

Response to Housing White Paper Consultation from Longdendale Community Group.

The Longdendale Community Group full response to the consultation runs to 15 pages. Below is a shortened version, focusing on our conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

If the Government is sincere in fixing the broken housing market, the DCLG should have a transparent and honest methodology. The current Housing White Paper starts well by making numerous appeals to the importance of the community (for instance, the document refers to the “impact new housing will have on their community. That is why it is so important that people have a say over where new homes go and what they look like through the planning process”..... “For local communities, the Government is offering a simpler and clearer planning process that makes it easier for them to get involved and shape plans for their area.”

However, the consultation questions express a very different emphasis, in which they raise hardly any of the points of concern to communities that they acknowledge in the text (such as in the above quotes). Indeed, the very word “communities” appears only twice in total among a total of 37 questions, and both of these questions are very restricted in their scope compared with the wider objective to allow the community to have any genuine influence “over where new homes go”.....and to “make it easier for them to get involved and shape plans for their area.”

As a result, what is clear is that the White Paper is designed to steer readers by virtue of the questions it asks. Indeed we feel that this White Paper has the appearance of a Developers’ “Charter.” It should have been entitled as such, rather than masquerading as a document that recognizes the importance of the community voice in shaping plans. This White Paper as it stands is likely to generate yet further resentment and hostility from the nation’s local communities. Is this the effect that was intended?

The way ahead: a two-way dialogue

Earlier in this response we have identified areas in which a two-way dialogue is needed. The White Paper one-way consultation steers towards an eventual developer-led and developer-friendly Housing policy. This should be replaced with a more pro-active two-way, ongoing dialogue between the DCLG and the communities they serve. We summarize here some of these areas requiring further such dialogue:

Recommendations for further two-way dialogue

1. Green Belt designation is effectively off limits; permanence as a restraint on urban sprawl is the defining aspect of Green Belt, and any net loss could never be acceptable. The community should be put back in charge of having their greenbelt and treasured green spaces (such as parks and playing fields) protected.
2. The preservation of community assets and land bequeathed to the community, rather than being sold off.
3. Communities should be invited to development processes early on, to genuinely shape the way they would like their area to look, and where they would like development to go. This means also that they should have the right to say where development should not go. Local Plans should not be an excuse to design a Developers’ Charter, but should be truly transparent and honest in including the community’s vision, opinions and choices. Neither

should the Local Plan be a Government social engineering tool to force LAs to build homes according to inflated national population predictions. Thus Local Plans should not be developer-led but community-led.

4. More effort is needed by LAs to reach all persons in the community, to involve them in the development process, rather than box-ticking consultations (which are often complex and over-long) in which the community voice is not heeded.

5. Financial support for community responses made available to independent community groups with impact in representing the community voice.

6. More realistic timescales for community responses to planning applications.

7. Planning conditions should be maintained to safeguard communities.

8. Extended mayoral powers should be used to afford protection to residents, and not to railroad through compulsory purchase against residents' will, particularly affecting the elderly. Thus compulsory purchase reforms should maintain or even extend proper protection for landowners.

9. Development should be guided away from protected habitats.

10. If infrastructure (especially the road transport network) is already fragile and overcapacity, there should be an embargo on further housing development in that locality. Merely improving the transport infrastructure with a view to subsequent housing development runs the risk of the transport system again becoming over-loaded.

11. Industrial areas should be clearly separate from residential areas, and transport infrastructure developments should by-pass residential areas. Mitigation is not a helpful concept, and our experience is that this term is used as an abdication of responsibility in dealing with the problem properly.

12. Independent Housing Need Assessment Panels should be inaugurated, to include equally persons from the environmental lobby, community groups, and the public and private housing sector, to prevent undue influence by those who would benefit by an inflation of housing need.

In conclusion, we strongly recommend that the White Paper consultation questions require a major, complete redrafting, bringing out more clearly ways that communities can expect to participate in the planning process. The document should reflect much more vigorously the name borne by the Department authoring it: the Department of Communities and Local Government. Our recommendations for two-way dialogue are a constructive move to bring these reforms.

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