

Eleven pipers piping....

Major advances for the cause of community-led co-design in today's Housing White Paper reflecting Create Streets' research, publications and policy suggestions

Well done to the Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP and Gavin Barwell MP and their teams for their important steps on community support, design codes, improved planning certainty and encouraging popular street-based high density development in the Housing White Paper

Much of the 'public debate' about today's Housing White Paper will focus on the change (or lack of change) to the green belt policy and the announcements about obliging developers to deliver housing quickly. These are important subjects. However, 'below the line' there were some axiomatically important announcements that, in time, could just help change our planning system for the better and very fundamentally indeed.

Never forget, how very odd our system is in comparative and historic terms; 1940s statist in conception and very organic and common law in its execution it combines a view on nearly everything and utter certainty on nearly nothing. Many foreign planning systems are less ambitious in their scope but more rule-based with greater certainty about what can and cannot be delivered.

To make matters worse, many of the rules that we do have aren't very good and make it harder to deliver the type of finely grained, high density traditional town that many people love – and will pay for. Polling and pricing data also consistently shows that too many modern developments do not achieve the same levels of desirability or resident satisfaction as their historic predecessors.

Until we evolve the questions from 'how do we build new homes' to 'how do we make new homes more popular' it will continue to be hard to build sufficient homes.

Fundamental change of the planning system and housing market can't be done with a 'big bang' or the system would fall over and house building collapse further. This is in no one's interests. That is why most of the Housing White Paper is about 'forcing more homes through the current pipe.' But, in time, we need to widen the shape of the pipe – and do so with popular consent. In this way the planning system and sub-functional housing market can evolve to one that is better able to help residents and communities confidently and visually express what they like and what they will support. Then in turn it can provide greater clarity to developers about what is and is not acceptable in local neighbourhoods.

The good news is that today's Housing White Paper starts this process with a range of practical and incremental steps which permit communities more clearly to express and explain what they like and will support so that the system can become more certain and better able to deliver.

We are also delighted, and proud, to be able to say that many of these proposals appear to reflect our research, community work, publications and policy suggestions. Our community work and research at Mount Pleasant was even cited by name - on p.31 if you are interested.

Here are our eleven quick observations on the White Paper – and what we've managed to read of it so far.

1. **Much of the analysis of the problem seems correct.** Despite the noises off about the impact of mortgage rates, the government are right to keep focused on the core underlying issue of lack of supply. They are also right to be worried about the ludicrous levels of concentration in the supply of new homes and in worrying about the quality and quantity of the rental sector.
2. **We're delighted to see some fundamental understanding and focus on the link between quality of design and popular support for housing which we've been calling for. This majorly reflects our research and data – and is a definite win.** Or as the White Paper puts it; *"Giving communities a stronger voice in the design of new housing to drive up the quality and character of new development, building on the success of neighbourhood planning."*

3. **The focus on use of public sector land is correct. Very good news (and a win for Create Streets), is the Government's recognition that this can't just be a model of sale for the highest price but needs to involve public / private sector working together.** Paragraph 1.27 reads; *"we propose to ensure all authorities can dispose of land with the benefit of planning permission which they have granted to themselves. We will also consult on extending their flexibility to dispose of land at less than best consideration and welcome views on what additional powers or capacity they need to play a more active role in assembling land for development (including whether additional powers are needed to prevent 'ransom strips' delaying or preventing development, especially in brownfield regeneration)."* More details are then set out about how this might work.
 
4. **The focus on estate regeneration is correctly balanced** with a proposal (para 1.28) to *"amend national policy to encourage local planning authorities to consider the social and economic benefits of estate regeneration, and use their planning powers to help deliver this to a high standard."* It is right to stress that estate regeneration must be done well. Some recent examples have not been a success, and these have understandably been the highest profile cases. However, done properly, with genuine resident support and input, it can be.
5. **We welcome the focus empowering communities through a focus on Neighbourhood Planning and increasing its possibilities.** In our work we have found that communities do not always realise the potential of Neighbourhood Planning to set where new development should go and what it should look like, so we are pleased to see the proposals to change the NPPF to *'highlight the opportunities that neighbourhood plans present for identifying and allocating sites that are suitable for housing, drawing on the knowledge of local communities'* (1.33)
 
6. **Development Orders and design Codes - A big win for Create Streets** is the proposal change the NPPF to *'encourage greater use of Local Development Orders and area-wide design codes* (1.33). Design codes are a potentially transformative way for the UK planning system to bring about popular design whilst keeping certainty for housebuilders of all types.
7. **We support the proposals to** *'expect local planning authorities to work with developers to encourage the sub-division of large sites.'* (1.33) This will encourage more housebuilding from a wider range of actors.

8. **Better, proper consultation - we are delighted to see the inclusion of visual tools and local consultation as proposed improvements to the National Planning Policy Framework. This is a big win for Create Streets** – as our community work and research has shown, people respond positively when they are genuinely engaged with and when visual tools that genuinely give a sense of what new development will look and feel like is used, rather than (often misleading) industry jargon.

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- Specifically, we are delighted with the proposals to *'expect that local and neighbourhood plans (at the most appropriate level) and more detailed development plan documents (such as action area plans) should set out clear design expectations following consultation with local communities. This will provide greater certainty for applicants about the sort of design which is likely to be acceptable – using visual tools such as design codes that respond to local character and provide a clear basis for making decisions on development proposals;* (1.46)
- This approach is emphasised and backed up by paragraph 1.48 which states, *'To really feel involved in the process, we need to help local people to describe what good design and local character looks like in their view. The longer term ambition is that the Government will support the development of digital platforms on design, to create pattern-books or 3D models that can be implemented through the planning process and used to consult local people on potential designs for their area.*

9. **The White paper is absolutely right to recognise that high-density housing can be popular and attractive:** *'When people picture high-density housing, they tend to think of unattractive tower blocks, but some of the most desirable places to live in the capital are in areas of higher density mansion blocks, mews houses and terraced streets.'* (1.51) We are particularly pleased that they have **chosen to cite our work at Mount Pleasant** in the footnotes at this point!

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10. **We are pleased that the White Paper supports our belief that certain standards can have unintended negative consequences:** In this way we are pleased that the proposed NPPF amendments include that plans and individual development proposals should;

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- *ensure that the density and form of development reflect the character, accessibility and infrastructure capacity of an area, and the nature of local housing needs;* and
- *take a flexible approach in adopting and applying policy and guidance that could inhibit these objectives in particular circumstances; for example, avoiding a rigid application of open space standards if there is adequate provision in the wider area.* (para 1.53). However, more work will be needed to ensure this
- Supporting this, paragraph 1.55 states: *'The use of minimum space standards for new development is seen as an important tool in delivering quality family homes. However the Government is concerned that a one size fits all approach may not reflect the needs and aspirations of a wider range of households. For example, despite being highly desirable, many traditional mews houses could not be built under today's standards.'* We are pleased therefore that the White Paper makes the commitment to *'make sure the standards do not rule out new approaches to meeting demand.'* (1.55) Clearly, this must not be a removal of space

standards (which are a good thing) but a recognition of some of their perverse consequences

11. **The government are right to stress that the permission process needs to be faster but they should be stressing it needs to be more certain as well.** It is lack of certainty that presents a barrier to entry and which makes it harder for smaller players to enter the housing supply market. We worry that the welcome steps to diversify the market could be undermined by this.

More to follow in the days to come but some very welcome signals and opportunities for the future. Our vision is for a planning and housing market ten or fifteen years from now which is fundamentally better at providing the sort of place where people want to live and where they thrive. This is a very important and welcome step in the right direction. We look forward to working with communities, local government, developers, researchers and government to move this forward.

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