The TCPA's Prospectus for Progressive Planning

- Planning has been good for Britain.
- Planning has delivered decent housing for millions of people. It has protected our countryside and valued landscapes from the piecemeal development and urban sprawl that characterises parts of the USA and Europe.
- Planning has promoted a mix of housing types and tenures and has resisted the extreme social segregation that results from ‘gated’ communities.
- But planning in England is under threat from deregulation, demoralisation and poor resourcing. Planning is no longer seen as a positive force to make people’s lives better. National planning policy has lost any sense of the progressive social values that are the traditional foundation of town planning.
- Only planning, embracing the higher economic, environmental and social ground, can deliver equity across the nation within a national framework for development.
The threat

It is a supreme irony that England, which helped to pioneer comprehensive democratic planning, seems incapable of organising itself to meet the economic, social and environmental challenges ahead.

Other advanced economies have strong planning, including national spatial plans – which link major infrastructure proposals to the overall planning objectives of the nation. In England we do the reverse: in the case of the High Speed Two (HS2) rail link, the Government is proposing a line without any plan to co-ordinate new capacity with housing growth. And while the Chancellor’s backing for the creation by the five largest northern cities of a new northern economic hub is welcome, it will only be realised by the re-creation of strategic planning across newly-created city-regions. A piecemeal, deregulated approach will not deliver a fair and efficient future.

The present Government has sought to deregulate and simplify the English planning system, which has appeared complicated and prescriptive – more ‘can’t do’ than ‘can do.’ An efficient planning system is something that everyone wants, but the changes have gone too far, leaving us without any strategic planning and with the weak duty to co-operate. In many cities, deregulation of permitted development has led to a loss of control over the urban environment. Too much development is now being approved after planning appeals and ministerial decisions rather than through a democratic, local and plan-led process.

Today, we find ourselves in a context that is a far cry from the optimism underpinning the groundbreaking 1947 Town and Country Planning Act – which was heralded by posters highlighting a vision of ‘order and beauty coming to our towns and cities’, set out under the slogan ‘Before we build – a plan’. The 1947 Act was born in part as a reaction against ugly and inefficient urban sprawl, which accelerated during the 1930s. For many years, the UK’s post-war planning settlement led the world in its approach to planning and development: containing our cities, protecting our countryside and National Parks, conserving our heritage – and creating 32 New Towns with, today, a combined population of 2.8 million people.

At a time when England faces a housing crisis, with the level of new building dismally failing to match levels of household formation, the planning system as we have known it is being undermined by deregulation. But try to imagine a country without planning: a land, like parts of the USA, with no green belts to contain growth and disfigured by seemingly endless sprawl; cities built to accommodate the car rather than people; houses, estates, warehouses and businesses scattered randomly in the countryside. In such an unregulated free-for-all, anything goes: if developers want it, they build it. In a recent example of English deregulation, office blocks and warehouses can be converted to housing without the need for planning permission, so local authorities cannot secure decent play space, green infrastructure or contributions to educational provision. Is this really the country we want our children and grandchildren to inherit?

Unless we’re careful, the planning system – a vital national asset that is essential to the maintenance and wellbeing of a small country – will be lost.

The housing challenge

Housing provides just one example of why we need to plan properly for the future. The facts on the housing crisis are as stark as the human misery it engenders; the number of young couples, families and individuals unable to get any home, let alone take a first step on the housing ladder, tells its own story of shattered dreams and broken relationships. All too many of us have experience of either a family member or a close friend facing the ‘housing block’: an inability to raise a deposit for a mortgage or a rental property, and unable to find a suitable home – indeed, any home – relatively near a place of work. For those on low pay, where either affordable or social housing is a tenure of necessity, the choice is often non-existent. We must act on a crucial guiding principle: good-quality housing, for people of all incomes and circumstances, is a pillar of a civilised society.
As a nation, we are simply not providing for essential low-paid workers – whose employment underpins an economy on which we all depend – or for people on average incomes trying to get onto the housing ladder. To do so, we have to change the terms of what has become a negative debate, full of contradictions. While housing is generally seen as desirable, development is invariably viewed as a threat. Headlines in some newspapers, driven more by emotion more than by hard evidence, scream of both green belts and countryside at risk. But emphatically they need not be – provided we have a planning system that is fit for purpose. Any threat comes from further deregulation of the system.

Rising above party politics, the TCPA has long campaigned for ‘a decent home for everyone’. Today, we need a consensus that housing is good for Britain. Advocates for new, high-quality housing need to seize the economic, social and environmental high ground to explain why the development underpinning new housing – whether provided through a new Garden City, a sympathetic urban or village extension, or a new or renewed suburb – is both necessary and desirable.

Crucially, the key challenge before us is to look beyond the simplistic case for more homes, to the wider need for place-making based on fairness, quality and resilience. To do this, we must address four questions central to the housing crisis:

- **Why the need?** In England, around 240,000 new households are formed annually – yet just 109,490 homes were built in 2013; 114,590 in the year to June 2014. Overall, the population of Britain is rising by almost 1% each year, faster than in most richer countries – yet we are failing dismally to meet demand in all sectors, while an affordable/social housing shortage is pushing up a housing benefit bill that was meant to be falling.

- **Where to build?** A new generation of Garden Cities should provide one part of the solution to the shortfall in housing supply; new and renewed inner cities and suburbs are another vital part of the package. Beyond that, we have to cater for demand in country towns and villages through sympathetic additions to meet a growing rural housing crisis.

- **What to build?** We must build places for people, learning from the mistakes of past so that we make communities inclusive, providing real homes which meet people’s needs over their whole lifetimes. Provision of proper social and transport infrastructure is vital, as are the cultural and leisure facilities that make life worth living. We have the capability, through setting high standards, to enhance people’s health and wellbeing over the long term. We must also exploit modern methods of construction more vigorously, not only to speed up the delivery of new and renewed homes, but to create new jobs and skills while reducing energy demand.

- **How to fund?** In putting the case for new housing – at least 240,000 homes annually – we have to take a view beyond five-yearly election cycles and work out how an ambitious construction programme can be funded. The effective capture of land values for the wider benefit of the community must be an essential aspect of such funding. This is a tried-and-tested approach but requires the political will necessary to make it happen.
Planning with ambition

Planning needs to change; and any future reform should start from first principles. Planning must be:

- **Principled**: Sustainable development should be the key holistic objective of planning, reflecting the principles of the 2005 UK Sustainable Development Strategy. Great weight must be given to social equity and to conserving the natural resources vital for future generations – aims reflected in the Garden City principles.

- **Comprehensive**: The issues that affect our future have a national, regional and local character, and we need to organise ourselves at all of these levels. We need a national spatial framework and effective regional organisation, as well as local and neighbourhood plans.

- **Democratic**: We cannot plan for the future without the consent of the people; planning must continue to be founded on representative democracy, along with clear rights for people to participate in the operation of the planning system.

- **Responsible**: We need to promote a new understanding among communities of the real challenges that must be faced in relation to housing need and climate change.

- **Powerful and positive**: If planning is to deliver on the aspirations of communities it must be given back key powers of control over their neighbourhoods, including power over the change of use of buildings. We must also apply the positive tools of planning, such as the New Towns Act.

- **Objective**: Planning must be based on real and objective evidence of the social, environmental and economic needs and constraints of our nation and communities.

- **Creative**: Planning is a creative enterprise, embracing the arts, economics, engineering and community development. We need a transformation of planning practice to restore these creative elements and to apply them positively to the development of our communities.

- **Self-financing**: Land value capture is vital to realising the potential of positive planning, by recycling development profits for the benefit of the wider community.

Action in the first 100 days of a new Government

Successive governments have simplistically viewed planning as an ‘enemy of enterprise’ – a frequent if totally unsubstantiated complaint. In fact, smart planning is an engine of sustainable growth that delivers multiple benefits to our society: certainty and confidence to business, democratic rights for communities, and protection for our heritage, environment and biodiversity. Planning is a positive force for good and should be at the heart of future public policy. To give the country the future it deserves, a range of measures are required to place planning at the centre of political debate. We need:

- A new legally-defined purpose for planning based on sustainable development and emphasising a progressive social agenda for planning practice.

- The updating and effective deployment of New Towns legislation to drive positive area-based planning and help deliver a new generation of Garden Cities built to the very highest standards.

- Forensic changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to ensure that social justice, equality and climate change sit the heart of all planning decisions.

- Better planning for cities, secured by compelling the new ‘combined authorities’ – for Greater Manchester, Leeds, and the North East, for instance – to produce a statutory co-operation framework, setting out housing requirements and planning principles.

- Strong measures to ensure that councils work together across defined housing market areas to meet housing need. A new form of flexible strategic planning is required, building on ‘combined authorities’ or joint planning committees with clear powers to guide development to the most sustainable locations.

- Better national planning for infrastructure, with the preparation of an integrated national strategy leading to a national development framework.

- Proper resources to enable local government to deliver a modern, efficient and fair planning service.