# Guildford Residents Associations

## Response to consultation on 'Planning for the Future'  October 2020

**Q1** *What three words do you associate most with the planning system in England?*

Vital, complicated, lengthy

**Q2** *Do you get involved with planning decisions in your local area?*

Yes

**Q3** *Our proposals will make it much easier to access plans and contribute your views to planning decisions. How would you like to find out about plans and planning proposals in the future?*

While in favour of better use of digital tools, we believe that traditional media also continue to be important. We are sceptical about the claim (para 1.22) that the ability to see proposals on smartphones will lead to better outcomes.

We want a mix of media to be used going forward.

**Q4** *What are your top three priorities for planning in your local area?*

Delivering good standard homes on appropriate sites

Conserving and enhancing the environment, both green/blue (protecting AONB, Green Belt and river corridors) and townscape

Ensuring infrastructure provision (physical and social) to meet needs

**Q5** *Do you agree that Local Plans should be simplified in line with our proposals?*

No. The proposals risk leading to an over-simplification of land categorisation. For example, the treatment of farm land is not explained. We are not persuaded that this zoning approach will improve the pace of delivery of homes or their quality. It seems probable that the identification of sites within the Growth and Renewal areas with their associated constraints will be similar to the existing process. What is meant by 'gentle densification'?

We see advantages in the alternative approach set out in para 2.12.

Land use planning should reflect the need to reverse the trend of loss of environmental diversity (such as woodland, wetland, meadows, etc) as well as provide for housing.

**Q6** *Do you agree with our proposals for streamlining the development management content of Local Plans, and setting out general development management policies nationally?*

There is scope for using some general aspects of development management policies at a national level through the NPPF, but we are keen to see specification of what development is appropriate retained at the local level. This is what appears to be described in para 2.16.

The production of design guides and codes in parallel with plan preparation, as mentioned in para 2.14, would have resource implications for LPAs.

Q7a *Do you agree with our proposals to replace existing legal and policy tests for Local Plans with a consolidated test of "sustainable development", which would include consideration of environmental impact?*

> In the absence of an explanation of what the consolidated test would comprise, it is difficult to know whether it would be an improvement on the existing process, but we think that there is a case for replacing 'soundness' with a more objective set of criteria for approval. Local Plan Examinations should provide an opportunity for an Inspector to make judgements on whether the proposed plan will result in good outcomes for that place, in terms of sustainable development, national policy and local circumstances. We agree that sites should not be included without adequate infrastructure (para 2.20). We would prefer to see a requirement to identify reserve sites in place of a demonstration of deliverability.

Q7b *How could strategic, cross-boundary issues be best planned for in the absence of a formal Duty to Cooperate?*

> There is a clear need for cross-boundary collaboration on matters such as infrastructure and protected landscape. This could be assisted by taking a regional overview of strategic matters to provide context. Making plans digital is not a substitute for coordinated decision-making across boundaries.

Q8a *Do you agree that a standard method for establishing housing requirements (that takes into account constraints) should be introduced?*

> While it is appropriate to adopt a consistent approach to the calculation of need, we have major reservations about the proposed standard method which was the subject of the recent consultation. It is critical that the assessment of housing need takes full account of constraints such as Green Belt land. We note the statement (in para 2.26) that 'the existing policy for protecting the Green Belt would remain', though we would prefer 'will' to 'would'.

> The target of 300,000+ new homes annually is not based on a standard method, and is not a helpful indicator of where and what type of homes should be built, though the ambition has the merit of encouraging the construction sector to equip itself for delivery.

> There should be recognition that flexibility in the housing delivery profile can be beneficial to enable LPAs in areas with significant constraints to flex the timing of delivery to enable innovative, less environmentally harmful solutions to be brought forward, e.g. brownfield site remediation or assembly.

Q8b *Do you agree that affordability and the extent of existing urban areas are appropriate indicators of the quantity of development to be accommodated?*

> No. Affordability is but one indicator of demand, and the weighting attached to it has to be assessed in context. Many of the least affordable locations have the highest levels of non-occupier ownership. It is also important to understand the composition of housing stock in an area and identify the type of homes that are in short supply, e.g. starter homes or homes for one-person households, and social housing.

> The extent of existing urban areas is not necessarily an indicator of current demand. The number of completions in recent years, on the other hand, **is** a signal of local demand.

> The concept of capacity should be reintroduced to the process because capacity is an essential pillar of sustainable development.

Q9a *Do you agree that there should be automatic outline permission for areas for substantial development (Growth areas) with faster routes for detailed consent?*

We do not agree with this proposal, because the identification of an area for development does not carry with it sufficient definition of the nature of the development, the infrastructure requirements, both physical and social, and its potential impact. Speeding up the plan preparation and approval process should not mean sacrificing due attention to specific proposals.

Automatic outline permission would be inconsistent with sustainable development which requires the principle, quantum and overall layout of development to be determined in the context of local social, environmental and economic circumstances.

Q9b *Do you agree with our proposals above for the consent arrangements for Renewal and Protected areas?*

In the case of Renewal areas, the proposals in para 2.33 suggest that there would be a statement of what is acceptable included in the plan. Our concern is to avoid this being vague, and potentially providing inappropriate opportunities for development that would be out of character or impacting on the environment, or against the wishes of the local community.

LPA master planning can make a major contribution to urban regeneration and should not be circumvented by automatic consents (including permitted development rights).

Q9c *Do you think there is a case for allowing new settlements to be brought forward under the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects regime?*

In principle, yes there is a case for this, but clearly limited to large, nationally significant settlements with major infrastructure requirements.

Q10 *Do you agree with our proposals to make decision-making faster and more certain?*

Of course, the processes should make use of up to date technology, and we agree that there is scope for more standardisation. However, this should not be at the expense of proper scrutiny and debate, where there are concerns at the local level. Indeed, making access to information easier could result in greater public participation in the process. Planning departments within local authorities should be adequately resourced. We do not wish to see local decision-making powers diluted.

Far greater recognition should be given to the positive contribution of planning committees and local representation in improving the quality of the built environment. Longer decision-making can be for many reasons, including positive ones, such as securing improvements that enable an application to be approved. If planning becomes too standardised, we risk local character being eroded, with potential economic implications.

Q11 *Do you agree with our proposals for accessible, web-based Local Plans?*

We recognise the potential value of moving to a web-based standard for planning documents. The same philosophy is applicable to related information such as that on utilities, environment, services, ownership etc, which could be viewed as elements of a comprehensive data set. Physical maps will still be necessary.

The potential disconnect we perceive is that the scope for local participation in the decision-making process could be constrained by the nationally determined framework, leading to frustration. If people are going to more informed on their phones and better able to participate, then it follows that their views should inform the outcome. There should be a requirement to revise data that is inadequate or misleading.

Q12 *Do you agree with our proposals for a 30 month statutory timescale for the production of Local Plans?*

We agree that plans are taking too long to finalise, but we think that 30 months is probably insufficient, given the amount of work to be done in plan preparation, consultation and analysis of responses. What guarantees are there that local authorities will have the resources to do the analysis and produce evidence in the specified time? The quality of the output is more important than speed.

Q13a *Do you agree that Neighbourhood Plans should be retained in the reformed planning system?*

Yes, we believe that Neighbourhood Plans are important. They provide a way for local communities to engage with, and determine, the future of their area at a greater level of detail than is usual in Local Plans.

Q13b *How can the neighbourhood planning process be developed to meet our objectives, such as in the use of digital tools and reflecting community preferences about design?*

No doubt digital tools, including visualisation, can help, but the preparation of neighbourhood plans is typically done with very modest resources, relying on volunteers from the community. Any pilot projects should take this into account. LPA support using its digital resources would help.

Q14 *Do you agree there should be a stronger emphasis on the build out of developments? And if so, what further measures would you support?*

We agree that it is unsatisfactory that approved developments can take many years to complete. Steps to support faster build out would be welcome. However, where a large development is dependent on infrastructure, the delivery of that infrastructure (which may be a responsibility of government and linked to the provision of sufficient finance) must remain a pre-condition for development.

Currently, anticipated low build out rates are used to justify identifying additional sites in Local Plans, often environmentally sensitive. This give rise to a risk that, if the main sites require more up-front investment, development switches to the 'additional' sites. Any new approach should avoid naivety about this process, and the phased release of a mix of types of sites should be encouraged.

Q15 *What do you think about the design of new development that has happened recently in your area?*

New developments are generally satisfactory, although some are cramped and have inadequate car parking provision. There is concern that the standards for accommodation, for example in the conversion of former offices to residential use, are too low. All living space should achieve a decent minimum standard.

Q16 *Sustainability is at the heart of our proposals. What is your priority for sustainability in your area?*

Our priority is retention of green space, currently designated AONB and Green Belt. Tree planting and green spaces in urban areas are also high on the list. We also want energy efficient buildings, and less reliance on the car.

**Q17** *Do you agree with our proposals for improving the production and use of design guides and codes?*

We support the application of local guides and codes, produced with input from the local community, and we agree with the aims set out in para 3.4.

Our expectation is that minimum standards for living space will apply nationally, including to permitted developments.

**Q18** *Do you agree that we should establish a new body to support design coding and building better places, and that each authority should have a chief officer for design and place-making?*

In principle, a new body with a focus on design codes could be helpful and would signal recognition of the importance of the subject, but it is not self-evident how its brief would relate to those of other organisations with regulatory responsibilities and professional bodies. More information is needed to make an informed judgement.

Appointing an officer in each local authority with responsibility for design and place-making begs the question of the definition of 'planning', which should surely cover place-making. We look forward to seeing the proposals to improve the resourcing of planning departments. We would prefer to see greater opportunity for community input from the earliest stages, and greater emphasis on assessing design and place-making in the application process. We submit that broad community input will contribute to better and more locally distinctive outcomes

If a non-discretionary requirement to create new posts is introduced, then the cost burden should be recognised.

**Q19** *Do you agree with our proposal to consider how design might be given greater emphasis in the strategic objectives for Homes England?*

We support the principle of Homes England giving greater weight to design quality, including recognition of the importance of sustainability and environmental standards.

**Q20** *Do you agree with our proposals for implementing a fast-track for beauty?*

Three proposals are made here. Regarding the first of these, surely all schemes should comply with local design guides and codes?
The second proposal is to require masterplans for significant development in Growth areas, which we support.
The third proposal, to widen and change the nature of permitted development by the use of standard, replicable designs, is much more problematic and not welcome. New development should relate to its surroundings and context. We would prefer to retain the safeguards built in the planning approval process.

**Q21** *When new development happens in your area, what is your priority for what comes with it?*

Our top priority is infrastructure (physical, social and green/blue) required for the development. We also want to see energy efficient homes, environmental enhancement, such as trees and space for recreation, and that there is provision for homes that those on average earnings can afford.

**Q22a** *Should the Government replace the Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 planning obligations with a new consolidated Infrastructure Levy, which is charged as a fixed proportion of development value above a set threshold?*

We support this proposal to simplify the system and reduce uncertainty over the availability of funds for infrastructure and affordable housing. Defining the criteria for setting the levy as discussed in para 4.9 will be challenging. (Would a better name be 'Development Levy' as it is used for more than infrastructure.)

We do, however, caution that S106 should be retained for situations where the Levy cannot be applied for a particular scheme due to the nature of the development (e.g. gravel extraction) or the status of a plan (e.g. not yet approved).

**Q22b** *Should the Infrastructure Levy rates be set nationally at a single rate, set nationally at an area-specific rate, or set locally?*

We are in favour of area-specific rates reflecting regional differences. What is not clear is what the size of an 'area' might be, and this has a major bearing on whether rates are to be set nationally, regionally or locally.

**Q22c** *Should the Infrastructure Levy aim to capture the same amount of value overall, or more value, to support greater investment in infrastructure, affordable housing and local communities?*

The levy should raise more than the existing arrangements. The funds will be needed for both 'affordable' housing and key infrastructure. It should help overcome the problem of scheme viability being revised after approval. There is a case for safeguarding local authorities' financial exposure in circumstances where the levy does not over the external development costs that authorities will necessarily incur.

**Q22d** *Should we allow local authorities to borrow against the Infrastructure Levy, to support infrastructure delivery in their area?*

It makes sense to allow borrowing by local authorities for developments of significant size, where initial public investment is needed prior to commencement of building and prior to completion.

**Q23** *Do you agree that the scope of the reformed Infrastructure Levy should capture changes of use through permitted development rights?*

We think that this would be a sensible extension of the scope of the levy.

**Q24a** *Do you agree that we should aim to secure at least the same amount of affordable housing under the Infrastructure Levy, and as much on-site affordable provision, as at present?*

It should be the intention to at least maintain the amount of affordable housing.

**Q24b** *Should affordable housing be secured as in-kind payment towards the Infrastructure Levy, or as a 'right to purchase' at discounted rates for local authorities?*

We can see the potential for using this form of payment to secure affordable housing, but the devil is likely to be in the detail. Fixed percentage discounts could be considered rather than negotiated ones.

Q24c *If an in-kind delivery approach is taken, should we mitigate against local authority overpayment risk?*

> If this approach is adopted, then it is important that local authorities are not exposed to increased risk.

Q24d *If an in-kind delivery approach is taken, are there additional steps that would need to be taken to support affordable housing quality?*

> This is a puzzling question. Pillar Two is concerned with raising standards and making sure that design codes are in place. It would surely be unacceptable for a developer to deliver homes 'not of sufficient quality'? In principle, affordable housing should be of a comparable specification to the market product, subject to minor exceptions.

Q25 *Should local authorities have fewer restrictions over how they spend the Infrastructure Levy?*

> We think that there is sufficient flexibility under the existing arrangements, and we do not wish to see any dilution of the Neighbourhood Share, for example.

Q25a *If yes, should an affordable housing 'ring-fence' be developed?*

> No. Local authorities should be able to determine the mix of spend on infrastructure and affordable housing over time.

Q26 *Do you have any views on the potential impact of the proposals raised in this consultation on people with protected characteristics as defined in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010?*

> We do not perceive any particular equality issues arising from these proposals.