

Planning a priority for party conferences

It has been notable that planning and particularly housing has been high on the agenda for all the major political parties at the Autumn party conferences.

At the Labour conference, planning remains a key pillar of the party's offer to the electorate, with Sir Kier Starmer pledging to deliver 1.5 million homes over a five-year period (not dissimilar to the Government's target of 300,000 per year), including through the use of Green Belt - albeit identifying a new term of "grey belt" i.e. poor quality or brownfield sites in the Green Belt.

He set out the Labour plan for another "generation of new towns", echoing previous initiatives such as Labour's Eco Towns and the Conservative's Garden Communities. Starmer outlined a package of devolution measures to Mayors to provide stronger powers over planning and housing. He also set out a plan for more Development Corporations that would have powers to purchase land without having to factor in planning gain and setting out new design standards which would focus on "gentle urban development", such as five-storey townhouses. Where developers met these criteria, a "planning passport" would be provided, which Savills interprets as similar to a Local Development Order or Permission in Principle (the detail is of course to be confirmed).

On Monday, the Shadow Chancellor, Rachel Reeves repeated how Labour "stands with the builders not the blockers" and would form "a Government that would get Britain building again". She set out that she would introduce reforms to planning legislation for "priority growth areas" which would accelerate green energy, life sciences and 5G projects through a fast-track planning route. Again, the detail is still to be confirmed.

Her speech also suggested Labour will ensure the local communities which host critical infrastructure will benefit directly, such as through lower energy bills (the consultation required for such projects would be set out in guidance). An increase in stamp duty on overseas buyers would also be used to invest in the planning system through hiring 300 new planning officers, intended to speed-up planning decision making. The additional resource will be undoubtedly welcome, though this measure would equate to less than one extra planner per planning authority in England.

The shadow Housing and Planning minister Matthew Pennycook has also pledged to reform the Section 106 system, should Labour be elected, to tighten delivery of affordable housing and infrastructure commitments. On Sunday the Deputy Leader, Angela Rayner, committed to a mortgage guarantee scheme and giving first time buyers first refusal on new developments.

Last week we saw the Conservatives confirm HS2 would not go ahead beyond Birmingham, with the funding re-allocated to other infrastructure projects and 10,000 homes at Euston station (subject to additional private investment). At the conference the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, also set out his intention to introduce a new bill to tackle nutrient neutrality at the "first available opportunity" following the defeat in the House of Lords of a similar measure via an amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill ('LURB', expected to become an Act in the King's Speech on 7th November).

The Housing & Planning Minister, Rachel Maclean confirmed her intention to intervene where local authorities are slow to produce a local plan. She also told a conference fringe event the country "was kidding itself" if it thinks we can meet housing need solely on brownfield land.

The Liberal Democrats, in their conference at the end of September, committed to a national housing target of 380,000 homes a year. This commitment was confirmed due to a successful lobby by Young Liberals, who overturned a motion to remove the housing target from the manifesto. The party also committed to commission ten new garden cities and to legislate to force developers to build once they have permission. These national policy announcements are of particular interest, given the increasing number of local authorities under the control of the Liberal Democrats.

Whatever the outcome of the General Election (which will likely take place within the next 12 months), it is clear there will be changes to the planning system although the scale of reform is unclear. Should

the Conservatives be re-elected, the commitments of the LURB will likely be carried forward, along with any potential changes to the NPPF and introduction of National Development Management Policies. Should Labour win, or form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats (and others), planning is clearly a priority area for reform intended to accelerate decision-making, particularly for infrastructure projects. The industry will have to wait to see if another Planning Act would be required or whether existing legislation, or that forthcoming in the LURB, would be used to achieve Labour's objectives.

Before embarking on new legislation, the planning system needs refining quickly to create the certainty needed for investment and to allow Local Authorities to progress with plan-making. New and secondary legislation takes time to introduce and take effect and inevitably therefore gives rise to short-term uncertainty. Building homes, investing in infrastructure, creating energy projects and commercial centres all drive economic growth and the planning system is central to delivering this in a sustainable way.

Last month, the APPG report on housing (Sept '23) made the recommendation to "make planning sexy". This might be a broader challenge, but it is clear that planning is on the agenda of all parties and looks likely to remain a key part of a national debate. Watch this space.