

5 July 2010

Planning Reform

Summary

This report:

- Updates members on the coalition government's national policy priorities for the planning system;
- updates members on how the LGA group is supporting local authorities during the transition period;
- includes a short appendix listing suggested LGA Group policy positions;
- includes discussion points for members to consider a potential future role for the LGA Group within planning reform.

Recommendations

Members are invited to:

- note report and use its contents to inform discussion at the meeting
- comment on each of the suggested LGA Group policy positions listed in Appendix 1.
- discuss and recommend a potential future role for the LGA Group within planning reform.

Action

Officer's to action Member's recommendations.

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Planning Reform

Background

1. On 20 May 2010 the coalition government published “The Coalition: our programme for government” a statement of agreement across the whole range of national policy that included new priorities for planning and the planning system. The key reference to planning reform was as follows:

“We will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live, based on the principles set out in the Conservative Party publication Open Source Planning.”

2. Specific measures on planning reform included:
 - Abolishing the Regional Spatial Strategies and the Infrastructure Planning Commission (but retaining a single national process for nationally important projects with decisions taken by Ministers).
 - Returning decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils, including considerable dilution in the powers of the Planning Inspectorate;
 - In *“the longer term”* giving *“neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live”*.
3. The government has followed up with a number of press releases and ministerial statements which provide additional details on how they plan to take their proposals forward.

LGA Response

4. The LGA is broadly supportive of the devolutionary intent behind the government's announcement on planning reform. The removal of regional targets and a more locally responsive planning system are welcome developments.
5. Many of the proposals reflect the LGA's fundamental principles that people should have the power to shape the places in which they live; that councils are uniquely positioned as the accountable public body to plan for their communities, and that unlocking councils' potential to play a leadership role is critical to the delivery of housing and other development.
6. Strategic spatial planning at the right level remains crucially important to ensuring we get the housing and infrastructure we need. But strategic planning does not equal regional planning. It needs to take place at the level which makes sense in terms of the way labour markets, housing markets, journey patterns operate. In most of the country this is the sub-regional level.

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7. Within a devolved system, we need a clear framework to give councils the clarity they need to put genuinely local plans in place. Government will need to work closely with us as a sector if they are going to get to a system that works. The LGA Group is working with the planning profession and the development industry to engage with government on the detail of how the new approach will work.

Actions currently underway

8. There is a risk that uncertainty during transition to the new system will provide ammunition to those opposed to the coalition government devolutionary approach, it is therefore important for the LGA group to promote the case for devolution and councils' ability to manage well in a devolved system. We are working with the Planning Officers Society (POS), Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and others within the sector to understand issues as they arise and provide advice to ensure that effective decision making can continue.
9. The intention is to help planners to keep planning going locally, and also demonstrate that local government is an influential and constructive partner that government should be engaging with.
10. Officers have issued a short set of frequently asked questions, which we plan to regularly update so that councils have the latest information as needed.

Suggested LGA Group policy positions

11. It is important at this stage to gather member's comments on key aspects of proposed planning reform. Officers have compiled a short breakdown in Appendix 1 as follows:
 - Key coalition government policy positions;
 - Short description of the LGA group's proposed policy positions.
12. Members are invited to comment on each of these proposed policy positions.
13. Officers have also highlighted three areas we believe warrant focused discussion.

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Potential role of the LGA Group in supporting councils in their new planning role.

14. Members are invited to discuss the potential role of the LGA Group in the following areas:
- Driving improvement and performance in planning
 - Supporting councils in their strategic planning role by facilitating access to evidence and research previously held at the regional or national level.

Financial Implications

15. The transition to a devolved regime is potentially the biggest devolutionary shift since the original Town and Country Planning Act in 1947 and will therefore require a strong level of sector led support.
16. We will need new ways of supporting elected members dealing with planning to ensure they have the skills and capacity to deliver this enhanced strategic planning role.
17. Both of these implications should be factored into discussions on the future of the LGA Group's performance and support activity.

Implications for Wales

1. LGA will liaise with WLGA colleagues as appropriate on this issue.

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