on prudential principles.
3. Further simplify Compulsory Purchase Orders on a double-current value basis to unblock urban sites.
4. Give local housing authorities a 'right to develop' underused public land where a genuine case cannot be made for opposing development.
5. Give councils the power to acquire development land with planning permission where viability is being used as an argument to side-step social housing and community infrastructure provisions.
6. Task councils with overseeing development from pre-planning to occupation, with stronger intervention powers to stop sites stalling.

There are already a scattering of activist councils, including Lib Dem authorities, taking housing as a core delivery responsibility, not just as a job to issue planning permissions that fail to be implemented.

In Eastleigh borough, the council has acquired land for over 2000 homes and is directly intervening in delivery of about one-third of all homes being built, accelerating supply and diversifying tenure to meet the needs of people and families. The liberal challenge is to let the market do what it does well, but to step in where need is not being met. Then we will get to 300,000 homes each year.

Keith House is Leader of Eastleigh Borough Council

THE PERILS OF PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT

Councillor Jon Hunt

In recent years government has extended permitted development (PD) rights across England. This has significantly increased the work that can be done on domestic properties, allowed the conversion of offices to flats and allowed conversion of agricultural buildings, all without needing to apply for planning permission.

The arguments for doing this have been two-fold. One is to generate more opportunities for housing, the second is to unleash small-scale economic activity as local businesses get work building extensions and converting buildings.

But it is also another indication of the way central government mistrusts local government and sees planning committees as an obstacle to the building of houses and economic development. We should respond with policies that restore trust in our local communities.

Conversation among Liberal Democrat councillors suggests a mixed response to this. Some have not found issues; others, such as myself and my colleagues in Birmingham, have a huge volume of intractable casework arising from the exercise of permitted development.

In addition we see growing problems arising from uncontrolled development of suburban communities. We are increasingly seeing floods, affecting hundreds of properties, primarily caused by surface water and brooks overwhelmed by local flash flooding that seems to be linked to global warming. In my ward this is now a key concern for our work on a neighbourhood plan.

The difficulty in enforcing the rules on front garden conversion to drives aggravates the impact of micro-development. The unwillingness of planning officers to take action reflects the general terror of the planning inspectorate within departments.

Locally and as Liberal Democrats, we do not seek to stop householders improving their properties. Often conversion is better environmentally than new building – and the party has argued in the past for VAT rules to reflect this.

We must also believe that councils are entitled to insist that conversions are appropriate to the neighbourhood and, even more significantly, are environmentally friendly: that they do not detract from air quality or add to the carbon footprint.

The current legislation allows some discretion to local authorities to vary national planning rules. They can use Neighbourhood Planning Orders to lift planning restrictions in some areas. They can also seek Article 4 directions to lift permitted development rights, and a recent change to legislation now means they can charge fees on applications within an Article 4 direction. Councils can also take their own steps to cut red-tape by effective schemes of officer delegation for small-scale developments.

The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) published an analysis in May of the impact of the extension of permitted development rights. It found a net cost of about £50 million to local authorities, of which £42 million was from the loss of affordable housing contributions and £8 million from the impact of loss of fees.

While RICS was able to obtain detailed data on office and agricultural conversions, the impact of residential changes is harder to assess.

In December 2012 the Communities and Local Government Committee published its own, hostile, pre-assessment of proposed extensions to permitted development. Like councillors, the MPs were no doubt able to refer to their own casework to assess the impact. In their report, the MPs accused the then coalition government of ignoring the risk of 'increased neighbour disputes and any deleterious impact on the quality, design and amenity of the permitted development and the local area.'

The MPs also noted the flaw in the Article 4 mechanism – that at that time councils could not recover fees if they sought exemptions from permitted development.

What should the Liberal Democrat response be?

Firstly, we should reaffirm the principle that planning is a matter for local councils not for government. The government should not be setting detailed rules for the size of extensions – as effectively it does through PD rules. RICS analysis shows how central government could not possibly anticipate the impact on specific communities of allowing a free-for-all in office block and agricultural building conversions.

Some local authorities may wish to play a smaller part in planning. They should have discretion to set their own permitted development rules. For some this will be a way of cutting costs. Others may wish to have less permitted development – they may wish to preserve office blocks to ensure job opportunities. They may face significant environmental impact from a myriad of micro-developments as property-owners exploit the PD rules to the maximum.

Secondly, we should review the role of the Planning Inspectorate. Planning needs to be a rules-based system, based on the choices of local electorates, and it not up to unelected officials to vary the rules. Developers who push the boundaries, often literally and figuratively, should do so at their own risk.

Jon Hunt is Leader of the Liberal Democrat group on Birmingham City Council and chair of the 3Bs Neighbourhood Planning Forum.

MAKING HOUSING MORE ACCESSIBLE

Richard Outram

Disabled people are often not well served within the current housing market. There are very few homes built specifically with the needs of disabled people in mind, even supposed 'lifetime homes' often fail the test in practice. There are few suitable homes for disabled people to buy or to rent in the private sector, and these are poorly marketed. Where properties are available in the social rented sector they are often located in grouped schemes targeted at the elderly, marginalising disabled people of working age, or are 'hidden' with adaptations remaining unidentified on property management databases. Clearly then this is an area of housing in which the Liberal Democrats can and should be innovative.

The Oldham Housing Investment Partnership (OHIP) is made up of the local authority and nine social housing providers.

In August 2011, I was employed by OHIP as coordinator of a time-bound project to create a database of all adapted and accessible properties available for social rent in Oldham, to streamline the lettings process to ensure that homes with adaptations were let to applicants with disabilities, rather than those with general needs. In so doing, this would reduce the expenditure on new adaptations.

In Oldham, thousands of properties in the social rented sector had been adapted, but, as there was no existing database of properties and their adaptations, in many cases such properties were simply let to general needs tenants, and applicants with complex needs were left to languish on the waiting list. Perversely this often meant that costly adaptations were ripped out as the new general needs tenant had no requirement for them.

In addition, it led to the unsatisfactory situation in which properties were being adapted on an ad-hoc basis to meet some of the needs of a tenant in-situ, such as installing a level access shower, when the property was itself patently unfit for that person's long-term needs. In some cases for example, the bathroom was only accessible via stairs that could not accommodate a chair lift or because the front entrance could only be reached via a steep flight of stairs.

To support the project, two bespoke focus groups were created:

- The first comprised officers from each of the social housing providers, Oldham Council and the community occupational therapy team. The input of the latter was especially useful in telling housing officers how it really was for tenants with disabilities.
- The second comprised tenants and leaseholders with disabilities, and their carers. I felt passionately that the personal experience of these individuals would be invaluable in establishing best practice and I really wanted their input.
- These groups both met regularly and meetings were chaired by me as project coordinator.

The officer group discussed new ways of working, and these ideas were reviewed and challenged by the tenants' group. The tenants' group also presented their own ideas for service improvements for consideration by the officers.

Over 15 months, the project achieved the following:

- With the support of the social housing providers, a comprehensive database was created on the IT software system Northgate listing 4,000 properties and their adaptations.
- With the support of the community occupational therapy team, a waiting list of social housing applicants with disabilities was also created.
- A protocol was agreed whereby adapted properties becoming available could be let directly to someone on the bespoke waiting list, rather than 'bid' for. This process was managed by a dedicated community occupational therapist.
- A small officer group was established to consider new requests for adaptations in social rented properties, with a protocol adopted that as a general rule-of-thumb tenants with disabilities would be supported to move to existing adapted properties that met their needs rather than installing new adaptations. Tenants that had been refused adaptations could go on the bespoke waiting list with priority.
- A financial and in-kind support package was available to applicants moving to an adapted property, and this was tailored to the needs of the individual rather than prescriptive; typically removal and dis-/reconnection costs would be met as well as an allowance given for decorating,

- A new Oldham wheelchair standard was agreed to ensure that new homes built for social housing providers could be accessed by tenants in wheelchairs, but also adapted efficiently to meet their future needs
- Several bespoke properties were designed and built by social housing providers to meet the complex needs of several of the families on our waiting list (generally families with two or more children with severe disabilities). These individuals would have otherwise languished indefinitely, perhaps forever, on a general waiting list whilst living in wholly unsuitable private sector housing.
- At the Independent Living Centre (LINK), a weekly housing advice surgery was established for applicants with disabilities
- An accessible booklet was produced for tenants and housing applicants containing information of all of the services they could access to seek a move to an adapted home or to request adaptations in their home. This was also produced in an easy read format.
- A booklet was also produced for councillors and community-based advisors with this information in a more detailed format.
- Improvements were achieved in the quality of customer service to ensure that services more effectively met the needs of people with disabilities, and their carers.

I will be delighted to share any of this knowledge with Liberal Democrat colleagues to help improve the social housing experience for disabled people in your area.

Richard Outram is Policy and Research Advisor to the Leader of the Opposition Councillor Howard Sykes MBE and the Liberal Democrat Group on Oldham Council

FACT BOX

Public Sector Equality Duty

Councils have a Public Sector Equality Duty under s149 of the Equality Act 2010 and councillors need to ensure that planning takes equalities into account.

The protected characteristic most likely to be of relevance is disability, and it is important to have disability-friendly planning policies. This is not just about tackling accessibility for wheelchairs and the mobility-impaired, but also making adjustments for visual impairment, hearing impairment and neurodiversity.

It can also consider the effect of a proposed development on an extant person with disabilities. For example, if a person has had a room converted for a disabled child with autism, then it may be appropriate to refuse extending the permitted operating hours of an adjacent development if those extended operating hours would have a significantly detrimental impact of the child.

For developments of larger, public buildings, ensuring that facilities such as prayer rooms (with access to appropriate washing facilities) are included as part of the design, not an after-thought, can be beneficial.

CHALLENGES TO CONSIDER

Councillor David Bill
The current planning situation presents a real dilemma for us all. We all recognise the need for more housing for a growing population and in particular the needs for young people and the ageing population but those of us at the sharp end of the planning process are often the last resort for people who deeply resent the loss of yet more countryside.

Here in the heart of rural England we live in what is called the 'Golden Triangle', an area bounded by motorways which is just over two hours or so away from all the major ports. As a result we face enormous demands for large scale 'Amazon type' operations, in other words huge sheds whose demands grow as the high streets shrink. Large parts of the Midlands are being taken over by distributive operations with the latest sting in the tail being that the Planning Inspectorate will take the decision to proceed on all major proposals with only a minimum amount of local participation.

The NPPF regulations already give a tremendous advantage to developers and those of us on planning committees know the problems this presents in trying to represent the people who resent the scale of change they see all around them.

It can feel that our ability to get involved as Liberal Democrat councillors is steadily being undermined and I cite the case of the local beauty spot in my town which I have taken part in saving for the last 20 years and whose fate is being determined by the Planning Inspectorate without the benefit of a public hearing. But that shouldn't stop us from providing challenge whenever possible.

The sheer scale of change brings other challenges in its wake and as a Liberal Democrat councillor I believe we need to be able to do things differently when being part of planning decisions.

First of all, we need to keep campaigning for national legislation to be changed. We should strengthen the powers of local government to prevent large developers reneging on their commitments. For example, where management companies are given responsibility for roads and sewers but then fail on the job.

In cases where planning decisions go against the local plan, we need to campaign for the community right to appeal to balance the power of the Planning Inspectorate, and we need other powers as well – for instance to penalise excessive land-banking where existing permissions are not implemented as the landowners or developers wait for prices to rise.

As a Liberal Democrat councillor I would urge all other colleagues to consider the following challenges and raise them at every opportunity:

1. Are we addressing the ability of vital services such as roads, hospitals, surgeries, schools, water and sewerage services to keep pace with the growth of housing and employment sites? Of course, once much of this was accountable to local government but who controls it now?
2. Are we addressing the challenge of the deteriorating air quality in much of our urban area?
3. Are we addressing energy and water conservation needs?

This checklist must first of all be applied to national government, who, if they were so inclined, could give local councils the powers they need to ensure there is a fair planning process which takes into account the points I make. I have been involved with planning for over 45 years and am only seeking assurances that someone, somewhere in Whitehall has thought this all through.

David Bill is a Leicestershire County Councillor and a Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Councillor

WHY WE NEED OUR COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT NEW HOMES

Councillor Max Wilkinson

As the old adage goes, the first step to solving a problem is recognising there is one. I'm pleased, therefore, that we have realised there's an issue on housing and that our party needs to address it. Many of us will start this debate with an accusation that problem exists outside of our party. There are undoubtedly issues with the way the government, planning system, local government and developers interact. That's not news to anyone.

But I feel we should question whether some activity in our party can be a contributing factor. Because there are a few people around who appear to think we don't need to build any more new homes to meet demand.

Yet experts in construction, the government and independent housing charities like Shelter recognise that we need to build lots more every year just to stand still. Indeed, our party has a policy of building 300,000 new ones every year - a policy backed by members at our conference.

We've all seen Liberal Democrat Focuses with anti-housing campaigns and promises to stop developments to prevent urban sprawl/coalescence. I've even seen councillors campaign against local plans designed by Liberal Democrat councils.

But let's take a step back for a moment and consider the cumulative impact of what we do.

Firstly, this can delay the provision of new homes that we all know are badly needed. Often the objection is on the grounds that the homes aren't affordable anyway, there weren't enough affordable homes included or it won't bring house prices down. Any of those criticisms may be fair enough, but what we also know is that failing to build homes does exacerbate the rampant house price inflation that has already priced out too many younger people.

Secondly, when we focus on anti-development campaigns we crowd out so much of the positive message we have to tell. Whether it's our national policy on the NHS, our positive campaigns on education or anything else positive happening in our communities, we lose that message if our campaigns are dominated by anti-development messages.

Thirdly, the way we campaign on housing belies our role as community leaders, or as people aspiring to lead communities. We may do it in the belief that we are representing residents and defending our communities. These are laudable aims, but what of those silent voices who don't contact councillors or take part in council consultations?

What about the people renting homes, forced to move every six months, or those living in crowded multi-occupancy homes? What about pretty much anyone under the age of 35 – an age group that we know we struggle to reach with our local campaigns?

The argument goes that we must oppose housing and that's totally fine because it's all part of the political process – particularly when we are in opposition. People also say that we only campaign against new homes on rare occasions and we 'always come up with an alternative option'.

On both points, I feel we are kidding ourselves more than local residents. And if we ever win a new council on the back of anti-housing campaigns, we will inevitably disappoint those who supported us when our vision of local planning also focuses on the delivery of more houses.

As a party, we are a force for good. We seek to campaign for people who are trampled, unheard and ignored by the system. I'm proud of that and I think our community politics is one of our strengths as a movement.

But it's time to admit that some of us have a problem with our campaigning culture when it comes to housing.

Max Wilkinson is a Cheltenham Borough Councillor

HELPING OUR ENVIRONMENT AND PLANET THROUGH THE PLANNING SYSTEM

Councillor Sarah Osborne

When you are in opposition it can, as we all know, be a frustrating experience!

Here in Lewes District, the Liberal Democrat Group have been working hard to show that you can still get things done and get others to support you even if you are not in control. We currently have a minority Conservative administration in Lewes, with the Liberal Democrats as the official opposition.

Here are just two examples of how we are making the planning system work on key areas of environmental concern – including tackling climate change and a good example of 'future proofing' new buildings.

In the run up to a full council meeting last October we were looking to act on the Government's plan to ban all diesel and petrol cars by 2040. We had heard nothing from the Conservative group on what they planned to do to meet their own government's target so thought we would lend a helping hand!

This motion called for 'new build' planning applications – no matter whether they are residential or commercial – to have electric car charging points included in the design. The Liberal Democrat Group was successful in getting our motion passed by a majority of one (17 voted for the motion, 16 voted against and there were 4 abstentions). The motion said:

"That from 1 January 2018 all new housing, new or replacement domestic garages and business/commercial planning applications to Lewes District Council include the provision of an 'electric vehicle charging scheme'; and that any such scheme would not become binding on the applicant unless included by the local planning authority as a condition of any planning permission granted".

In his speech to council members, Liberal Democrat Transport & Environment spokesman Councillor Vic Ient said, "The Conservative Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has announced a government plan to ban the sale of all petrol and diesel cars by 2040. What the Government was doing was reacting to the research which has proven the high levels of air pollution caused by diesel and petrol vehicles.

In the introduction to the government's policy paper on air quality, issued in July 2017, it states:

'We pledge to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it. Clean air is one of the most basic requirements of a healthy environment for us all to live, work, and bring up families' .

The Liberal Democrat Group pointed out that without the provision for electric car charging points in the district the government will find it hard to force through the implementation of the ban on diesel and petrol cars. We pointed to the fact that other councils such as Lib Dem led Colchester have already written charging points for new homes into their local plans.

At the same council meeting we proposed that all new housing and commercial developments incorporated a renewable energy scheme. It's a fraction of the cost to build in renewable energy systems into a new house, and there will be a real bonus for the new residents as it will mean their fuel prices will be lower and at the same time they will be helping reduce the amount of CO2 going into the atmosphere.

From 1 Sept 2019 planning applicants for housing and commercial development will have to work with the officers of the council to include a renewable energy scheme. Also the South Downs National Park (which is the planning authority for part of Lewes District) is being encouraged to do the same.

Any form of renewable energy scheme can be proposed to provide all or some of the electrical power supply, heating and hot water. New homes and businesses could power their building from an external renewable energy source, but most would be from either solar, ground source or air source heat pumps on the buildings themselves.

Below is a copy of the motion:

"That from 1 September 2019 new housing and business/commercial planning applications to Lewes District Council should usually include the provision of a 'renewable energy scheme'; and that any such scheme would not become binding on the applicant unless included by the local planning authority as a condition of any planning permission granted."

This was a team effort and I want to pay tribute to my colleague Vic Ient who has done so much to get these steps agreed by the district council.
We will continue to work hard on Lewes District Council to show that Liberal Democrats are committed to tackling climate change and taking the lead on green issues.

Sarah Osborne is Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on Lewes District Council

PLANNING IS ABOUT THE WAY WE LIVE, AND THE WAY WE LIVE IS CHANGING

Councillor Peter Thornton

Driverless cars

It's tempting to think that the significant changes have already happened and we can look forward to some stability, but there are bigger changes approaching us and they will, or should, affect our planning policies.

Let's start with autonomous vehicles, or driverless cars as we often call them. If you are in the market for a new car you will probably be offered a 'self parking' facility. This will park your car into a parking space whilst you take your hands off the wheel.

Some will park themselves whilst you stand outside the car. Have you thought about the fact that this could double the capacity of your car parks, as you can park right up against other vehicles without leaving room for the doors to open? How long before the car will park itself outside the town centre?

In Kendal we have a multi-storey car park which is about 60 years old and probably has another 10-25 years in it – as an old concrete structure. If it needs replacing in the next few years then will it make sense to build another? Probably not. I can't believe that we will still be parking cars in town centres at the end of this century.

How will these vehicles affect building in the countryside? Traditionally, planners have tried to limit vehicle movements because cars pollute, they kill people and they cause congestion. But what if they didn't? What if they were all electric, computer controlled for safety and didn't clog up town centres? Would that change things? Because that's going to happen, the only question is when?

How often are pedestrian zones compromised by the necessity of shops receiving deliveries? The time is coming when we will no longer see a 7.5 ton van drawing up outside a shop to deliver a small cardboard box. Trials are already taking place of systems which will use small electrically powered pods not much bigger than the boxes they are delivering.

Connectivity

We all complain about poor broadband. This will be solved by fibre to every home. Maybe not before the next election (!) but within our children's lifetimes, if not ours. The rural community around Kendal will have this before 2020 due to a community initiative and whilst I'm writing this piece I see that government has taken five minutes off from Brexit to announce that all homes will get a fibre connection in 15 years. Ambitious, certainly, but it will happen in time.

This will give us 1,000mbps instead of the 3-30mbps that most of us currently experience. What will this mean?

The honest answer is that we don't know at this stage but working from home will certainly become much more practical. Those tele-conferences will be transformed into something really useful where you can see and hear people better than if you were actually in the same room.

Health is on the edge of a revolution.

The latest Apple watches know quite a lot about your activity and heart rate. The next generation will measure heart rhythm and blood pressure. How long before your health centre rings to suggest you need an appointment rather than the other way round?

Town centres

Our immediate challenges are around town centres. Not just in our towns or in the UK, it's happening all around the world. Retail, as we know it, is moving towards the end of its life. The concept of shops, with a limited amount of goods to sell, has had its day. It lasted over 100 years but is now on the way out, replaced by online shopping with a huge increase in choice for the consumer with the ability to shop right around the world.

Planning policies are taking account of this and planners are accepting that there will be a contraction into a core town centre which will be based around entertainment and social interaction. Solid middle class towns such as my home town of Kendal seem to be managing this at the moment but tougher times are coming especially for the more deprived post industrial areas which are really suffering and present real challenges.

Not so far off.....

My grandchildren will probably see:

Sleeper cars. Travel at night whilst you sleep and wake up at your destination.

Artificial meat. Veganism is on the increase and there are already many convincing meat substitutes on the market. No need to kill animals, how would that transform our world and the world of farming? What will the effect be on our countryside?

Holographic communication and the ability to shake hands with someone anywhere in the world.

An end to the ability to go anywhere, at any time, on our road network. They will have to book their journeys into the system.

3D printers to manufacture most of your needs in your home, or in your immediate community. No more waiting for spare parts to cross the world.

Human spare parts and gene editing.

Intelligent robots to perform most household tasks.

Online voting and the ability to call referendums with a couple of days' notice. (Ok, maybe not this one...)

These things are all being developed now and will drastically change the way in which we live and the environment in which we live, work and play. Don't be fooled by the fact that they sometimes seem to take a long time arriving, once they come they seemingly appear overnight.

It's been said that we usually overestimate the effect of technological advances in the short term whilst underestimating their impact in the long term. This has certainly been true in my lifetime.

Our planning policies will need to constantly adapt and change if we are to plan for the future rather than just try to stay in the past. That's a real challenge to Liberal Democrats, but it's one which we must take on!

Peter Thornton is a Councillor on South Lakeland District and Cumbria County Council

HOW DO WE CAPTURE INCREASES IN LAND VALUE?

Max Von Thun

One of the pressing questions facing policymakers today is how to capture the sudden increases in land value generated by public planning decisions and investment. This happens for example when public authorities invest in local transport infrastructure, making their area more accessible, or when previously low value agricultural land receives planning permission for a new shopping centre or block of flats.

The issue is that while the infrastructure investment or planning permission is ultimately paid for by, or granted on behalf of, local citizens, the gains in terms of increased land value accrue almost exclusively to private landowners and developers. Not only is this windfall unfair from a distributional perspective, it limits incentives for local authorities to invest in their areas at a time when Britain is crying out for large-scale investment in housing and infrastructure.

The flipside is that improving councils' ability to capture such windfalls would increase their willingness to invest by raising additional revenues, worth an astonishing £87 billion according to Shelter. But while mechanisms do exist to capture land value increases, they are fundamentally unfit for purpose.

Council Tax for example is based on property valuations that are almost 30 years out of date, and therefore incapable of capturing dramatic increases in land value since then. Stamp duty plays its part in capturing these, but taxing transactions – a good thing if we want an efficient property market – is in other ways economically damaging. The Community Infrastructure Levy – brought in with the specific intention of capturing windfalls – is overcomplicated and underused.

The problem has not has gone unrecognised by political parties. Both Labour and the Conservatives have promised to address the issue of land value increases being captured by private landowners, though neither has yet put forward proposals of any detail.

The Liberal Democrats meanwhile have long been committed to ensuring communities benefit from public investment.

Our 2015 manifesto called for 'techniques for capturing the increase in land values from the granting of planning permission' while in 2017 we promised to 'consider the implementation of Land Value Taxation' as a replacement for Business Rates. And the recently launched Parliamentary APPG on Land Value Capture is chaired by none other than Leader of the Liberal Democrats Sir Vince Cable MP.

Most recently, the party has built on its aspiration to replace the broken Business Rates system with a tax on land value. Exactly one year ago, Vince Cable asked Andrew Dixon, founder of the Lib Dem Business and Entrepreneurs Network (LDBEN), to work out what such a replacement might look like. The final report – 'Taxing Land, Not Investment' – which is being debated at this year's Autumn Conference, proposes a Commercial Landowner Levy (CLL) paid for by landowners and based solely on the land value of commercial property.

The report shows that this change would give a significant boost to business, with lower taxes for companies in most parts of the country and especially large benefits for deprived areas and capital-intensive sectors such as manufacturing and renewable energy.

But of particular relevance to the debate on land value capture is the CLL's superior ability to capture increases in commercial land value generated by public investment.

Business Rates itself does a poor job. Revaluation is infrequent and rather than taxing only land –where the uplift itself occurs – Business Rates is also a tax on the physical capital that does not receive such uplifts. In contrast, rather than taxing productive investment in buildings and machinery, the CLL would concentrate on capturing publicly-created land value increases. Planning for new transport links, for example, could reflect the fact that Commercial Landowner Levy revenues would increase as a result, helping to make the case for new investment.

Introducing the CLL would not address the issue of land value capture by itself. Residential land – where the great majority of value is created and captured – would not be covered by the reform, and there may well be instances where a specific mechanism is needed to capture sudden increases in value triggered by planning decisions. But it is an ambitious first step towards solving a complex challenge.

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LIBERAL DEMOCRAT BEST PRACTICE APPROACHES TO PLANNING:

Campaigners, councillors and council leaders can:

1. Get involved with your local, neighbourhood or town plans to ensure you are getting a wide spectrum of views.
2. Consider the benefits of working with neighbouring authorities of all political colours to ensure the voices of your residents are heard.
3. Identify the best locations and the most appropriate people to deliver your housing, jobs, schools and other infrastructure.
4. Be realistic about the future needs of your communities.
5. Look at new and innovative ways to deliver sustainable, well designed buildings.
6. Where appropriate, support and encourage self-build and neighbourhood planning.
7. Capture and utilise the finances available from new developments to support new homes and jobs.
8. Continue to lobby government to allow councils to borrow to build all tenures of housing, simplify Compulsory Purchase Orders and give councils the power to acquire development land with planning permission; support the continued role of planning from pre-planning to occupation to help prevent sites from stalling.
9. Use Article 4 directions to prevent office to residential and other permitted development rights where they are having a negative impact on the community.
10. Be aware of the Public Sector Equality Duty and in particular plan for housing to suit a range of needs and abilities.
11. Plan for the necessary infrastructure to support the growth in housing and employment, and consider the best ways to minimise their environmental impacts.
12. Campaign for positive change with your community and encourage support for the right kind of homes in the right places.
13. Support implementable policies that help the environment such as electric charging points and renewable energy.
14. Think about the future. Driverless cars and other technological advances will change the way we live our lives and we have to factor that in to our planning processes.

This booklet contains just a sample of the many good practices and ideas from Liberal Democrats around the country. There are plenty more examples and suggestions in our Liberal Democrat manifestos and in the motions that come to federal conferences. For further information, or if you have a good story you think we should hear about please contact us at **libdem@lga.gov.uk**

You can also contact the LGA's planning advisory service website for further advice and information on planning matters **www.local.gov.uk/pas**

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