

South East England Councils (SEEC) response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's *Planning for the future* white paper



“The South East is already under tremendous planning pressure not least because of higher development costs and it is important that careful attention is paid to the particular issues of the region.

We do recognise that there is a need to build quality affordable homes in to order boost regeneration and development across the region, while also supporting localised Covid-19 recovery efforts. These aims are best achieved in co-operation with local councils rather than by central imposition.

The proposals outlined in the white paper distract attention from the need for more affordable housing. Most Councils, irrespective of party, across the South-East want to see government focus and energy prioritised on increasing investment in housing for rent and sale, not on dismantling the existing planning system.

Therefore, SEEC, reflecting the views of members across the South East is of the view that ministers should reconsider the proposed changes outlined in this white paper, and instead work with local councils to ensure delivery of local housing that is affordable and accessible for local communities”

Cllr Roy Perry, Chairman, South East England Councils

1. Introduction

1.1 This response is from South East England Councils (SEEC) a cross-party, voluntary membership association recognised as a regional body by the Local Government Association (LGA). SEEC brings together District, Unitary and County councils to promote the views and interests of all tiers of local government across the South East. The majority of the 71 local authorities across the south east region are members of SEEC.

1.2 It is important to note that SEEC represents all tiers of local government across the South East, therefore, this response will reflect the opinions of those councils which have differing powers and responsibilities over housebuilding, but more notably the planning system itself.

1.3 SEEC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's *planning for the future* white paper. During the coronavirus pandemic, councils the length and breadth of the UK have adapted, and risen to, the challenges brought about by Covid-19, by continuing to provide essential services to residents and leading on local recovery efforts. Councils have demonstrated that if you put faith in local leaderships they can deliver.

1.4 It should be noted that this response is a compendium of feedback received from member councils. If any clarification or further detail is required on any point raised, the SEEC secretariat would be delighted to help facilitate this. Furthermore, our response summarises the views of our members and SEEC more broadly and is broken down into each of the three *pillars* outlined in the *planning for the future* white paper.

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2.0 Pillar 1: Planning for development

2.1 Planning communities is about more than housing and providing employment is also important, which seems to have been neglected in this consultation. Indeed, in a recent poll of 275 councillors in the South East revealed that the government should prioritise a number of areas in order to support the South East's economic recovery post Covid-19, including employment (89%), social care (89%), schools (82%), environment (82%) and digital infrastructure (80%), while 58% of councillors polled said housebuilding as a high priority¹. It is also important that the Government recognise that the South East is one of just three regions that makes a positive financial contribution to the national exchequer.

2.2 There is a pressing need for more affordable homes across the South East, yet 400,000 planning permissions over the last 10 years, remain unused due to developers demonstrating little sense of urgency. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government planning proposals should be refocused to ensure the planning system empowers local councils to secure delivery of local housing that is accessible to their local communities.

2.3 SEEC recently commissioned polling organisation Savanta ComRes² to survey a cohort of businesses, local authorities, and residents across the South East on several issues, including on housing and planning. On barriers to building new homes, businesses are significantly more likely to highlight opposition from the community as a main barrier to building new homes (49%), compared to the public (41%) or councillors (39%).

2.4 In our new flagship biannual monitor published this month³, a survey of 1,043 people (a mix of councillors, business decision makers and the public) found overall, 42% of all respondents regard the lack of available land as a main barrier to building new homes in their area.

2.5 In addition, the biannual monitor also revealed businesses were significantly more likely to highlight opposition from the community as a main barrier to new homes (49%) than the public (41%) or Councillors (39%). Opposition from the community ranked joint first place alongside lack of available land (both 42% overall). Meanwhile Councillors are just as likely to shift the blame onto larger developers being too slow (38%), a viewpoint a small minority of businesses (13%) and the public (16%) share.

2.6 On the planning system: as part of the biannual monitor⁴ only one third (32%) of all respondents regarded the Planning System as a main barrier to building new homes in their area. There are notable differences between businesses (42%) and councillors (18%) apportioning blame on the planning system. It may be the former is guided by experiences of submitting applications while the latter, well versed in decision making, taking into account the democratic will of local residents.

2.7 With Government consulting on reforms to planning, notably through this white paper,

¹ South East England Councils (SEEC) commissioned Savanta ComRes to survey opinions of 275 Councillors across South East England between 13 and 23 July 2020. Breakdown of councillor participants was: 65% District, 23% Unitary, 13% County Council.

<https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/2020/07/polling-of-south-east-england-councillors/>

² Polling conducted by Savanta ComRes for South East England Councils of 504 adults (members of the public), 278 businesses, and 261 councillors, all based in the South East, between 4 and 17 September 2020. Public data were weighted to be representative of South East England adults by age, gender, and county. Business data were weighted to be representative of South East England by industry type, and councillor data were weighted by council type, council control, party, and gender.

³ South East England Councils South East 1,000 Biannual Monitor: Survey of 1,043 people (261 councillors; 278 business decision makers; and 504 members of the public) between 4 and 17 September. <https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/South-East-1000-Doc.pdf>

⁴ Ibid

there is an important point for ministers to take from this – if less than one in five councillors and reflecting the will of residents – do not see a problem with the current planning system, then why expend so much political capital to change it?



3.0 Pillar 3: Planning for infrastructure and connected places

3.1 As part of our biannual monitor of opinion in the South East, when asked about transport, it was reported among councillors, business leaders and the public in the region that they would like to see better integration between land use and transport planning.

3.2 For example, one of Transport for the South East’s economic priorities is to deliver a “more integrated approach to land use and transport planning that helps our partners across the South East meet future housing, employment and regeneration needs sustainably”.⁵ Subsequently, SEEC has and will continue to support Transport for the South East’s (TfSE) bid to become a statutory sub-national transport body.

3.3. It is for this reason that we firmly believe that the South East should have its own sub-national transport body to better achieve alignment between housing and transport need.

Summary

MHCLG’s planning proposals should be refocused to ensure the planning system empowers local councils to secure delivery of local housing that is accessible to their local communities.

Furthermore, with less than one in five councillors reporting they do not see the planning system as a barrier to building more homes, it begs the questions as to why so much political capital is being expended to change it. With this in mind, and as the government contemplates restructuring of local government in the context of their Devolution White Paper, and usher in reforms to local planning, ministers should take note of the affinity and confidence that local populations have with their local councils.

Ultimately, as a regional body for the South East we believe it is important that councils as locally elected democratic bodies should retain a significant say in the development of their area.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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⁵ Transport for the South East: Transport Strategy for the South East pp. xi <https://transportforthesoutheast.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/TfSE-transport-strategy.pdf>

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