

Moving Towards the Planning White Paper

Speech by Ruth Kelly MP at a stakeholder event on 29 January 2007.

Introduction

Let's start with a thank you. I'm grateful to the Royal Town Planning Institute for co-hosting today's event.

The experience and expertise you represent make you a crucial voice in any debate on planning, and the material you produce - such as the *Planning Together* guide you will be launching on Wednesday - is always essential reading.

This truly is an expert audience. I'm particularly pleased that Kate Barker is here. Her acute analysis has driven forward the debate.

No other audience could understand better the challenges and opportunities as we seek to ensure that our planning system is fit for the twenty-first century.

Why planning matters

My ambition - and I'm sure yours is too - is to create thriving, vibrant, sustainable communities.

It takes a lot to achieve this.

It takes places where people feel proud to live. Homes of the quality, design and type that individuals and families want. And the green spaces they and their children need.

It takes good infrastructure. From shops to hospitals, from transport to schools. And it takes access to jobs, and well-designed public spaces.

Get it wrong, and you risk creating isolated communities, run-down town centres, dilapidated housing, crime and disorder, and the loss of green space.

Get it right, and you make safer, cleaner, greener communities,

where people get involved in the life of their local area, and where different sections of our communities can come together.

I see **planning** as key to delivering this vision.

Changing Context

Planning's objective is to support sustainable development. That means integrating a range of aims - economic, social and environmental.

The Barker and Eddington reports underline that in a changing world, planning must adapt.

But the fundamental principles remain sound.

Yes, globalisation and demographics are changing the shape of our country. Yes, we need to respond to the economic challenges.

And yes, as the Stern report shows, we must keep the environmental aspects of development in mind.

Look at China. Rapid economic growth has gone hand in hand with speedy development and urbanisation. The costs - in terms of the impact on people's quality of life and environmental consequences - are all too apparent. 16 of the world's 20 most polluted cities. 300,000 deaths a year from poor air quality.

China increasingly recognises this, and wants to learn from our approach.

The fact that we have made tackling climate change an integral part of our planning principles shows the importance we place on an integrated approach.

Decisions at the Right Level

One of my Department's key strengths is its focus on place. I am committed to ensuring that the right decisions are taken at the right level.

This was one of the key principles underpinning our Local Government White Paper, published in October. Our reforms will give local authorities more power to take the decisions that are best

taken at a local level. And they will also ensure that citizens are more involved in the changes that affect them.

These principles are important for planning, too.

We want to lead a revival of our towns and cities that puts citizens at the heart of change.

And in which local councils take on a greater 'place-shaping' role.

Look at the best traditions of our past. Our great towns and cities, where local leaders took responsibility for the well-being of their areas and the people who lived there. Places that not only function, but also inspire.

People care passionately about their local environment: about houses, their green spaces, their local infrastructure.

And so we must retain the important principle that local people have a strong say about the things that happen close to them.

Building Capacity

In some areas local authorities are leading the way, putting planning centre stage as part of a wider strategy. You can see the benefits in towns like Birmingham - with its renovated canalside and Bullring.

But let's be candid about where the current process could be improved.

Kate Barker found that local authorities often have to take too much national policy to take into account. That decision makers lack the high quality evidence on economic matters that they need. And that the appeals process is too long and complex for many minor cases.

Central government needs to put its hand up. We can do better. The White Paper will show how we intend to respond to the challenge.

But local planning authorities need to do better within the current framework too. Take, for example, the preparation of Development Plan Documents - designed to set the overall planning strategy for an area. So far the Planning Inspectorate has received 92 for examination - out of an originally expected 250. And of those that it has examined, almost half have not been up to scratch. That's not

good enough.

And so building capacity at a local level will be key to our goals of making the planning system more responsive and efficient.

Both the Local Government White Paper and Kate Barker underline the importance of raising the status of the planning function within local authorities.

I recognise that this continues to be a big challenge. My Department must play its role. We've taken steps to ensure a supply of high-quality planners with our post-graduate bursaries scheme. And our proposals for a single housing and regeneration agency - Communities England - will help build stronger and more effective partnership working between central and local government.

Further expanding the capacity of local authorities to deliver on their planning and place-shaping role will continue to be a priority for me in the forthcoming spending review. We've built up real momentum behind what has been called - and rightly so - the planning renaissance. This must be maintained.

Challenge to Developers

And as part of that, I'd like to issue a challenge to developers, too.

Before Christmas I announced our ambition for every new home to be zero-carbon from 2016 onwards.

In the lead-up to that announcement, I had a meeting with the World Wildlife Fund sitting to one side of me and the Home Builders Federation to the other.

Imagine my surprise - and delight - when I found them both telling me the same thing.

There was consensus on all sides - that we should be ambitious; and that to meet our goals, we should set a clear - if challenging - timetable that all parties sign up to.

Difficult though this is, I want to see a similar alliance on planning. Developers, it is up to you. But in any event, I encourage you to think imaginatively about your role in making planning work better for everyone.

National Level

I've spoken about decisions that are best made at a local level.

But there are - and there will remain - decisions that can only be made at a national level.

Only at the national level can decision-makers have the perspective to weigh up the benefits to the country as a whole against the impacts on a local area of major infrastructure projects such as power stations, airports, and motorways.

But in their reviews Rod Eddington and Kate Barker found that a series of different regimes that have grown up piecemeal over time make for an inconsistent and untransparent approach.

Rationalising those regimes is not about taking away decision making from other levels. It is about making the approach more consistent, more transparent and more open for public engagement.

We are proposing a new consent regime for major infrastructure projects which would have three stages:

- * a strategic stage, led by Government, subject to wide-ranging consultation, and resulting in a statement of national policy for the particular infrastructure sector
- * a scheme development stage, led by the promoter, with public consultation; and
- * a decision stage, led by an Independent Planning commission, which would assess applications and include the inquiry phase.

Each of these proposed stages would involve public engagement.

I know that you will want to debate these proposals further.

And I welcome today's event as an opportunity to explore the issues in more depth.

Myth-Busting

So today will be an important debate. It should be an honest one too.

There has been a lot of speculation about the Barker report and the Government's response. I think it's reasonable to say that on some issues Kate has been not just misunderstood, but misrepresented.

Green Belt

Nowhere is this more true than on the green belt.

Some are concerned that accepting Kate Barker's recommendations will lead to the end of green belts across the country.

Nothing could be farther from truth. We don't buy the free market approach advocated by some of the think tanks.

Let me be clear, we remain committed to the principles of the green belt approach. Local authorities should continue to contain urban sprawl, assist urban regeneration and protect important green space.

Since 1997, we've seen the amount of green belt land across the country grow by 64,000 acres. Green belt policy has served us well and must continue to do so.

But as Kate said, it is right that we look at our existing approach to see if there is more planners can do to ensure green belts are working to deliver sustainable outcomes for our towns and cities.

For example, we need to consider Kate's findings about commuters 'jumping' green belts because they cannot live nearer to town centres. This can actually increase travel and emissions.

That is why it is also important that we consider how we can improve the quality of green belts too.

I have no intention of making fundamental change to green belt policy - just making sure it is fit for purpose in 21st century England.

I look forward to hearing from you what you think.

Town Centres

Some are worried that if we remove the 'needs test' we will

undermine our town centres.

Others are concerned by what the Competition Commission might conclude on supermarkets.

Let me first say that we remain absolutely committed to promoting the vitality and viability of town centres and we will be sticking to our town centre-first policy, while providing choice, competition and innovation.

The planning system has a real role in supporting thriving high streets, where small shops can succeed and provide real choice for consumers. We must ensure that we continue to have tough tests for new development that help us protect and enhance our town and city centres as the bustling hearts of every community.

I want to work with the industry and our stakeholders to develop the best and most robust methodology for assessing the impact of new development proposals on our town centres.

That will help build on all we have done in recent years to turn round our town centres.

In the mid-1990's only about 25 per cent of new development was in or around our town centres. By 2003, it was up to 40 per cent.

Look at the vibrant town centres in Guildford, Norwich and Newcastle. Let those who talk about Ghost Town Britain see what the best local authorities are achieving when they plan for the future of their centres.

We want continued town centre investment to help make all our town centres the vital, thriving places they should be.

Whilst we need to look carefully at Barker's proposals, I want to be clear that we do not want to return to the free for all of the 1980s. Our policies will continue to be about creating great towns, not ghost towns.

Public Consultation and Involvement

Some have said that our proposals will undermine local public involvement and consultation.

Not so. Our challenge is not to **reduce** public engagement, but to make it more **effective**.

Excellent local authorities and good developers already involve communities in many creative ways. Just look at Medway Council, SEEDA and Countryside Properties at St Mary's Island in Chatham - regeneration project of the year in 2005.

And we are supporting them. For example, through Planning Aid we are reaching out to excluded groups to help them get involved. And the web-based Planning Portal is already making it easier to find out what is happening in your local area.

Ultimately, effective community involvement needs real commitment on all sides - not just a box-ticking approach. Local authorities, developers and interest groups must show leadership to make the planning process work effectively for the benefit of the whole community, not just the few.

Conclusion

I recognise some of the proposals under consideration are controversial and raise real issues.

Today we want your views on how to address key challenges:

- * How do we build effective accountability into the system?
- * How do we ensure that the system best balances environmental, economic and social objectives?
- * How do we ensure full and proper opportunities for public consultation and engagement?

We are here to listen. There is no time to lose as we prepare the White Paper. That's why your contributions are crucial.

The White Paper must not be just a list of 'to do' items. Above all, it needs to reaffirm the central purpose of planning in delivering places where people want to live. And to strengthen the role and flexibilities

of local government in doing so.

Let's all seize the opportunity.

Speech by Ruth Kelly MP on 29 January 2007.

Kelly Speaks Out on Planning

Last Updated 30 January 2007

Speaking at a planning event Ruth Kelly, the Communities and Local Government Secretary, has said that town centre planning policy would support ³thriving² high streets.

The conference, jointly run by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Royal Town Planning Institute, discussed the issues raised in the Kate Barker's Review on planning.

The Barker Review recommended the abolition of the 'Need test'¹ which requires retail developments to demonstrate that there is an economic need for the development before an application can be granted.

In response to this recommendation Ms Kelly said, ³We remain absolutely committed to promoting the vitality and viability of town centres and we will be sticking to our town centre-first policy, while providing choice, competition and innovation.

³The planning system has a real role in supporting thriving high streets, where small shops can succeed and provide real choice for consumers. We must ensure that we continue to have tough tests for new development that help us protect and enhance our town and city centres as the bustling hearts of every community.

³I want to work with the industry and our stakeholders to develop the best and most robust methodology for assessing the impact of new development proposals on our town centres.²

The Communities Secretary also used her speech to stress the need for more planning decisions to be taken by local councillors, although major decisions would still be taken at national level under a new, streamlined content regime.

ACS is concerned about the Barker Review's recommendations and is leading the sector's lobbying on this issue. ACS will submit its response to the Barker's recommendations and the Government will publish a white paper on planning in March.