

Planning for the Public

Why Labour should support a public planning system



Policy Paper

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Authorship

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Note on Devolution

The paper is addressed to Labour as a future UK government. Most of this document applies to the UK generally, as what is advocated for are a set of general policies and principles which could be utilised across the constitutive nations of the UK. The devolution of planning powers to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland means variation that this paper does not have the space to capture fully. The primary impact of the reforms, if taken up by Labour, would be on England (as this is where Westminster has the most direct influence) but many of the principles and policies could be taken up by the respective national governments too.

The Importance of a Public Planning System

Town and Country Planning is an unusual institution within our society. Planners and planning committees have quasi-judicial roles, an expectation that they consult and deliberate with citizens, yet also balance the needs and demands of citizens with the policies and laws laid down by national government. Making actual real-life decisions over the use of one of the world's most valuable resources – land – involves negotiating between competing political, aesthetic, cultural, environmental, and economic values and interests and in some cases not being able to find a suitable compromise position. Planning has to deal with dry, technical detail and small-scale changes as well as major strategic decisions and subjects of profound importance.

Over the last decade or so, the UK has been running a failed experiment with a 'market-led' approach to planning. There are three key features of the market-led approach. De-regulation, through expanding permitted development rights and 'streamlining' policy (into the NPPF in England), and the 'presumption in favour' of sustainable development which has been used to bypass local planning. Privatisation, through reducing the funding for public planning and moving to an outsourcing model where core public planning activities are carried out by private consultants, and where the value created by planning permission goes predominantly to the landowners and developers rather than the public. And, there has been an increasing centralisation of powers within the executive to intervene in decisions and policy through written ministerial statements for whatever business or political interests they so wish.¹ Each of these features of the market-led approach have reduced the capacity of planning to shape land use decisions in the public interest and for communities to benefit from these decisions.

The experiment with the market-led approach has comprehensively failed. We have seen the decimation of planning as a public activity, increasing delays, and more poor-quality and inappropriate developments which do not meet public needs. Local planning authorities have faced over 50% budget cuts, planning is increasingly out-sourced, and planners have seen their professional credibility undermined – both in their pay packets and by the conspiratorial language used about planning by right wing journalists, ministers, and a new wave of far-right activism (particularly aimed at traffic reduction). At the same time as rapidly diminishing resources and powers, planning is asked to solve problems which have complex roots outside of its diminished scope. It is little wonder the UK faces a housing and environmental crisis when one of its central institutions for democratically shaping land use is treated in this manner.

The roots of our present crises are not an over-bearing weight of regulation and state interference – it is in fact the opposite: chronic under-investment, the stripping away of environmental and regulatory protections for the public and a politics which prioritises the profits of companies over the needs of the public. Evidence shows that rather than being a barrier to development, based on outdated 1980s ideas from neo-classical economics, planning is in fact an enabler of development and can intervene for the public good, particularly when markets fail.² This is widely supported by research demonstrating how well-funded local authorities can deliver high-quality developments at scale.³

Unplanned development is socially, economically, and environmentally wasteful and cannot continue if the UK is to meet its climate targets whilst also tackling the housing crisis, uneven spatial development and the nature emergency which is made viscerally real to many by the overt pollution of rivers and coasts with raw sewage. The Teesside Freeport is emblematic of the government's market-led approach to planning: so, it is no surprise to see that it is now mired in corruption

allegations and claims that its development has decimated local marine life.⁴ The chorus from the right wing thinktanks is that we need one more push to bring the ideal market order to life – rather like Liz Truss believed last year. However, as we are seeing in many areas of life, the application of a narrow market ideology to the public sector is increasingly out of touch with the day-to-day realities of people's lives and values.

We call on the next Labour government to end the damaging experiment in 'market-led' planning. Put simply, Town and Country planning is an inherently public activity – there is no magic market formula that can supplant or replace the deliberation required to negotiate the politics of land-use. As a result, the development rights conferred through the planning process need to be understood as the outcomes of public decision-making, from which the public should benefit. We cannot replace this process with an algorithm or ideal set of 'rules', those who advocate for such a position are by and large advocating for a system that acts in the interests of landowners rather than the public. While acknowledging that planning is inherently imperfect, we can make it work much better if we treat it as an important public activity once more. This requires a plan-led system leading public and private development to determine the best use of land.

In the five sections below, we set out a positive view of planning, as an important part of the public sector which can help to build stronger and more equitable communities, and which can enable the UK to move towards a more environmentally sustainable future. We oppose the continued, myopic expansion of market-led planning, and propose a series of systemic changes a Labour government should pursue to strengthen public planning that can help to address the challenges the UK faces. We argue for a public, plan-led system which aims to: capture the value from planning decisions, redistribute wealth from unproductive rentierism to investment in community and energy infrastructure and intervene in the environmental and housing crises in the interest of the public, not landowners. We need to re-invigorate planning as the public institution the post-war Labour government envisaged it to be and reshape it for the challenges of the 21st Century. We need to re-think of planning as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

First and foremost, *communities need proper resources*. Changes to policy and regulations will be ineffective if we continue with the semi-privatised, austerity planning system. Local, regional, and national planning need proper funding, which can be raised through changes to property taxes and land value capture - on the principle that more of the value created through public planning decisions should be captured for public benefit.

Increased resources for planning can enable *greater democracy and community participation*. Planning is currently caught between de-regulation and top-down reactionary interventions. Including a greater plurality of citizens in planning processes leads to better outcomes, as well as allowing us to refocus on *tackling inequality through democratic planning*. The UK has significant regional and spatial inequalities. Democratic public planning systems can be redistributive in terms of wealth, good jobs and access to housing and essential services.

Public planning is needed to face the multiple, global crises the UK faces. Here, we focus on the environmental and housing crises which are among the most pressing ones for a Labour government. We need a strong *public planning for an equitable and green future*. We need well planned developments to adapt to a changing climate, and to facilitate a green transition in energy, transport and construction. We also need to ensure *affordable housing for all*. The market-led planning system has comprehensively failed to do so, we instead call for a public, plan-led system of housing development and allocation.

Communities Need Proper Resources

Planning has been decimated by austerity and the market-led approach of reducing the value captured by the public from the granting of planning permission. Major cuts to local government have significantly reduced the capacity of planning departments, while landowners are able to generate huge windfalls from the decisions made by what is left of the public planning system. Communities need resources to make plans, good decisions and to regulate and manage developments in their interests.

The market led approach of the last decade or so has been one of privatisation and the ideological institution of austerity across the public sector.⁵ Local government has been devastated by unnecessary cuts. Between 2010/11 and 2015/16 local government lost 27% of its spending power in real terms, with planning departments losing 45%.⁶ Total expenditure on planning policy has fallen by 22% in England since 2010, by more than 40% in Scotland since 2009, and by 50% in Wales since 2008-09.⁷ As Figure 1 shows, planning has faced the most significant cuts from local government spending.

Not only has this created a significant resource deficit for the day-to-day practice of planning, but it has also meant a significant reduction of staff levels in planning departments which have increasingly turned to a system of out-sourcing.⁸ Planning departments have, in effect, been semi-privatised, and now their core functions rely upon demoralised public employees and private consultants.⁹ No business or organisation can seriously be expected to deliver the same outcomes whilst being starved of resources and simultaneously undergoing a radical restructuring.

Austerity and privatisation have created a planning system which struggles to fulfil its basic functions. The result is significant delays in making planning decisions, local authorities living in fear of punitive costs at appeal, huge difficulties in developing up to date local plans

and the draining of local and technical expertise from the process – all made worse by constant ad-hoc interventions from Ministers, allegedly even in the interests of party donors.¹⁰ Long term and strategic planning are simply not possible in a system of job insecurity whose institutional memory has been severely damaged. Such a system is wide open to corruption – consultants can move between developers and making planning decisions, and under-funded councils can easily be captured by private interests – blurring the distinction between public and private.¹¹ The stripping back of planning's capacity has meant that development decisions are today more led by the market and developers than at any time since 1947. The gaming of the market-led system by some firms creates worse outcomes for development in general.

The first step of any reform must be returning funding for planning departments to pre-austerity levels in real terms. There is no way to a progressive, public planning system without doing so. The more complicated and longer-term process is of in-sourcing public planning at a local and national level. We need to increase the number of permanent employees within planning departments, both at a strategic level as well as in specialist areas such as housing & environment. Without re-establishing planning as a public service, it will not be possible to make decisions on land-use in the public interest – private interests will continue to dominate.

More fundamentally, significant gains from granting planning permission flow to the most fortunately placed landowners, who accrue significant unearned increases in value over time, whether by virtue of wider economic circumstances and public investment or due to windfall gains from planning permission. In a period where asset values have been inflated through 'quantitative easing' and low interest rates,¹² the lack of a significant mechanism for capturing the value of planning permission has meant a significant

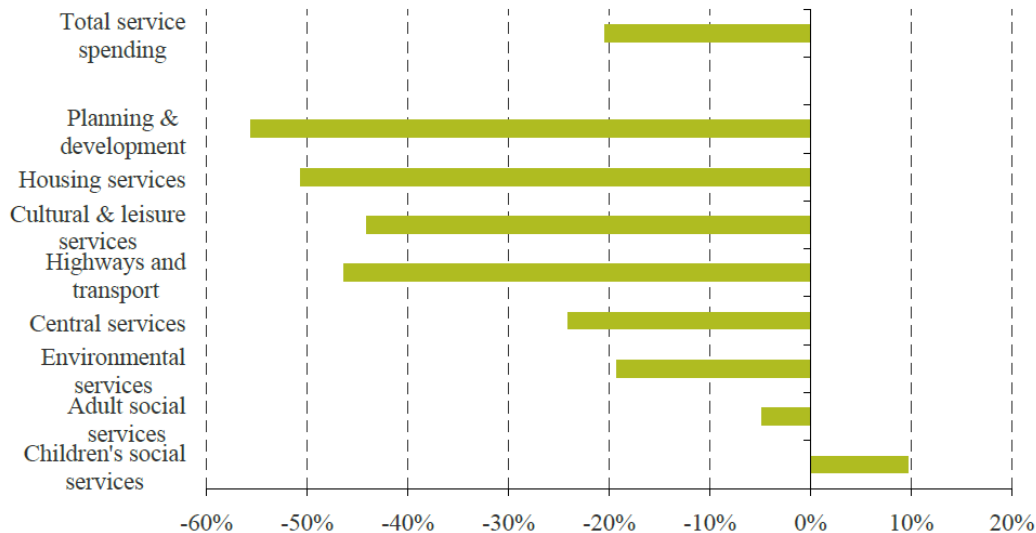


Figure 1: Real-terms change in local government service spending by service area 2009-10 to 2017-18 (Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies)

redistribution of wealth upwards which the market-led planning system has facilitated.

Not only is this unjust, but it has also helped to create an economy focused on unproductive rentierism rather than productive, value (and job) creating activity and reduced the capacity of the public sector to invest in large- and small-scale public infrastructure.¹³ Labour now have an historic opportunity to address these structural problems.

Labour needs to make use of the significant potential for more effective regular and event-based taxation of unearned wealth to pay for public services, infrastructure, and affordable housing. For example, council tax in England is currently highly regressive and in desperate need of reform. This could involve regular revaluations and the introduction of new tax bands, or its replacement with a progressive property and land tax, payable by owners rather than occupiers.¹⁴ There is also potential for reform of business rates and their enhancement by (or replacement with) a land value tax - again payable by owners rather than occupiers. While there is currently a highly complex and possibly ill-fated reform to the planning gain system currently making its way through Parliament (the Infrastructure Levy), Labour could instead focus on clarifying how the development value that is crystallised via planning permission should be split between landowners/developers

and the community. It has been continued uncertainty and deliberate vagueness regarding this crucial question that has in part enabled landowning and development interests to game the system (e.g., through negotiating down Section 106 commitments).¹⁵ It should be the development industry, rather than local authorities, that bears the risk of changing market conditions, given that it is taking on such risk that is supposed to justify their profits.

Labour should commit to:

- Increasing land value capture and introducing progressive reforms to land and property taxation to fund social housing and infrastructure.
- Restoring local government funding to pre-austerity levels in real terms
- Launching a nation-wide recruitment drive for strategic and specialist public planners on permanent contracts.
- Legislating to end planning outsourcing for its core functions (policy, decision-making), with barriers between public and private planning.
- Clear rules which prevent local officials and representatives working in the development industry during or immediately following their time in office

Greater Democracy and Community Participation

Properly resourced planning must be accountable to the communities it serves. It has not always been so in the past, so the challenge for a renewed public planning system is how to embed greater democratic involvement from the public. The fantasy behind *Planning for the Future*, which Labour rightly opposed, was that the free market just needs to be unleashed to solve all our problems. The current Conservative government has been forced to acknowledge such a view is absurd, but their answer has been to once again prioritise their Home Counties electoral base and further entrench ministerial powers.

We can do so much better. A well-resourced planning system can, and should be mandated to, include a plurality of different interests and voices on how land is used in a particular area.¹⁶ News media focuses on so called 'NIMBY's, but the reality is that those who have suffered most from austerity planning have been working class communities (particularly BAME communities) who have seen new developments which displace them or which are permitted with very little consideration for their interests.¹⁷ Further, the government have tried to change planning rules on the hoof to force through hugely unpopular developments which have damaging environmental consequences.¹⁸ There is presently an absence not an excess of democracy in planning.

Fortunately, we can act to make planning effective and democratic – indeed it cannot be one without the other.¹⁹ A progressive planning system needs to move from being market-led, to being plan-led once more. What this means is properly resourced planning departments, at local and regional levels, producing up to date development plans designed with the communities they serve. The creation of local plans can and should be the democratic basis of decision-making, but it can only do so when the creation of plans involves the range of different

views and needs of the people in the locality. To do so requires the involvement of local representatives, but also wider methods of public participation targeted at under-represented groups. There is significant scope for innovation in forms of participation, particularly by using digital technologies,²⁰ what we can say with some certainty is that bypassing participation just leads to conflict being displaced into anger, frustration and apathy with planning and government which in turn undermines the legitimacy of developments. The TCPA's Raynsford Review sets out a comprehensive set of changes which can improve the democracy and structures of public planning.²¹ When last in government, Labour set standards for inclusion in planning and provided 'Planning Aid' to support more marginalise communities in the planning process.²² Labour should:

- Fund projects for greater participation from those historically excluded from planning: people of colour, people who have disabilities, LGBT+ people, people on lower incomes.
- Establish a Commission on Public Engagement for major infrastructure²³
- Re-instate a plan-led system, across the local, regional and national level plans, legislating for (properly funded) authorities to have up to date plans based on strong public engagement.
- Define the core missions and purposes of planning in legislation, replacing the circular definition of 'sustainable development' with meeting public needs
- Invest in public, 'open data', digital modes of participation in planning which expand participation
- Apply the subsidiarity principle, with decisions and policy for appropriate level of government

Tackling Inequality Through Democratic Planning

The market-led approach to planning, as in many other areas of society, has done little to nothing to reduce the spatial and regional inequalities that blight the UK.²⁴ This is because the market-led approach rejects the redistributive potential of planning in favour of development at all costs. Further, the centralisation of powers through the use of written ministerial statements, and now National Development Management Policies, takes power away from communities and local government, reducing accountability and reflects the extent to which planning practice has been stripped back by austerity. Labour needs to reverse these centralising tendencies, moving power and resources away from Westminster through greater and more consistent and accountable devolution. A democratic plan-led system can be one tool with which Labour can begin to challenge long standing inequalities in the UK, which have complex histories.

Regional inequalities stem from rapid de-industrialization and the abandonment of any cohesive industrial strategy - which is needed more than ever today to build a green economy. We welcome Labour's engagement with a green industrial strategy, and further regional and national devolution. Central to this process will be establishing regional planning in England, to ensure the development of infrastructure and new employment opportunities of the green transition are shared across the country.²⁵

Labour attempted to tackle regional inequalities through planning when last in government. The 'A New Britain'²⁶ report led by Gordon Brown called for the re-instatement of 'regional planning frameworks' in order to better coordinate local authorities and those areas of planning which reach across localities - such as transport infrastructure and major industrial developments.

We would broadly echo this call, recognising the limitations of the previous regional planning

attempts. Labour's regional planning experiment did encourage some greater joined up thinking, but the failure to establish appropriate and corresponding regional government meant the Regional Development Agencies faced a democratic deficit for the public and a lack of clarity of responsibility and powers relative to both local and national government.²⁷ Regional planning, therefore, requires directly elected and responsible devolved governments with the powers and resources to act on public priorities - with clear lines of accountability for the decisions they make e.g. through elected regional assemblies in England, and national spatial strategies and plans. What is important is that there is a consistent devolution of powers across English regions and the constitutive nations of the UK. National, regional and local strategic spatial plans should be seen as a key tool for integrating and coordinating public and private investment, ensuring it is targeted into places where it is needed. Patchwork devolution will not lead to greater equality, nor will endless competition for funding or the inconsistent deployment of 'neighbourhood plans' which tend to direct resources to wealthier areas.²⁸

Many spatial inequalities are complex and very deeply rooted. Within cities, nations, regions and counties, there are significant disparities in wealth which correspond to inequalities in terms of infrastructure and access to essential services.²⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic showed how deep this problem is,³⁰ with those in overcrowded housing and lacking access to medical services facing greater chances of infection and mortality. Lower income areas are less likely to have access to fresh food, GPs and dentists, affordable and active travel options, community and social spaces, cleaner air, and access to employment opportunities.³¹ Those in lower income areas are disproportionately people of colour³² and people with disabilities and long-term health problems.

Housing allocation has and continues to be structurally racist.³³

The planning system alone cannot address all of these issues, but it is one important part of making a more equitable future. Importantly, it is evident that the market-led approach has very little to offer in addressing regional and spatial inequality, in fact greater de-regulation and privatisation of planning only makes inequalities worse.³⁴ The UK2070 Commission's report 'Make No Little Plans' sets out a comprehensive set of proposals for regional investment through devolved powers,³⁵ what we would emphasise is the importance of spatial planning bodies directly linked to elected officials, as well as a clear legislative framework for the responsibilities of local/regional/national planning powers and responsibilities based on strategic spatial plans. This is the opposite of the approach found in Conservative experiments with de-regulatory 'Freeports', which give powers and resources to the private sector with little public oversight or planning.

Planning's role in tackling regional and spatial inequality lies in its capacity to ensure a just distribution of jobs, services and improving the quality of the places everyone lives in. Planning can ensure a fair distribution of all housing types, as well as ensuring each locality has access to the amenities people need and want. To do so, a renewed public planning system would also have to be reformed internally to ensure greater diversity within the planning profession, as well as greater consideration of the role planning and the built environment has historically played in exclusion: by race, gender, sexuality, social class and disability. Plan-making should have to consider, and be judged by, its success in reducing spatial inequalities.

To address regional and spatial inequality, Labour should:

- Establish universal standards of access to basic services, from healthcare to transport and digital connectivity.

- Introduce a regional/devolved funding formula, like that for devolved nations, to ensure regional/devolved governments have consistent levels of resources following a needs-based approach.
- Legislate for each devolved region to develop a spatial plan, in conjunction with local authorities, giving all devolved government planning powers.
- Launch programmes to incentivise a more diverse planning profession, from schools through to public hiring practices.
- Expand social housing with high minimum standards, and increase training and choice with the clear aim of eliminating structural racism and all forms of discrimination in housing allocation.
- Develop design standards for public space driven by inclusivity and public safety
- Work with RTPI and universities to ensure equality and diversity is central to planning education.
- Use land value capture/tax to redistribute gains from development to community assets.
- Set up programmes for greater dialogue with communities about public spaces and memorialization, including recognising the contributions of BAME people to the UK³⁶
- Re-introduce a programme of 'Planning Aid' aimed at ensuring under-represented groups have a meaningful part to play in plan-making
- End the 'Freeport' experiments and remove centralised 'National Development Management Policies'.

Public Planning for an Equitable Green Future

These final two sections focus on how a progressive public planning system can address two of the most profound crises the UK faces: the environmental and housing crises. We focus on environment first and then move on to housing in the next section. A democratic, public planning system is needed which is capable of tackling social and environmental issues holistically rather than as separate and isolated areas of activity. This means that the outcome of environmental policies needs to be fair and improve everyone's health and wellbeing, while social and economic policies need to protect and enhance the environment.

There are two urgent environmental considerations to which a well-resourced public planning can make vital contributions: climate change³⁷ and biodiversity. Here, we focus on the former: the need to plan for carbon reduction as well as adaptation and resilience to a changing climate in land use and the built environment³⁸. One of the most obvious failings in the adaptation to climate change relates to flooding. With increasing climate-related extreme weather, flooding events are on the rise, yet we have seen more and more risky constructions on or near flood plains. The lack of technical expertise, public participation and use of local knowledge in the planning process has led to a weak assessment of flood risk³⁹ – with 5000 homes granted planning permission despite flood risks in 2021.⁴⁰ Insufficient mitigation measures and management of waterways erode the resilience of new homes to flooding, with devastating impacts on people's lives.

The problem of flooding is emblematic of the privatisation and de-regulation of planning. A focus on simply adding additional housing units is resulting in developments completely unsuited to the changing climate. The annual sight of people being ferried away from their homes in dinghies should make it clear that the planning system desperately needs to be reformed towards a public system that has the right skills and resources to act strategically with the public

need prioritised. We simply cannot continue to treat environmental considerations as a luxury add-ons or tick boxes. Public planning needs to consider society and nature as interrelated parts of the same system and address the UK's historic contribution to greenhouse gas emissions that have global impacts.

Another climate-related area to which a well-resourced public planning can play a vital role is carbon reduction to ensure that flooding and other extreme climatic events do not become the new normal – both in the UK and globally. We welcome Labour's commitment to invest in a green energy transition, as it is the absence of such investment which has slowed down decarbonisation rather than planning decisions (as right-wing think-tanks are cynically claiming). We cannot do a green transition on the cheap, and the 'market' cannot be expected to use limited land and environmental resources efficiently when it has proven time and time again to be unable to do so.⁴¹

We therefore reject the notion that the delivery of new industries can be achieved through streamlining or de-regulating public planning. Nuclear power stations, HS2 and shale gas fracking provide various examples of what can happen when governments try to force through projects through by-passing a public planning process – they often take even longer to deliver or turn out to be the wrong decisions altogether (in the case of fracking). Green energy, low carbon transport and decarbonisation of the built environment are not primarily held back by planning regulations – they are held back by an underfunded planning system, the over-indulgence of reactionary campaigns (against onshore wind, traffic reduction measures), and a lack of public and private investment.⁴² De-regulation does not address these issues. As in other nations that have pushed forward with major green subsidy programmes, public investment and participation are the means to an equitable, green future which directs investment to the places that need it most. Labour's 'Green

Prosperity Plan' will go some way to addressing the investment deficit. Investment needs to be complemented with strong public planning to direct and shape it. We suggest that this could benefit from co-ordination through a green infrastructure bank and through capital being made available to properly resourced local and regional planning bodies to make long term investments.

The various exercises in 'streamlining' policy - e.g., through the NPPF in England - have created absurd policy ambiguities which add to rather than reduce delay. There needs to be a significant revision of planning policy to bring clarity to the aims and missions for new green industry and align planning policy with the UK's carbon targets and budgets, as suggested by the Climate Change Committee's latest report.⁴³ There is presently significant policy ambiguity over the place of new fossil fuel developments, which need to end, and inconsistent and vague support for new green energy projects - such as onshore wind, tidal power, and community renewable energy projects. Given the significant public support for green energy, planning policy and guidance ought to give the highest priority to such development. Increased levels of investment also incentivise local authorities to prioritise green industries in local plans to attract, and make their own, investments in the green jobs of the future.

Reform is also required for major infrastructure projects, such as the necessary development of the National Grid which has also been held back by privatisation and lack of investment. These are not only major technical projects, but also political ones. The 'snake oil' solution is to simply drive through developments as if people do not matter - an approach which has been shown to fail across the world.⁴⁴ The priorities for major, national infrastructure must be set and legitimised by the elected government. But, their delivery includes considering alternatives and the inclusion of a plurality of different views from the earliest possible stages. Large projects will inevitably lead to some losing out, but a more democratic public planning process means that

such losses can be minimised and compensated, and unforeseen consequences can be discovered. A democratic process will enable a coalition of support to be built. Thus, improved national and regional plan-making will be central to green infrastructure development. The basis of strategic infrastructure planning is already in place (e.g., in transport), but strategic organisations lack the resources and capacity to act, due to cuts in public expenditure and increasing centralisation of decision making.⁴⁵ Greater land value capture will also help provide greater benefits to communities impacted by infrastructure development.

More generally, construction and the built environment are significant contributors to global carbon emissions. To decarbonise them will require appropriate environmental regulations and strong planning policy. There is a clear need to set out higher standards for insulation and heat management, building materials, processes, and design - to reduce emissions and future costs of retrofit and re-design.⁴⁶ The government also has an important role to play in procurement, setting high environmental standards in new developments and the retrofitting of existing buildings which in turn can help develop the skills and expertise required for private developments. There is also significant scope for encouraging the re-use and adaptation of existing buildings, to reduce the release of embodied emissions and the use of limited carbon budgets on unnecessary new construction.⁴⁷

Well-resourced public planning can play a vital role in addressing the climate crisis and other environmental challenges that we face. To ensure an equitable green future, Labour should:

- Give the highest policy priority to green energy and technology developments (e.g. removing de facto ban on onshore wind).
- Require local plans to allocate land for green energy generation as well as improvements in active travel and public transport.
- Increase funding for planning authorities to enable in-house expertise and local

innovation along with public engagement in the adaptation to climate change and community resilience building.

- Enact policy and legislation that ensure new developments contribute to both climate adaptation and carbon emissions reduction – through e.g., low carbon building standards, efficient use of water, energy efficiency, access and expansion of green spaces.
- Institute local and regional carbon budgets derived from national limits
- Prioritise green infrastructure in regional and national plans.
- Set standards for net zero in building materials.
- Prioritise re-use and adaptation of existing building stock through policy and/or taxation on demolition.



Figure 1: Platts Field Market Garden, Manchester – A grassroots urban agriculture project which greater public planning should support and enable to reduce GhG emissions and promote health and well-being (Source: Manchester Urban Diggers)

Good Quality Affordable Housing for All

Reading the news, you could easily be led to believe the only function of the planning system is to release land for building new homes. You could also be forgiven for thinking that the only thing standing in the way of affordable housing is the planning system. This final section will address how planning can *actually* help to address the housing crisis - which has only gotten worse with every round of de-regulation and market-led reform.

It is important to understand that the 'housing crisis' is not unique to the UK. Nations across the world, with very different planning systems, suffer from a lack of affordable, quality housing for many or even the majority of their citizens. A survey of 200 major cities globally found that 90% were unaffordable to live in when median incomes were compared to average housing costs.⁴⁸

What these international comparisons highlight is the global nature of the problem as well as some of its causes. As the financial crisis showed, real estate is the subject of significant speculation and is an important commodity for global finance, creating significant asset bubbles which can easily burst. What this means on the ground, is that housing is built according to the needs of those who use it as a speculative asset, rather than according to the housing needs of the public.⁴⁹ Resources are directed towards expensive, luxury accommodation rather than affordable housing of all tenures. The current semi-privatised, de-regulated planning system is incredibly permissive to speculative urban house building projects, without delivering the types of housing that are needed at the rents and prices that people can afford.

House prices in the UK are further inflated by a series of other factors. Property speculation, managed build out of existing planning permissions, the very model of the house-building industry which is premised on keeping housing prices high to realise profits; each of these features has been demonstrated to

increase the cost of housing.⁵⁰ Further, the UK still has an extraordinary amount of land in the hands of the aristocracy and large landowners (50% of land in England is owned by 1% of the population)⁵¹ and suffers from the absence of a redistributive mechanism for the wealth accrued by historic land ownership.

The government's main response to the housing crisis has been to simply de-regulate and hope that the market will solve all their problems. The preventable tragedy of Grenfell Tower should have been the end of the de-regulatory drive for housing, yet the government has taken over 6 years to enact legislation to protect social housing tenants which remains insufficient. They have though, ploughed on with further housing de-regulation through expanding permitted development rights which in turn leads to the expansion of poor-quality housing even when research they commissioned shows them that this is the case.⁵² Full planning permission upholds higher quality and need not be uncertain or slow if planning departments are properly resourced and with up-to-date plans and supporting documents like Design Codes which can significantly reduce planning risk. De-regulation privatisation and 'streamlining' are often the very causes of the delays we are once again being told they will solve. Further, the current patterns of market-led development risks creating settlement patterns that lock in unsustainable lifestyles and make any kind of transition towards net zero more difficult and costly, e.g., by creating car-dependant neighbourhoods.⁵³

We need new housing, but new housing alone will not resolve the housing crisis, without demand side measures and planning to ensure good quality housing in the right places. Years of failed experiments by the Tory government show that there is not a market-based solution to the housing crisis. Simply letting housebuilding rip also threatens climate change targets, and in all likelihood would fail to meet acute social needs or provide enough supply to meaningfully tackle

unaffordability. The ethos of Labour's 1947 Town and Country Planning Act was to ensure land and the benefits of development were distributed more equally. Tackling the housing crisis will require Labour to recover this lost ethos.

First and foremost, we need to see a return to the building of good quality social housing, at scale, by properly funded local authorities rather than ad-hoc Section 106 commitments. The market-led approach is that we simply need to expand supply, but if this supply is unaffordable, it does very little for those on lower incomes. Instead, social housing should be prioritised in planning, with local authorities given the capital to purchase undeveloped land and encouraged to use existing land holdings. We need to build social housing to high environmental standards and end the disastrous 'right to buy' policy to maintain the social housing stock.⁵⁴ Social housing, combined with rent controls, would not only make renting more affordable but would boost local spending (and saving) power as people have more money in their pockets rather than it being diverted into unearned rental incomes for landlords. Rent controls have been shown to reduce inequalities,⁵⁵ and can begin to address the crisis when combined with the expansion of housing supply, we need the controls in the short term to stop price-gouging from landlords as new supply becomes available.

Second, there are many existing homes that are either empty or used as short term lets. There are over 250,000 long term empty homes, 772,000 second homes⁵⁶ and approximately 257,000 properties (in England) listed for short term lettings.⁵⁷ Labour could immediately act to empower local authorities to tax and even take ownership of long-term empty homes to retrofit for use as social housing, and reduce the amount of short-term lets and second homes through taxation and regulation.

Third, by empowering and funding local authorities to make stronger use of compulsory purchase powers to buy up development land at

values that enable policy priorities to be delivered, Labour could enable the development of affordable housing, low carbon transport and energy infrastructure that is needed across the country. The Development Corporation model which built the 'new towns' remains a good way of securing publicly-led development, both for social housing and private development of housing for sale. Greater public ownership of land can also unlock more diverse development patterns, e.g. leasing for community assets and community-led housing through a reinstated Community Housing Fund. At the heart of this approach is the state acting to capture the value created through planning permission for communities rather than landowners, reducing the land value component of housing which is what drives higher prices. As a report for the Scottish Land Commissions shows, this public, plan-led approach to housing development has been proven to work across Europe.⁵⁸ To tackle the housing crisis, Labour should:

- Invest in a new programme of social housing, with priority given to its development over housing only affordable to the top income deciles.
- Allow local authorities to use land/property taxes to control second/empty homes
- Allow local and devolved governments to implement rent controls which limit rents to affordable ratios to income.
- Legislate for local authorities to introduce more strictly applied levies on private development, ring fenced for social housing and community infrastructure.
- Reform building standards, securing minimum space, safety and environmental standards
- End the use of Permitted Development Rights for house-building/conversions.
- Enable stronger use of compulsory purchase powers for new housing and infrastructure development which capture uplift
- End right to buy of social housing
- Increase public land holdings to be released according to need (active land policy)

Summary of Recommendations

The market-led approach to planning has failed, yet its advocates continue to push for further de-regulation, privatisation, and centralisation of planning. The rhetorical sleight of hand is that we just haven't gone far enough, that the magical market just needs one more push to come and save us all. The socio-ecological crises the UK faces today show us that we simply cannot indulge this experiment any longer. What we propose is a public, democratic, plan-led system which puts communities and their interests first. The principles at the heart of our proposals are those of the Labour party and wider labour movement: redistribution, equality and democracy. Creating a public planning system will take time and resources, but it is the only means by which we build a brighter, greener future for our communities which harnesses the shared knowledge of state institutions and citizens.

We first argue that communities need proper resources. Planning has been hit hard by austerity, but more fundamentally we need to ensure that the value of conferring development rights through public planning decisions is put to public use. Labour can do this by:

- Increasing land value capture and introducing progressive reforms to land and property taxation to fund social housing and infrastructure.
- Restoring local government funding to pre-austerity levels in real terms
- Launching a nation-wide recruitment drive for strategic and specialist public planners on permanent contracts.
- Legislating to end planning outsourcing for its core functions (policy, decision-making), with barriers between public and private planning.
- Clear rules which prevent local officials and representatives working in the development industry during or immediately following their time in office.

A well-resourced system needs to be accountable and responsive to the needs of the public through greater democracy and community participation. A plan-led system requires a plurality of interests to be included within plan-making, with a focus on those under-represented or marginalised in, and through, land-use decisions. Labour should:

- Fund projects for greater participation from those historically excluded from planning: people of colour, people who have disabilities, LGBT+ people, people on lower incomes.
- Establish a Commission on Public Engagement for major infrastructure
- Re-instate a plan-led system, from the local level to regional and national plans, legislating for (properly funded) authorities to have up to date plans based on strong public engagement.
- Define the core missions and purposes of planning in legislation, replacing the circular definition of 'sustainable development' with meeting public needs
- Invest in public, 'open data', digital modes of participation in planning which expand participation
- Apply the subsidiarity principle, with decisions and policy for appropriate level of government

The UK has significant regional and spatial inequalities, and Labour should commit to tackling inequality through democratic planning. We need greater and more consistent devolution of planning and targeted support and interventions on spatial inequalities. We urge the next Labour government to:

- Establish universal standards of access to basic services, from healthcare to transport and digital connectivity.
- Introduce a regional/devolved funding formula, like that for devolved nations, to ensure regional/devolved governments have consistent levels of resources following a needs-based approach.
- Legislate for each devolved region to develop a spatial plan, in conjunction with local authorities, giving all devolved government planning powers.
- Launch programmes to incentivise a more diverse planning profession, from schools through to public hiring practices.

- Expand social housing with high minimum standards, to increase training and choice with the clear aim of eliminating structural racism and all forms of discrimination in housing allocation.
- Develop design standards for public space driven by inclusivity and public safety
- Work with RTPI and universities to ensure equality and diversity is central to planning education.
- Use land value capture/tax to redistribute gains from development to community assets.
- Set up programmes for greater dialogue with communities about public spaces and memorialization, including recognising the contributions of BAME people to the UK.
- Re-introduce a programme of 'Planning Aid' aimed at ensuring under-represented groups have a meaningful part to play in plan-making
- End the 'Freeport' experiments and remove centralised 'National Development Management Policies'.

Years of Conservative rule and the pursuit of the market-led approach have created or made the UK more susceptible to myriad socio-ecological crises. We address two of these crises here. First, we argued that we need *public planning for a green future*. We need well designed regulation and policy which ensure developments adapt to climate change and which prioritise green infrastructure. Labour should

- Give the highest policy priority to green energy and technology developments (e.g. removing de facto ban on onshore wind).
- Require local plans to allocate land for green energy generation as well as improvements in active travel and public transport.
- Increase funding for planning authorities to enable in-house expertise and local innovation along with public engagement in the adaptation to climate change and community resilience building.
- Enact policy and legislation that ensure new developments contribute to both climate adaptation and carbon emissions reduction – through e.g., low carbon building standards, efficient use of water, energy efficiency, access and expansion of green spaces.
- Institute local and regional carbon budgets derived from national limits
- Prioritise green infrastructure in regional and national plans.
- Set standards for net zero in building materials.
- Prioritise re-use and adaptation of existing building stock through policy and/or taxation on demolition.

Finally, we argue that we need a plan-led, public planning system to ensure good quality, affordable housing for all. The UK's housing model prioritises speculation and housing as an asset not a human need, to tackle the housing crises we need a new programme of social housing and greater powers to redistribute land and buildings. Labour should:

- Invest in a new programme of social housing, with priority given to its development over housing only affordable to the top income deciles.
- Allow local authorities to use land/property taxes to control second/empty homes
- Allow local and devolved governments to implement rent controls which limit rents to affordable ratios to income.
- Legislate for local authorities to introduce more strictly applied levies on private development, ring fenced for social housing and community infrastructure.
- Reform building standards, securing minimum space, safety and environmental standards
- End the use of Permitted Development Rights for house-building/conversions.
- Enable stronger use of compulsory purchase powers for new housing and infrastructure development which capture uplift
- End 'right to buy' of social housing.
- Increase public land holdings to be released according to need (active land policy)

What we have set out here are the principles of a progressive, public planning system. It is not a fully comprehensive overview, we have said little about transport or marine planning for example, its main aim is to encourage Labour to reform the planning system to one that is plan-led, which captures the value of planning permission for communities and infrastructure, and in which the state takes an active role in tackling inequalities and the crises the UK faces.

Images and References

Cover Images (from left):

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