

Town & Country Planning



Vision-led transport planning: reform or rebrand?
Has the AI boom put planning on the back foot?
Women's health and participation in planning

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Climate Innovation District, Leeds: a new, low-carbon neighbourhood in the heart of the city, designed around people and active travel

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Contents

Regulars

220 **On the agenda**

Katy Lock:

A new chapter for the TCPA

230 **Time and tide**

Celia Davis:

Has the AI boom put planning on the back foot?

275 **Design matters**

Matthew Carmona:

A long and winding road to clarity

282 **Off the rails**

Robin Hickman:

Heathrow's proposed third runway: rationality or rationalisation?

Features

224 **Fiona Howie**

An appreciation of the TCPA's outgoing Chief Executive by **Hugh Ellis**

226 **Book review**

Young, engaged and shut out?

Sally Roscoe on *Turning Youth Voice into Sustainable Public Policy*, which explores why political systems sideline young people – and what true participation might look like

238 **Women's health and participation in planning**

In 1990s Birmingham, a group of women came together to campaign for change in a city built for men. **Debby Humphry** and **Sue Brownill** share some lessons from their experiences

245 **Vision-led transport planning: reform or rebranding?**

Colin Black asks whether National Highways is quietly reversing the government's promise of 'vision-led' transport planning

252 **Back to the future?**

Some of the UK's most celebrated townscapes were developed plot by plot. European cities are rediscovering this approach, and **Iqbal Hamiduddin** and **Chris O'Brien** believe that Britain should do the same

259 **Making the most of health impact assessment**

Health impact assessment can be a powerful tool for integrating health into planning, but it needs to be better supported in policy, suggest **Iurii Beshpalov**, **Danielle Sinnott** and **Heather Rumble**

265 **Planning for justice at the neighbourhood level**

Gavin Parker, **Tessa Lynn**, **John Sturzaker** and **Matthew Wargent** draw on a three-year research project to show how planning can and should do far more to serve deprived communities

271 **How could we innovate in strategic plans?**

The return of strategic planning and the introduction of spatial development strategies offers a chance to reimagine how we shape regional growth, suggests **Robert Hayward**

On the agenda

New TCPA Chief Executive **Katy Lock** pays tribute to her predecessor and sets out her ambition to explore new ways to promote the longstanding values of the Association



Katy Lock

A new chapter for the TCPA



Welcome to this issue of *Town & Country Planning* – and to a new chapter for the TCPA. I am delighted to be writing my first column as Chief Executive.

I must first give thanks to Fiona Howie who, during her seven years as CEO, led the Association through very difficult times, including an international pandemic, Brexit, and a carousel of planning ministers and prime ministers. Fiona also oversaw the TCPA's difficult but necessary move from Carlton House Terrace.

From our new home in London's County Hall we can still see Big Ben from our window, and are now close enough to hear when it's time for lunch. The move included the transition of our archive to Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, where it is now safely stored and will be catalogued and made accessible to the public.

An outgoing task for Fiona was to outline the TCPA's new five-year strategy to 2030, and I look forward to working with the team, board, policy council, partners and – of course – our members and supporters, to deliver on that ambition in new and innovative ways. I wish Fiona all the best with her next role [see page 224 for an appreciation of Fiona Howie].

A busy policy agenda

Meanwhile, the wider world of planning and policy continues to turn. We await the revised *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF), *Design and Placemaking Practice Guidance* (PPG) and an announcement on locations and process for the New Towns Programme.

In recent months, the TCPA has been engaging with government consultations on all these processes. Our response to the draft NPPF focuses on climate resilience, healthy placemaking, public participation and new communities, including the ongoing relevance of the Garden City Principles. The TCPA welcomes the draft PPG, and our consultation response recommends how content could be strengthened in relation to long-term stewardship, inclusive design and climate resilience. We are also exploring ways to support and engage with the emerging worlds of strategic planning and devolution. Our summer conference in June

⌚
Howard Park
in Letchworth
Garden City –
birthplace of
the Garden City
Movement and a
fitting new home
for the TCPA
archive

© Letchworth
Garden City Heritage
Foundation

On the agenda

explored how spatial development strategies can plan for inclusive growth, and there are some reflections on their potential in this issue [see page 271].

In praise of Planning Aid for London

The end of May saw the conclusion of the TCPA's six-year project with Planning Aid for London (PAL), funded by Trust for London. The project aimed to help underrepresented people and communities influence planning across the capital. We explored new ways to engage and empower community groups and strengthen PAL's service, while giving its trustees the space to plan for the future and long-term financial sustainability.

The project included over 40 workshops and outreach events, engaging more than 1,000 people, recruiting 124 volunteers, and producing new resources on planning in London. The team worked with poets and community leaders to explore creative ways to engage people in planning, and this reflected a key lesson from the project: the need for expertise and representation beyond planning to help people engage in its processes. There was much learning from the project, and Project Manager Denean Rowe has shared some initial reflections on the TCPA website.¹ Planning Aid for London is needed more now than ever. The TCPA will continue its relationship with the organisation, and I hope that readers in London will also explore its services. We are grateful to everyone who engaged in the project, including the PAL steering group and excellent volunteers.

Overheating and the Healthy Homes legacy

The heatwaves in May, June and July this year highlighted some of the shocking evidence revealed through the TCPA's work with University College London (UCL) on permitted development (PD). The UCL team surveyed and interviewed over 1,000 residents living in PD housing in England, and

nearly half of them described experiencing problems with overheating. This work is part of the ongoing legacy of the TCPA's Campaign for Healthy Homes. Rosalie Callway explains more about the research on our website² and there will be a permitted development special section in the Journal later this year.

Learning from the past, building the future

Sue Brownill's timely article on women, planning and health [see page 238], has echoes of the TCPA's Forgotten Pioneers project, which highlighted the important role of women in planning and the Garden City Movement.³ This was just one of many projects I was privileged to lead on in recent years in my role as FJ Osborn Fellow.

The Garden City Principles remain the golden thread of the Association's work, yet they are still too often misunderstood. As the new planning system takes shape, I look forward to exploring fresh ways to champion these values – social and environmental justice, combined with practical solutions for change – through all our workstreams, and to sharing more about our impact on these pages.

In the meantime, I wish you all a wonderful summer and I hope to see many of you as part of our busy autumn programme.

Katy Lock is TCPA Chief Executive.

Notes

- 1 D Rowe: 'Don't stop (thinking about planning)!'. Blog. TCPA website, 4 Jun. 2026. www.tcpa.org.uk/dont-stop-thinking-about-planning/
- 2 'Hot housing: Why is the government still permitting overheated office conversions?' Blog. TCPA website, 26 May 2026. www.tcpa.org.uk/hot-housing-why-is-the-government-still-permitting-overheated-office-conversions/
- 3 *The forgotten pioneers: Celebrating the women of the Garden City Movement*. TCPA, Jan. 2021. www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/the-forgotten-pioneers-celebrating-the-women-of-the-garden-city-movement/

An appreciation of the
TCPA's outgoing
Chief Executive by
Hugh Ellis



Fiona Howie

Fiona Howie: an appreciation

There's always a risk that any appreciation of someone can read a bit like an obituary. So while we will all miss Fiona after her seven years in charge of the TCPA, it's brilliant that she's embarked on a new and exciting chapter with Cratus Group.

Fiona's tenure as Chief Executive was marked by some of the most extreme challenges the charity has ever faced. Some of these, like the Covid 19 pandemic, were completely unexpected, and required someone with a depth of calmness and confidence to be able to navigate the transformation in how we worked together. Her modernisation of the TCPA's governance, and the enormous task of moving us to a new office, required an extraordinary level of determination and grit.

But while these are mostly internally focused achievements, it is Fiona's work to reconnect the charity with its founding principles that will be her lasting legacy. Having

the wisdom to understand the unique social justice DNA of the Garden City Movement, and to distil those ideas in a way which is relevant to current policy, was a seismic achievement. To do so in such a hostile environment took remarkable determination.

While constant bombardment of anti-planning rhetoric was and remains completely unevidenced, it has been very effective in driving deregulation. It is, of course, extremely difficult for any small charity, however principled and dedicated, to combat that kind of corporate lobbying. But under Fiona's leadership, the TCPA's Campaign for Healthy Homes was able to shout loudly about the social costs of such deregulation. The campaign highlighted not just the slum-housing conditions being created through permitted development for those in extreme housing need, but also the very obvious benefits to individuals and society of adopting the kind of safeguards that can produce healthy homes and communities.

We celebrate Fiona as being in the finest tradition of the women who have led our movement: courageous, wise and tenacious



Ultimately, it takes real nerve as a Chief Executive to stand up to government on matters of core principle, when it's so much easier to stay silent or give in. As we wish Fiona the very best of luck in her new career, we celebrate her as being in the finest tradition of the women who have led our movement: courageous, wise and tenacious in the cause of social justice and sustainable development.

Hugh Ellis is TCPA Policy Director.

Book review

Sally Roscoe on *Turning Youth Voice into Sustainable Public Policy* by James Sloam (Bristol University Press, 2025), which explores why political systems sideline young people – and what true participation might look like



Young, engaged and shut out?

James Sloam's new book offers insights into contemporary debates on both youth political engagement and the failures of public policy toward younger generations. It draws upon an array of qualitative and quantitative research, much of it conducted with young Londoners between 2018 and 2024, along with various international examples. Sloam uses these accounts to examine how youth perspectives can be meaningfully embedded into the policy-making process. He also provides a nuanced portrait of both the barriers to youth participation and the opportunities for reimagining engagement in ways that take youth voice seriously.

Sloam reframes youth disengagement not as apathy, but as a rational response to political systems that have deprioritised young people's needs. He outlines contemporary youth politics within the broader context of intergenerational

and intragenerational inequality, emphasising that members of Generation Z (those born approximately between 1995 and 2012) face significant economic, social, and environmental risks. Meanwhile, political systems, from party structures to policy priorities, remain skewed toward older voters, who turn out in higher numbers and whose interests policymakers are therefore more inclined to serve. The result is a system in which youth concerns are consistently sidelined, and the distancing of young people from formal politics becomes a predictable outcome.

Young people are not uninterested in shaping their communities; rather, they are seeking forms of engagement that align with their lived realities



Yet the book is far from suggesting that young people are disengaged from politics entirely; in fact, it suggests the opposite. They are often deeply engaged in issue-based and cause-driven politics, such as climate justice, social equality and economic insecurity, rather than party-based or institutional politics. They tend to prefer project-oriented engagement, rather than abstract ideological debates. The book's discussion of a growing generational values gap, not simply as a lifecycle phenomenon but as the result of successive generations becoming more accepting of diversity and in favour of public investment, provides helpful context for understanding these shifts. Young people are not uninterested in shaping their communities; rather, they are seeking forms of engagement that align with their lived realities.

Despite this, there are many structural barriers to youth participation – such as lack of time, money, and skills – that disproportionately affect those from disadvantaged backgrounds. These can be exacerbated by supply-side constraints within governance, such as lack of project time for

long-term engagement, capacity shortages in local authorities, and a broader reluctance to cede power. Therefore, youth participation requires more than consultation exercises; it requires a rebalancing of power, a willingness to work **with** young people rather than **for** them, and an openness to learning from the successes and failures of models in other cities, such as Chicago, Berlin, and Paris, which are explored in the book.

The sense that many feel they are pushing against a system rigged against them comes through strongly



The London case study is particularly illuminating: survey data shows high levels of interest and demand for participation among the young, yet this demand is not matched by sufficient opportunities. The book identifies five core priorities of young people in the city – poverty and inequality, health and safety, education for life, environmental protection, and civic engagement – and shows how many young people feel trapped in cycles of insecurity relating to these issues. The sense that many feel they are pushing against a system rigged against them comes through strongly in the text. Sloam does not frame this as cynicism, but as a legitimate critique of political structures that have consistently undervalued youth perspectives.

In response, he shifts toward solutions, emphasising the need to build trust, ensure high-quality engagement and avoid tokenistic approaches. Quality matters as much as quantity: poor engagement risks reinforcing disillusionment, whereas genuine, sustained, and skill-building interactions can strengthen democratic participation. Place-based models are promising forms of engagement, grounding participation in local contexts that are more accessible and more relevant to young people, especially those from marginalised communities.

Practical pathways for youth participation

Overall, *Turning Youth Voice into Sustainable Public Policy* challenges policymakers to rethink assumptions about young people, emphasises the need to address intergenerational and intragenerational inequalities, and offers practical pathways for more inclusive and meaningful youth participation. As a member of Generation Z myself, I found it refreshing to read a text that so accurately captures many of the frustrations experienced by my generation and perhaps those coming after it. Far from depicting young people as disengaged, it presents them as politically active, socially conscious and ready to participate – provided that the system meets them halfway.

Young people in July 2016 campaign for the UK voting age to be reduced to 16 years – in February 2026, the government introduced a bill to bring this about by the next election

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Sally Roscoe is a Projects and Policy Officer at the TCPA.



Time and tide

In this first of a series of columns examining the hidden carbon costs of high-emitting sectors, **Celia Davis** looks at the proliferation of data centres in the UK, and asks whether planning is equipped to respond



Celia Davis

Has the AI boom put planning on the back foot?

The UK is on a mission to become an 'AI superpower' and according to Sir Keir Starmer, 'there is barely an aspect of our society that will remain untouched by this force of change.' Whatever one's views on the capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI), professionals and communities interested in the built environment and land use must pay attention to the physical demands that it generates.

The most apparent of these is the proliferation of AI data centres. These vast warehouses store the servers and processors that provide the compute capacity (processing power) needed for the growing use of AI. There are currently around 500 operating in the UK, with a maximum operational capacity of around 1.8 GW (gigawatts), accounting for around 2% of national energy demand.¹ Their growth seems exponential, with more than 100 new data centre applications currently in the planning pipeline.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

forecasts that data centres will need up to 6 GW of capacity (the maximum power they could draw at any moment) by 2030 – a threefold increase in just four years. The National Energy System Operator (NESO) anticipates an increase in energy demand from the sector of 200-600% – potentially up to 71 TWh (terawatt hours) per year by 2050. This is equivalent to over a quarter of the UK's total electricity use in 2021.² While there is some uncertainty in these projections, the scale of growth clearly raises serious questions about whether such an increase can be accommodated within the UK's carbon budget.

The government is encouraging this rapidly expanding market, with commitments that include a £2 billion investment in AI supercomputers and a series of AI Growth Zones to accommodate 'hyperscale' data centres. It also promises to 'speed up planning proposals for data centres.'³ The December 2024 update to the *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF) included policy support for data centre developments, which has led to increased planning consents by local authorities and

ⓧ
The rapid pace and scale of data centre construction in the UK puts the planning system under huge pressure

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Time and tide

at planning appeals. The most recent NPPF consultation also requires local plans to include provision for data centres.

Data centre developers can now also seek planning consent through the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects regime, although at the time of writing the promised National Policy Statement for data centres has not been published, so there is still uncertainty over the scale of projects likely to be encouraged to use this route.

Powering the AI boom

The energy demands of proposed data centres are staggering. A recently approved scheme at Southall Industrial Estate in Ealing is estimated to require 1.6 million MWh (megawatt hours) per year for its operation. According to campaign group Foxglove, this is equivalent to the annual energy use of over 500,000 homes.⁴

➤ An already-constrained national grid faces growing pressure from data centres, with demand set to rise steeply in the years ahead

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A single data centre in a grid-constrained location could hold up the delivery of thousands of new homes



In many areas, this vast thirst for energy is coming ahead of energy infrastructure, creating a backlog of grid connection requests. When data centres secure grid connections, there can be implications for other developments. This played out in West London in 2022, when the completion of over 5,000 homes was delayed due to grid constraints caused by unprecedented demand from data centres. The London Assembly has estimated that a 'typical' one will use as much energy as around 100,000 households.⁵ This means that a single data centre in a grid-constrained location could hold up the delivery of thousands of new homes. And because data centre operators want to locate facilities close to economic and financial centres, competition for power with other forms of development is bound to continue.

To avoid these constraints, an increasing number of data centres are seeking to fuel their operations from on-site gas power stations, creating substantial new demand for fossil fuels. A recent article in *The Times* revealed that seven data centres have been granted gas connections so far, and that data centre developers have made a staggering 113 applications for gas connections within a two-year period. This could generate a fossil-fuel demand equivalent to heating 1.3 million homes.⁶

The sheer scale of the energy need makes the feasibility of on-site renewables particularly challenging. The proposal for the Ealing data centre included a vast installation of solar panels, but Foxglove estimates that this will produce 'less than one ten thousandth of the data centre's total electricity demand.'⁷

Water under pressure

Data centres also require vast quantities of water to feed their cooling systems. Thames Water suggest that a large-scale facility could place a demand on water resources of between

Time and tide

4 and 19 million litres of water per day – enough to supply between 28,000 and 132,000 households.⁸ Here again, location is key, as work by Global Action Plan reveals that 84% of proposed data centres are in areas that either are already water-stressed, or are predicted to be by 2040.

Not all data centres are equally water intensive, as it depends on the cooling technology employed at specific sites, but the Environment Agency has expressed concern about AI and water resource management, and the pace at which water infrastructure enhancements can be delivered.⁹ It is also frustrated by a lack of information on water consumption provided by data centre operators, indicating a concerning gap in the understanding of water use in operation.

Hidden carbon

The explosion in energy demand from data centres poses an evident challenge for meeting the UK's legally binding net zero target. Yet how the resulting carbon emissions are accounted for remains far from clear. The government position is that data centre demand is factored into electricity forecasts, which aligns with net zero through grid decarbonisation. But as we have seen, infrastructure is already playing catch-up to meet demand. It is also concerningly unclear whether data centres providing their own on-site power from fossil fuels is accounted for in the carbon budgets.

Where estimates of carbon emissions from AI have been made, the projections have been found to be wildly underestimated by developers and government. In April 2026, the government significantly revised its estimates up from below 0.05% of the UK's emissions in 2035 to between 0.9% and 3.4% over 10 years from 2025 to 2035. This was a result of campaign groups querying discrepancies in the estimates of energy demand being used by different government departments.

It has also emerged that data centre developments have underplayed their emissions in planning documents. In the case of Elsham data centre in North Lincolnshire, its *Carbon Footprint Statement*¹⁰ estimates that its emissions will peak at

just over one million tCO₂-eq (tonnes of CO₂ equivalent) in 2035. It states that this figure represents around 0.1% of the UK's 'annual' carbon budget, and therefore classifies it as 'not significant'.

Calculating emissions on individual data centre proposals in isolation is deeply flawed



Campaign group Foxglove has questioned these figures, suggesting the assessment has been calculated using the UK's five-year carbon budgets rather than annual quotas (which don't exist). This means that the annual emissions may represent more than 0.5% of the UK's carbon budget per year – five times the figure stated in the planning document – and that's just for one data centre. This highlights that calculating emissions on individual data centre proposals in isolation is deeply flawed. By this measure, nearly seven million tCO₂-eq of emissions over eight years produced by just one data centre could be classified as 'not significant'.

These implications are now being investigated by the Environmental Audit Committee, which is concerned that 'there is no mention of data centres in the Climate Change Committee's *Seventh Carbon Budget* and its associated documents.'¹¹

Data centres appear to be circumventing scrutiny over their emissions on two fronts. First, the planning system does not require robust carbon assessment or consideration of the cumulative impact of developments; second, some operators are bypassing the national grid with on-site fossil fuel power, thereby sidestepping the UK's decarbonisation strategy. This highlights the planning system's inability to align data centre development with legally binding national climate goals. There is also a clear question raised about whether the planning system offers a strong enough basis for refusal on the grounds of high carbon emissions.

Towards a strategic response

It is clear that the ability to manage AI's burgeoning energy demand within our planetary boundaries requires strategic consideration. At the very least, there needs to be transparency through robust projections and mandatory reporting on water and energy use and carbon emissions.

There is sense in identifying AI Growth Zones in areas that meet the needs of the sector and where grid capacity is not a constraint. And while five of these have been designated across the UK, this has not halted a cascade of speculative applications for data centres, mainly concentrated in the southeast of England, where other development and resource pressures are felt most acutely.

The combination of an emerging market jostling for 'first mover advantage' and the permissive regime set by government, creates significant pressure to grant data centre consents. The upcoming National Policy Statement on data centres will have a difficult job in squaring the circle of carbon emissions, resource constraints and pressure to support industry demand; it is unlikely to offer a route to a more strategic and coordinated approach to data centre deployment.

In the absence of this, planners can merely take rearguard action. This undermines the capacity of local government to manage land and resources sustainably. It also limits their ability to direct different forms of growth to the areas it is most needed, where it can be best accommodated, and where it can serve the most pressing needs of communities.

Celia Davis is Senior Projects and Policy Manager at the TCPA. With thanks to Owen Epsley at Global Action Plan for their help with this article. For more information visit www.globalactionplan.org.uk/our-work/big-tech/climate-vs-big-tech/data-centres

Notes

- 1 'CO₂ from data centres could be "hundreds of times" higher than thought'. Webpage. Carbon Brief, Mar. 2026. www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-co2-from-uk-data-centres-could-be-hundreds-of-times-higher-than-thought/
- 2 'How the UK's plans for AI could derail net zero – the numbers explained'. Loughborough University, 17 Jan. 2025. www.lboro.ac.uk/research/digital-decarbonisation/news/how-the-uks-plans-for-ai-could-derail-net-zero/
- 3 'MPs fear data centre boom could derail Miliband's net zero plans'. BBC News, Feb. 2026. www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yjr9mp92po
- 4 'London council approves data centre using power for half a million homes'. Foxglove, Nov. 2025. www.foxglove.org.uk/2025/11/07/london-council-approves-data-centre-using-power-for-half-a-million-homes/
- 5 *Gridlocked: how planning can ease London's energy constraints*. London Assembly, Dec. 2025. www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/london-assembly-work/london-assembly-publications/gridlocked-how-planning-can-ease-londons-electricity-constraints
- 6 'UK's first major AI data centre on collision course with net zero'. *The Times*, 15 Apr. 2026. www.thetimes.com/business/companies-markets/article/gas-supply-data-centre-net-zero-7s7kqzpr0
- 7 See note 4, above
- 8 'Data centres: are our heads in the cloud?' Friends of the Earth, Oct. 2025. <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/data-centres-are-our-heads-cloud>
- 9 *Policy paper 5. Taking action on other significant water-using sectors and emerging demands*. Environment Agency, Apr. 2026. www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-framework-for-water-resources-2025-water-for-growth-nature-and-a-resilient-future/5-taking-action-water-for-the-environment-national-framework-for-water-resources-2025
- 10 *Carbon Footprint Statement – Review of Scope 2 Emissions: Elsham Tech Park – Proposed Data Centre Development*. Found Digital, Oct. 2025. https://m.northlincs.gov.uk/pl_open?REF_NUM_PARAM=PA/2025/643&PK_PARAM=2309095&token=f5c384b00fc4211a88fcbb5157837a38f2c725dd
- 11 T Perkins: *Data centres and the Seventh Carbon Budget*. Letter. Environmental Audit Committee, 11 Feb. 2026. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/51659/documents/286148/default/>

In 1990s Birmingham, a group of women came together to campaign for change in a city built for men. **Debbie Humphry** and **Sue Brownill** share some lessons from their experiences

Women's health and participation in planning

The TCPA has long campaigned around the impact of the built environment on health outcomes. However, aspects of this relationship can remain hidden. This article focuses on a group who came together in Birmingham in 1989 to campaign for a city that would meet the needs of women. It reveals two important findings for healthy cities that remain relevant today: first, that the built environment, particularly if it is unsafe, can impact women's health; and second, that the process of women's collective action around planning can itself bring potential health benefits.

The impact of the built environment on health outcomes has long been recognised. Way back in 1898, TCPA founder Ebenezer Howard was advocating for an antidote to 'dark satanic mills', while in this century, *The Marmot Review* highlighted the role of the built environment in promoting or restricting healthy lifestyles.¹ However, the gender dimensions of this relationship remain underexplored – even though research shows that men and women experience the built environment differently; and despite decades of action by women to improve urban spaces.²

Women in the centre

One example of this activism is the Birmingham for People (BfP) Women's Group, who campaigned from 1989 to the mid-1990s for a city that put women's demands at the centre. Key to their work was an emphasis on safety. The city had been redeveloped in the 1970s to meet the demands of the male commuting businessman, rather than the everyday needs of the women who lived and worked there. This was manifested most prominently in the proliferation of dark, dangerous and disorienting subways under an inner-city ring road, which pedestrians had to access by steps.

Recent reports have highlighted the impact of unsafe spaces on women's physical and mental health,³ but women have been aware of this for decades. From 2022 to 2024, we conducted historical and archival participatory research with the BfP Women's Group.⁴ Their work has implications for health and is still relevant today.

The group emerged from a broader community campaign called Birmingham for People (BfP), who were advocating for a more people-friendly redevelopment of Birmingham city centre. The women involved realised at the very first meeting that their voices and concerns were not being heard. In response, they set up a sister group, which for the next five years worked relentlessly to push for women's needs to be recognised and met by the city planners.

Great Charles Street
Queensway,
Birmingham:
in the 1990s
the BfP
Women's Group
campaigned for
underpasses
such as this one
to be better lit
for safety

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Women's health and participation in planning

Women's health and wellbeing was central to the work of the BfP Women's Group. On the one hand, they focused on making the city's public spaces and transport safer for women, such as calling for the subways, multi-storey car parks and bus stops to be better lit; and on the other hand, they attended to the physical needs of women, pushing for more breastfeeding areas and public toilets.

One BfP Women's Group member, Tonia Clark, explains how the focus on safety incorporated both the physical and emotional, and was connected to women's typical role as carers:

'We did a lot of work on community safety – both feelings of safety and the changes needed to the built environment to make them actually safer. This was central to health in terms of a lower risk of attack or rape. We looked at physical space in terms of safety and I think feelings of wellbeing were part of this. When women have a voice in planning and in urban design they will design spaces that improve wellbeing – partly I think because of their need to create positive spaces for their children and dependent elders.'

The group were active at a time when many councils, including in Birmingham, were setting up women's units, and when national advocacy groups, such as the Women's Design Service, were operating. Karen Garry was the first paid worker for the group, and the central remit of her job was to build relationships with the city council and influence its policies. She worked with its community safety unit and the planning and architecture department, supported by the council's newly established women's unit.

Safe estates for women

As well as the focus on making the city centre more accessible, the group were active on housing estates. Karen worked with Jeanette Arregger, who was seconded from the council as a community architect, on the Bloomsbury estate in Nechells, then undergoing regeneration. Karen describes it as: 'a typical 1960s estate. Lots of dead-end alleys, lots of overhanging bushes. Lots of lighting that's not working. Lots of steps, lots of

underpasses.' The estate already had a resident-led management board, but again this was dominated by men, so Karen and Jeanette pulled together a group of women residents to form the Safe Estates for Women (SEW) group. Karen describes their approach:

'We walked around the estate, and the women mapped it, and they said "these are areas that we go to, these are areas that we don't go to. This is where we'll let our children play." And they did it from their point of view.'

To ensure the women's views translated into action, Karen and Jeanette built strong relationships between SEW and the city planning department, as well as with local service providers, such as the police, the council's community safety unit, highways, lighting and maintenance teams, and with councillors, who they showed around the estate. Jeanette describes the women 'going around with clipboards, finding all

☺
Women residents performing a safety audit at the Bloomsbury estate in Nechells, Birmingham

© Birmingham for People Women's Group



Women's health and participation in planning

the nasty areas on the estate that were just unsafe basically'. Karen recalls that 'they used to report lights going out and uneven paving slabs and all that tasking kind of thing. And they did get changes on the estate as a result of their work.'

The methods developed on the estate resulted in a safety audit tool used by women across the city to gather evidence themselves about their environment and lobby for change. The women's work led to the setting up of a more strategic city-wide body called the Women's Safety Initiative (WSI), which brought together women representing various organisations across the city, along with key agencies. This cross-sectoral group was able to push effectively for women's perspectives to be taken on board in policy decision-making, ultimately contributing to the breaking up of the inner-city ring road with surface-level crossings.

The wellbeing benefits of activism

From the start, however, it was also apparent that the processes of involvement and advocacy brought other potential health benefits. Group members spoke of how important their work was for positively reinforcing their self-confidence and wellbeing, and indeed how important community activism was for women's health in general. Polly Feather, a volunteer, says:

'My over-riding belief is that most forms of community and grass-roots engagement and activism, where people who perceive themselves as being 'without a voice' do actually acquire a voice and make themselves heard, are health-giving to those involved. By 'health' in this context I mean mostly mental health. Any improvement in self-esteem and self-confidence is by definition a strengthening process, even leaving aside the possible beneficial outcomes that the activism has been aiming for.'

Through her experiences as a community architect on the Bloomsbury estate, Jeanette Arregger joined BfP Women's Group as a volunteer, and she reflects on the importance of being part of a women-only group for her own health. Throughout her career she had undiagnosed ADHD and says

she struggled to make her voice heard, especially in groups and committees, and in the context of a male-dominated patriarchal society:

'I was terrified of saying the "wrong thing" and found those situations extremely stressful. Birmingham for People Women's Group offered a supportive group where my ideas were listened to and taken seriously. Knowing that the group supported my ideas gave me the confidence to set up the Women's Safety Group in Nechells ... I had to attend all-male or male-dominated meetings and raise issues that were not necessarily prioritised. So having a supportive group behind me encouraged me to promote other women too. My mental health must have benefited from their support, as my role as community architect was quite an isolated one.'

Prioritising safety in urban planning from early on is crucial to women's long-term health



Jeanette also describes how the Bloomsbury women residents who joined SEW benefited from the support of a local group where they felt safe to express their feelings and share personal situations, as well as their opinions about the public good:

'Some of the women who joined the group struggled with poverty and ill health and the isolation of living on a large housing estate, but gained confidence and optimism from being listened to and seeing small improvements being made to their environment.'

Several of the women went on to take what they had learned with the group into other workplaces – some, like Karen, moving specifically into health.

Linking past and present

Three main issues emerge from this history, which are relevant to those involved in creating healthy places today: first, their work clearly shows that prioritising safety in urban planning from early on is crucial to women's long-term health. This

Women's health and participation in planning

underlines, then and now, the need for women's concerns to be taken into account in the planning process, and the importance of funding and supporting groups that advocate for such change; second, it shows the importance of partnership working between women's groups, councils and other agencies to deliver the changes in the built environment needed to address these demands; and third, it highlights the importance of women's involvement in activism and decision-making for positively reinforcing self-confidence, mental health and wellbeing. We need to learn the lessons from these types of projects and carry them forward.

Debbie Humphry is Research Fellow at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. **Sue Brownill** is Professor Emeritus in Urban Policy and Governance at the School of the Built Environment, Oxford Brookes University. Thanks to all the women who participated in the Spaces of Hope research,⁵ including Jeanette Arregger, Tonia Clark, Polly Feather, Mary Fielding and Jo Townshend. And special thanks to Karen Garry, who made a crucial and exceptional contribution to the BfP Women's Group. Karen sadly died last year. All views expressed are personal.

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- 5 Read more about the research at www.peoplesplans.org/peoplesplans/case-study/feminist-community-planning-in-birmingham

Colin Black asks whether National Highways is quietly reversing the government's promise of 'vision-led' transport planning

Vision-led transport planning: reform or rebranding?

The UK planning system is at a critical juncture in relation to transport. The government has signalled a shift away from 'predict and provide' towards a new era of 'vision-led' transport planning.¹ While this may sound technical, the distinction is simple. Under the old system, transport planners estimate how much traffic a development might generate and then design highway capacity to accommodate it. A vision-led approach starts from a different premise: what kind of place do we want to create? Transport is then designed to support that outcome.

This shift has the potential to reshape how we plan towns, cities and neighbourhoods. But it is not uncontested. Recent positions taken by National Highways suggest an attempt to reinterpret, and ultimately dilute, this transition. Although framed in collaborative and technical language, the practical effect is to pull decision-making back towards the very model the government claims to be leaving behind.

Vision-led transport planning: reform or rebranding?

What is ‘predict and provide’ and why does it matter?

For decades, transport planning for development has relied on forecasting future traffic based on past trends, often using historic trip rates from databases such as TRICS (Trip Rate Information Computer System).² If a development is expected to generate additional peak-period vehicle trips, the surrounding road network is assessed for capacity. Where shortfalls are identified, highway upgrades typically follow.

The limitations of this approach are well established. It assumes that existing travel patterns will continue, driving a steady expansion of road capacity. Where developments generate fewer trips than forecast, the resulting surplus capacity can itself induce additional traffic. Over time, this reinforces car dependency and makes alternative modes harder to prioritise. In short, ‘predict and provide’ plans for the future by extending the past.

What is ‘vision-led’ planning?

Instead of accommodating projected traffic, vision-led planning reverses this logic and begins with desired outcomes: places where daily needs are within a ‘reasonable’ distance mainly accessible by walking or cycling; where public transport is the default, and where streets are safe and attractive. Transport is then designed to support these outcomes through prioritising active travel, constraining road capacity where appropriate, and aligning land use with accessibility.

Crucially, this approach accepts uncertainty. As Homes England guidance³ notes, vision-led planning requires practitioners to ‘grapple with uncertainty’ and test ‘a range of reasonable future scenarios’, rather than relying on a single forecast. It also warns that ‘business as usual’ scenarios can become a backdoor route to car-dependent outcomes. If assumptions about behaviour remain unchanged, so too will the outcomes.

National Highways, as the operator of the Strategic Road Network (SRN), plays a powerful role in development planning. Its 2025 guidance⁴ adopts the language of vision-led planning, but its substance tells a different story. It reinforces National

Highways' central requirement that plans 'must not compromise the SRN's prime function to enable the long-distance movement of people and goods.' This establishes a clear hierarchy: network performance is treated as a fixed priority, rather than one of several objectives to be balanced.

This is not a technical nuance. It reframes vision-led planning as conditional on maintaining traffic flow. In effect, place-based outcomes become secondary to highway performance. The consequences are predictable. Developments must still demonstrate that they will not worsen congestion, typically using modelling rooted in historic trip rates. Where impacts are identified, the response remains focused on capacity enhancement or future-proofing the network. This is not a reinterpretation of vision-led planning; it is a continuation of 'predict and provide' under a different name. What is more concerning is the lack of

☺
Centenary
Square in
Bradford, once
dominated by
traffic, has been
transformed to
deliver a vision
that prioritises
active,
sustainable
movement and
quality of place

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Vision-led transport planning: reform or rebranding?

response to the guidance. Six months on from publication, it remains unchallenged by the Department for Transport (DfT). There has been no clarification, no correction, and no visible attempt to reconcile it with wider policy. This suggests either a lack of urgency or of clarity within government about the role of National Highways in a vision-led system. Neither is reassuring.

This is not a reinterpretation of vision-led planning; it is a continuation of ‘predict and provide’ under a different name



The self-fulfilling forecast

There is a deeper issue beneath this debate: the reliability of the forecasts themselves. Emerging evidence⁵ suggests that transport assessments routinely overestimate peak car trip generation for residential development, in some cases by up to 70% in urban areas. The scale and persistence of this overestimation warrant far greater scrutiny.

The implications are significant. If traffic is consistently over-predicted, then highway capacity is consistently over-provided. That additional capacity then induces further traffic, reinforcing the very patterns policy is attempting to change. In effect, the system risks solving problems that may be overstated while simultaneously creating new ones.

The consequences are already visible. Even where developments are designed around sustainable travel, there is often pressure to include ‘backstop’ highway interventions if traffic exceeds expectations. Homes England identifies this as a key risk: that schemes revert to ‘predict and provide’ despite a vision-led framework. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle. The possibility of higher traffic justifies additional capacity, which in

turn makes higher traffic more likely. It also makes the system slower, more complex, and more risk-averse. Developers are required to test multiple scenarios, satisfy conflicting expectations, and commit to costly mitigation that may never be needed. The result is a system that works against the delivery of genuinely place-led development.

Reframing the role of evidence

At the heart of this debate is a question about evidence. Traffic models are assumed to offer precision, but their assumptions are increasingly out of step with policy objectives. Vision-led planning does not discard modelling, but it changes its role. Instead of predicting a single outcome, it explores a range of futures and tests how interventions might shape places and desired behaviours.

☑
'Predict and provide' in practice: housing planned around the road, not the other way round
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Vision-led transport planning: reform or rebranding?

There is also a clear irony. Vision-led approaches are frequently criticised for lacking evidence, yet the traditional model has rarely been subjected to equivalent scrutiny. If transport assessments systematically overestimate demand, the evidential foundation of 'predict and provide' is far weaker than often assumed.

This points to the need for a more critical approach. Models should inform decisions, not dictate them. Greater emphasis should be placed on observed outcomes, monitoring, and iterative learning.

Vision-led planning will not fail because the idea is wrong. It will fail because the system was never willing to let go of the past



A need for alignment

For vision-led planning to succeed, policy, guidance and practice must align. At present, they do not. National policy promotes place-based outcomes. Yet key parts of the system, including the framework governing National Highways, remain focused on maintaining and expanding network capacity. This is not just inconsistency. It is a structural barrier.

Without reform of *Circular 01/2022*⁶ and National Highways' operating framework, vision-led planning will continue to be filtered through a capacity-led lens. The result will be compromised outcomes and continued reliance on outdated assumptions.

In the meantime, clearer direction is urgently needed. National Highways, DfT and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) must align their approaches. The long-promised planning practice guidance on vision-led transport planning will be a critical test of whether this can be achieved.

A critical moment for planning practice

The shift to vision-led planning offers a genuine opportunity to create more sustainable, liveable places. But it also exposes the extent to which systems embedded over three decades are resistant to change.

The question is no longer whether ‘predict and provide’ is flawed. It is whether the planning system is prepared to move beyond it. Without clearer leadership and meaningful reform, there is a real risk that the system will continue to produce the same outcomes under a different label. If that happens, vision-led planning will not fail because the idea is wrong. It will fail because the system was never willing to let go of the past.

Dr Colin Black is a transport planning specialist with Mayer Brown, and is leading a consultation on vision-led planning for the Transport Planning Society working with MHCLG and DfT. All views expressed are personal.

Notes

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Some of the UK's most celebrated townscapes were developed plot by plot. European cities are rediscovering this incremental approach, and **Iqbal Hamiduddin** and **Chris O'Brien** argue that Britain should do the same

Back to the future?



The past decade has seen considerable public discussion over the aesthetic and experiential qualities of new development projects across Britain. Following on from the *Living with Beauty* report in 2020,¹ discourse has tended to focus on how policy could be used to lever ‘better’ design outcomes by setting clearer direction through design coding, guidance and frameworks. Design parameters would be established with the help of local communities, thereby helping to encourage support for new housing.

Despite its many strengths, the report didn’t fully recognise the role of serendipity in the creation of our most celebrated townscapes. The overall vision for Georgian Bath or Edinburgh’s New Town, for example, may have been set out in masterplans; but this was brought to life by a plot-based approach to development, and the many specific decisions on design and finish made by individual developers. As with most pre-industrial urban development, these set-piece townscapes were developed incrementally, plot by plot, creating the interest, surprise and fascination that we celebrate today. Translating a vision into a formal set of planning rules and guidelines is only one element in the creation of high-quality townscapes which are, in reality, a collection of many different decisions and actions.

Europe leading the way

Several European countries began to recognise the placemaking importance of plot-based development after the Second World War. The city of Freiburg in Germany was a very early adopter, using the approach to recreate its bomb-damaged Altstadt (old town); while the Dutch 1960s protests against monotonous housing schemes led to the creation of a national funding programme for *experimentele woningbouw* (experimental housing projects) in 1968.

From these early precedents, municipal authorities in the Netherlands and Southern Germany became familiar with the idea of using more granular approaches to urban development that encouraged individual and collective households to commission their own homes. Municipalities began to create masterplans for schemes containing individual development



A street in Westerkwartier, Delft, built plot-by-plot under a Dutch ‘plot passport’ system

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Back to the future?

plots, subject to specific design guidance set out in a 'plot passport', which created a system of rapid approval. The plots were prepared with services and essential infrastructure, which allowed for quick development by individuals and groups. This resulted in new neighbourhood and settlement-scale schemes, such as at Westerkwartier in Delft, Netherlands, and the French Quarter in Tübingen, Germany, being built rapidly with distinctive place identity.

The land history, socio-cultural context and structuring of the development industries in Southern Germany and the Netherlands makes this more devolved approach to development easier to bring forward. However, the Graven Hill self-build village in Oxfordshire and the King's Cross redevelopment in London show two different approaches to creating plot-based development in the UK. In Graven Hill a masterplan and plot passport system was created using a local development order on an ex-Ministry of Defence site; at King's Cross, the master developer Argent developed the scheme through dozens of long leasehold concessions to individual developers.



⌂
Edinburgh's Old Town, where centuries of plot-based development created the layered, varied townscape widely celebrated today

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The case for developing differently

Britain already has the means to undertake plot-based development (PBD), so why is this approach so rarely used? Access to development land is a key factor. From the Industrial Revolution, a paternalistic system of housing provision emerged, where urban homes were increasingly not developed by residents themselves. The practice of estate development became the established norm through the 20th century, with land sold to single developers for pattern-book residential schemes. Only exceptionally have more visionary landowners deviated from this comfortable and predictable pathway.

Plot-based development naturally creates the urban density that supports mixed-use neighbourhoods



Against the backdrop of a UK housing crisis, there are three principal arguments for taking a plot-based approach to development. First, it is part of the essential DNA of our towns and cities. It can be considered to be a primary agent of good placemaking, producing individuality in the design and finish of buildings within a scheme that generates interest, a sense of conviviality and continuity in time that avoids pastiche. This individuality can be relatively subtle – a marginally different roofline from adjacent buildings, or slightly different window styles, for example.

The PBD approach can also successfully embed more avant-garde architectural styles into a classical urban pattern; a particularly effective way to create new urban quarters that maintain place character and intensity of experience. Plot-based development naturally creates the urban density that supports mixed-use neighbourhoods, which in turn reduces the need to travel and encourages more sustainable ways of living.²

The second argument concerns the opportunities for diversifying development approaches. Plot-based development encourages resident commissioning of housing – individually or collectively – thereby promoting self-build or collaborative

Back to the future?

housing development approaches. This, in turn, helps to sustain local and regional developers who are often limited to hunting for scraps of land left aside by the major developers. Yet PBD also includes opportunities for major developers acting in a master developer role, as Argent demonstrated at London's King's Cross.

Third, plot-based development allows residents greater control in shaping their living environment, at both the domestic and neighbourhood levels. There is abundant evidence indicating the latent demand for self-build and the collective commissioning of housing in the UK. Yet despite 2016's Right to Build legislation, opportunities for self-builders to create a home within their current community remain scarce. However, in Europe, collaborative models of housing development, including cohousing, cooperatives and collective commissioning, such as Germany's *Baugruppen* (building group) or its Dutch equivalent, *Collectief Particulier Opdrachtgeverschap* (collective private ownership), are routinely used to create plot-based development at high urban density.

The good news is that the legislative provisions to enable plot-based development in Britain already exist and are in use



The good news is that the legislative provisions to enable plot-based development in Britain already exist and are in use. The key policy instrument is the local development order (LDO), which was originally developed to allow a zoning-style, rapid approval system for commercially active areas, such as industrial estates, ports or enterprise zones. Although a local plan (local development plan in Wales) can be used to enact PBD as a mode of development in a given locality, an LDO is helpful for creating a detailed masterplan that sets out design guidance for each plot within a scheme. This creates the



Plot-based development in Brecon, Mid Wales

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legislative basis for a rapid permission system for self-builders and community developers. It removes the need for a development site under multiple ownership to be assembled under a single owner, with the concentration of development risk and financial resources that this would entail; it also avoids the risk of the public ending up with another 'cookie-cutter' housing estate.

A Welsh test case

Brecon in Mid Wales has a seven-acre site east of the town centre which has been identified as a significant development opportunity. There is a risk that a single developer could create place-less, monofunctional housing here, but Policy 2 of *Future Wales 2040* explicitly encourages a plot-based approach to development, to encourage diversity.

Use of an LDO would allow the local planning authority (LPA) to generate both an overall masterplan for the area and detailed development guidelines for each plot, putting it in a design leadership role. Combined with plot-based

Back to the future?

development, this would create a two-step design process, offering greater opportunity for independent input and scrutiny, while opening up competitive tendering for individual plots. This would foster the kind of design-led, competitive approach seen elsewhere in Europe. By taking greater responsibility for design parameters, the LPA would inevitably take on some additional cost of masterplan development – and therefore some design risk. However, this needs to be set against the overall benefits of early engagement with local people on masterplanning, and opportunities for greater community involvement in development.

From aspiration to action

In Britain, there is increasing awareness of the potential for plot-based development to become a force for good placemaking. However, it has proved extremely difficult to translate its latent potential into the types of schemes that are becoming increasingly widespread across Europe. As we have shown, it is perfectly possible to undertake plot-based development under existing UK planning rules – as illustrated at Graven Hill and King's Cross – and relatively minor tweaks to policy could smooth the way to building better places in ways that would have numerous benefits for residents and communities.

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Health impact assessment can be a powerful tool for integrating health into planning, but it needs to be better supported in policy, suggest **Iurii Beshpalov**, **Danielle Sinnett** and **Heather Rumble**

Making the most of health impact assessment

Health is a vital factor that impacts our quality of life. At the same time, the built and natural environment is a key determinant of health,^{1,2,3} meaning that planning can play an essential role in enhancing people's health outcomes. Although planning and public health have a shared history, the need for integration of health into urban planning has become more obvious in recent years. This has resulted in an expansion of 'healthy places' policies and the use of health impact assessment (HIA) to ensure that new developments support health and wellbeing.

Given the increase in the requirements for HIAs, we thought it would be useful to examine a sample of them to understand which dimensions of healthy places are covered well. We reviewed 13 HIAs found via an internet search: eight assessed the potential health impacts of planning policy documents (such as local plans), and five assessed the impacts of specific proposed developments. The local authorities that performed or commissioned HIAs for policies were Bath and

Making the most of health impact assessment

North East Somerset, Worcestershire, the London Borough of Wandsworth, Leicester, Birmingham, Bridgend, Croydon and Ipswich; the development locations were Bristol (two HIAs), Stockport, St. Albans and Derby.

Key themes of HIAs

To ensure that our evaluation was objective and systematic, we appraised the content of the HIAs against the themes from *Spatial Planning for Health* (SPfH),⁴ a national framework published by Public Health England that is based on evidence regarding the relationship between health and the built and natural environment. It outlines five broad themes: neighbourhood design, housing, food environment, natural and sustainable environment, and transport.

For each document, we assessed whether the broad themes were included, along with the specific features (such as active travel infrastructure and access to greenspace) that were required by the policy or assessed in the development HIA.

Overall, each HIA covers many of the features included in SPfH, with the following objectives being the most prevalent:

- encourage physical activity;
- encourage active travel;
- improve air quality;
- access to public transport;
- access to high-quality open or green spaces;
- access to local employment and training opportunities;
- access to healthy food;
- adaptation to climate change;
- providing diverse forms and types of housing;
- access to social infrastructure and healthcare services; and
- quality of urban design.

Nevertheless, we found that some HIAs – especially development ones – do not consider the five broad themes in depth, even when they include many of them. Our findings on how each theme from SPfH is covered are as follows:

1: Neighbourhood design

Both policy and development HIAs tend to focus on walkability and access to active travel infrastructure. The features covered most are mixed-use developments and access to amenities; encouraging active travel via walking and cycling infrastructure; facilitating mobility for older adults; and improving access to public transport. However, street connectivity, compact neighbourhoods, and public realm improvements are not widely covered.

2: Housing

The policy HIAs more explicitly emphasise the need for good-quality, warm and energy-efficient housing, whereas the development HIAs often include emphasis on provision of diverse forms and types, such as mixed-use and affordable housing. None of the reviewed HIAs consider refurbishment, which may be due to their focus on new development. Similarly, indoor air quality was missing from 10 of the HIAs, and affordable housing for vulnerable groups was missing from 11.

✓
King's Cross,
London: a
mixed-use
development
that supports
walking, cycling
and access to
public space
—
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Making the most of health impact assessment

3: Food environment

This theme is almost fully included in all of the HIAs we assessed, but it is often overlooked in the development HIAs. The main focus in this theme is on increasing access to healthier food for the general population and reducing exposure to unhealthy food environments, such as overconcentration of hot food takeaways. Other aspects included in SPfH, such as retail outlets selling healthy food and increasing access to healthier food in schools, are outside of planning, and may be featured in other local authority policies.

4: Natural and sustainable environment

This theme is considered most frequently in both policy and development HIAs. Most of the aspects are covered well, including improvement of air quality, minimising exposure to air pollution and excessive noise, provision of access to the natural environment, and encouraging physical activity. Flood risk management and green space quality are less well covered.

5: Transport

The HIAs include many aspects included in *Spatial Planning for Health*, such as enhancement of walking and cycling infrastructure; prioritisation of pedestrians and cyclists; encouraging the use of public transport, and improving public realm. However, there is less focus on features that specifically target mobility for different age groups, traffic-calming measures, access to recreational space, and active travel routes to employment and schools.

Use of evidence

The HIAs refer to government publications or reports of international organisations, such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations, to explain policy and site context (including statistics and current health issues) and the relationship between health and the environment. Academic sources are also sometimes used to explain this, suggesting

that it is important that government and non-governmental organisations ensure their evidence reviews and other documents reflect the most recent academic evidence.

Health impact assessment is treated as an additional tool, rather than a systemic approach to public health



What makes a good health impact assessment?

A strong HIA is clearly structured by theme, provides sufficient depth of content and evidence, and includes precise, straightforward requirements for each theme. It also combines various types of evidence, from grey literature, such as non-academic reports and guidance documents, to official publications and academic articles.

A good example of this is the HIA of Frome Gateway Regeneration Project.⁵ At the beginning, it introduces the project and the connection between health, wellbeing and the built environment. It then clearly presents the main purposes of performing the HIA and sets out the themes covered. It also provides context for the area, including demographic, socio-economic and health information. The document goes on to cover all themes from the SPfH with sufficient depth and transparency. For each theme, it provides information on the relevant key emerging local plan policies, the ways the framework is responding to the issues and the requirements and recommendations for developers and planners.

An underused tool

Overall, we found that policy and development HIAs differ from each other substantially, and their application is inconsistent. Health impact assessment is treated as an additional tool, rather than a systematic approach to public health from a planning perspective. However, rigorous health

Making the most of health impact assessment

impact assessment policies can provide a structured framework for integration of health into planning via development HIAs. Therefore, to make HIAs more effective in achieving better health outcomes, they need to be further integrated into the decision-making within the planning process – for example, by being required in planning applications – and supported by robust planning policy.

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Notes

- 1 *Spatial Planning for Health*. Public Health England, 2017. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b59b090e5274a3ff828c70c/spatial_planning_for_health.pdf
- 2 A Renalds, T Smith and P J Hale: 'A Systematic Review of Built Environment and Health'. *Family & Community Health*, 2010, Vol. 33 (1), pp. 68-78. https://journals.lww.com/familyandcommunityhealth/fulltext/2010/01000/A_Systematic_Review_of_Built_Environment_and.9.aspx?casa_token=0labMJyoRjYAAAAA:djGH5tpFB-IOIs5Ry-6goZGiKot4iM7BKaUM3AgfYBfEUTU3sKK7GOERqjKdAw8Y21hqTK82X8DEOII_FZGbBXoaPhG7ZA
- 3 D E Bowler, L M Buyung-Ali, T M Knight and A S Pullin: 'A systematic review of evidence for the added benefits to health of exposure to natural environments'. *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 10, article 456, 2010
- 4 See note 1, above
- 5 *Frome Gateway Health Impact Assessment*. Bristol City Council and TRUUD, Oct. 2023. <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/8005-exa011a-frome-gateway-health-impact-assessment-october-2023/file>

Gavin Parker, Tessa Lynn, John Sturzaker and Matthew Wargent draw from a three-year research project to show how planning can and should do far more to serve deprived communities

Planning for justice at the neighbourhood level

Planning has the potential to improve the quality of life for all, including those living in deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods. In order for this to happen, plans need to be better aligned to the needs and issues in the areas they serve, as well as informing and responding to regional and national goals. In this piece we reflect on community experiences drawn from a three-year research project, *Just Neighbourhoods?*¹ which explores neighbourhood-scale planning activity in areas of deprivation across the UK.

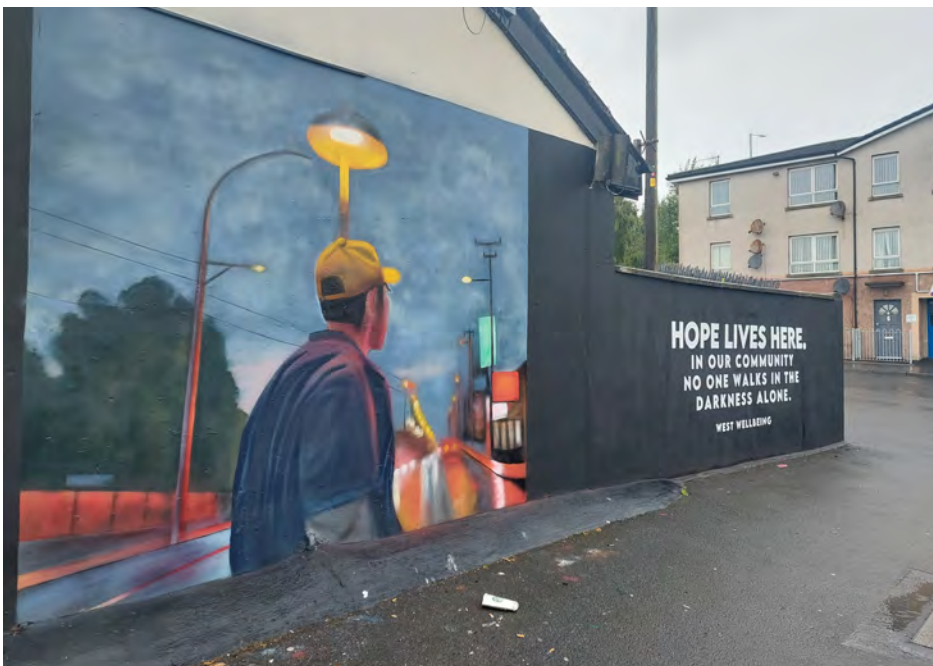
At the heart of the project lies the question of what a 'just' neighbourhood looks like. We reviewed plans, undertook case studies and held meetings and interviews with those active in deprived neighbourhoods. Our findings show that neighbourhood-level plans rarely take direct aim at issues of

Planning for justice at the neighbourhood level

justice and deprivation. Moreover, such questions can be overlooked – obscured in text about, for example, affordable housing – or are scripted to follow the narrow or established requirements of planning authorities and central government, rather than by the communities they are meant to serve.

A rhetoric and reality gap

This situation does not help deprived neighbourhoods. Increasingly, the importance of community engagement, place-based approaches to tackling socio-economic challenges, and interest in social justice have been acknowledged, even promoted, in planning. Yet in practical terms, justice has been neglected. This highlights the lack of impact that a social justice agenda has had in planning over the past 15 years. Notably, the TCPA's 2013 *Planning out Poverty report*² argued that the whole planning system needed to reorient towards social justice goals. And it is worth remembering how, prior to 2012, *Planning Policy Statement 1* in England asserted that plans should seek to reduce social inequality. It is time for such aims to be restored through the *National Planning Policy Framework*



⌂
A mural in Colin, Northern Ireland, created by Dan Kitchener in association with local mental health charity West Wellbeing. It serves both as a tribute and message of support to the community

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(NPPF), as part of a concerted effort to tackle deprivation and spatial injustice³ at the neighbourhood scale; a point we fed into the NPPF consultation that ended in March 2026.

In order to assist in this objective, the terms of engagement and scope of hyper-local plans (i.e. those focused on very specific areas, such as single neighbourhoods) need to be re-examined. Predetermining the scope of plans can constrain community voice and reproduce top-down solutions. They should be co-produced and widened to allow for more expansive work, covering both 'service' issues (such as transport, healthcare and education) as well as economic and physical development priorities. This is an approach that works with what residents already know about their area, and corresponds with 'whole place' policy thinking.⁴

On a basic level, plans need to set down clearly the issues being faced and make explicit links between those issues, policies and action. Communities should be kept informed about how councils and other public bodies can and will respond – and this communication should form part of the planning process. Plans should show what needs to be tackled, as well as what is realistically achievable within existing budgets and timescales. This approach forms part of our research recommendations,⁵ covering plan scope, clarity, the formal recording of issues, and the critical role of community development professionals.⁶

Neighbourhood-scale plans in deprived areas should be mutually agreed, rather than defined by councils and government



Overall, neighbourhood-scale plans in deprived areas should be mutually agreed, rather than defined by councils and government. To help achieve this, existing neighbourhood planning tools can be amended or repurposed and better integrated with strategic planning. Very local planning can help realise objectives and actions that communities have helped to

Planning for justice at the neighbourhood level

shape and genuinely own. Our research shows that this is possible, but not routinely encouraged or integrated into local policy – which is often perceived by residents to take little account of past community activity or reflect their needs and aspirations. This gap can be addressed through working with community partners, intermediaries and council officers in agreed co-production arrangements. This latter concept should feature in policy and guidance.

The bigger picture

Plans therefore need to be better aligned to the needs and issues in the areas they serve. This is not solely a question for the neighbourhood scale though. We should also be asking ourselves how the planning system more generally plays a role in pursuing social justice, particularly in the current context of a lack of public trust and unstable, fragmented politics. The success of the government's planning reform agenda in England also depends on whether communities regard the system as legitimate. Therefore, much greater effort and transparency is needed in plan-making generally.

Care too will be needed to reorient subregional planning to enable spatial and social justice. National planning policy also plays a critical role and should ensure that local knowledge and community priorities will meaningfully shape planning decisions. This requires stronger recognition of co-produced planning processes as important sources of evidence and insight, alongside an overt aim to deliver greater social justice.

Planning for 'Pride in Place'

Linking the above assessment to current policy initiatives, we note that, increasingly, the importance of community engagement and place-based approaches to tackling socio-economic challenges is being acknowledged. The government's £5 billion Pride in Place Programme (PiPP) targets 284 of the most deprived or 'doubly disadvantaged' areas in the UK,⁷ and puts great emphasis on its participatory credentials. The guidance⁸ describes PiPP as the 'flagship communities

programme, which empowers local people to shape the future of their neighbourhood'. It also states that PiPP plans should 'outline the community's overarching vision for change over the next decade ... developed through grassroots engagement to reflect local people's priorities', and promises that 'residents will be supported to identify local needs and make decisions about the future of their neighbourhood.'

Past experience shows us that deploying such a 'project based' approach risks reproducing inequalities, particularly if there is a lack of planning at scale and depth. This raises the question of the role of the planning system and of reinvigorated neighbourhood planning. We need a stronger

✓
Signage for
the Stainforth
Town Deal's
headstocks
remediation
project – part
of wider
regeneration
efforts in this
former mining
community

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Planning for justice at the neighbourhood level

‘whole place’ approach, with planning and regeneration working together and allowing communities to co-produce; this allows local knowledge to combine with analytical data and processes of careful deliberation. This should culminate in revamped neighbourhood plans that incorporate a new approach for deprived areas.

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Notes

- 1 Read more about the Just Neighbourhoods? project at <https://research.reading.ac.uk/justclp/>
- 2 H Ellis and K Henderson: *Planning out poverty: the reinvention of social town planning*. Town and Country Planning Association, 2013
- 3 Spatial (in)justice has been discussed at length; Susan Fainstein posits ‘three hallmarks’ of justice – material equality, diversity and democracy – and argues that planning activity should feature and support these. See S Fainstein: ‘Planning and the Just City’, in *Searching for the Just City*. Routledge, 2009, pp. 39-59.
- 4 See more on ‘whole place’ thinking at www.llanelli-rural.gov.uk/wellbeing/whole-place-plan-2015-2030/; read also about the ‘Total Place’ approach, which looks at spending across the spectrum, at www.futuregovernanceforum.co.uk/2026/03/17/why-total-place-is-vital-for-labours-chance-of-reforming-public-services/
- 5 G Parker, T Lynn, J Sturzaker and M Wargent: *Just Neighbourhoods?* Final report. Nuffield Foundation, Mar. 2026. www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Just-Neighbourhoods-Final-Report.pdf
- 6 For example, see: P Healey: ‘Territory, integration and spatial planning’, in *Territory, identity and spatial planning*. Routledge, 2006, pp. 64-80
- 7 See ‘Pride in Place: funding gaps and capacity challenges’, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Mar. 2026. www.jrf.org.uk/neighbourhoods-and-communities/pride-in-place-funding-gaps-and-capacity-challenges
- 8 *Pride in Place Programme: prospectus*. Guidance. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 20 Mar. 2026. www.gov.uk/government/publications/pride-in-place-programme-prospectus/pride-in-place-programme-prospectus

The return of strategic planning and the introduction of spatial development strategies offers a chance to reimagine how we shape regional growth, suggests **Robert Hayward**

How could we innovate in strategic plans?

📍
Aerial view of Leeds from Middleton Park – the kind of cross-boundary, subregional landscape that spatial development strategies are designed to address

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How could we innovate in strategic plans?

The news of a return to more formal or ‘universal’ strategic planning¹ in 2025 was greeted with relief by planners and the wider development industry. Since its comeback, I have been thinking about how we could innovate in this new era in the form of spatial development strategies (SDSs). This matters now, as relevant authorities are gearing up and getting the foundations in place to start developing their SDSs. There is an opportunity to try something new, be creative and progress plan-making.

The circumstances now are perfect for innovation. We have a new plan-making framework in the draft *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF).² This calls for spatial development strategies (SDSs) to be high-level documents focused on strategic, cross-boundary issues, covering a minimum of 20 years (therefore having the potential to go on much longer). Added to this plan framework are the forthcoming changes to environmental impact assessment, with the introduction of environmental outcomes reports and therefore a bespoke framework needed for SDSs. There is also



A landscape of competing land uses – housing, farming, infrastructure and nature – the trade-offs spatial development strategies must balance

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the growing prominence of the digital planning and design agenda, which has been facilitated by the government's PropTech Innovation Fund.³ And finally, there is a series of national programmes and objectives to work towards at the strategic scale and timeframe, like the *Land Use Framework*,⁴ the 10-year infrastructure strategy⁵ and the *Strategic Spatial Energy Plan*.⁶

Thinking at the right scale

How could we innovate, then, with this context in mind? In particular, what new methods and approaches could be used to progress and improve how we make SDSs across subregions in the new era? One way to start is to think about how we develop them. In doing this we should be mindful that they are strategies and not plans: they set direction rather than specifying detail. To determine that direction we could explore different spatial patterns of growth – as the NPPF quite rightly requires – and see how these connect with different objectives at the subregional and national scale.

Associated with this is the importance of location, and the factors relating to that, such as flood risk and connectivity, rather than the detail associated with development itself, such as access and heritage impact. These two distinct considerations often get muddled together when considering location. And related to this is the opportunity to move away, in the first instance, from options that focus on standalone development types, like urban intensification and new settlements. Instead we could focus on the trade-offs between different land uses at the strategic scale, such as how to balance housing, food production and nature recovery across a region. How we present these strategies is open for exploration and creativity too, particularly in conveying these in different ways and for different audiences – less around detailed boundaries and more about broader views.

An evidence base fit for the long term

Supporting the development of SDSs will require a robust evidence base. However, the longer the strategy period, the greater the uncertainty; therefore strategies and supporting evidence will need to reflect this and move away from focusing

How could we innovate in strategic plans?

on short-term deliverability and towards developing longer-term opportunity and potential. Added to this is the much larger geography involved, and the need for the SDS to be high-level. This then creates an interesting opportunity to rethink the process of developing evidence and to craft something bespoke for long-term strategies rather than adapting approaches designed for shorter-term local plans.

So, to conclude, there are lots of elements at play which could stimulate innovation, but there is also the easy option of simply rolling forward standard practices. The next few years of developing spatial development strategies will be the testbed for innovation. There is a great opportunity to try new approaches and methods – and we should embrace it.

Robert Hayward is a Senior Associate at David Lock Associates.
All views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *English Devolution White Paper*. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), 16 Dec. 2024. www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper
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- 3 'PropTech Innovation Fund'. Webpage. Local Digital. www.localdigital.gov.uk/digital-planning/proptech/funding/
- 4 *Land Use Framework*. Policy paper. Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 18 Mar. 2026. www.gov.uk/government/publications/land-use-framework
- 5 *UK Infrastructure: a 10 Year Strategy*. Policy paper. HM Treasury and National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, 19 Jun. 2025. www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-infrastructure-a-10-year-strategy
- 6 'Strategic Spatial Energy Plan'. Webpage. National Energy System Operator (NESO). www.neso.energy/what-we-do/strategic-planning/strategic-spatial-energy-planning-ssep

Design matters

After years of tinkering, the latest draft of England's national planning policy finally seems to be getting design right, argues **Matthew Carmona**, who sets out what works and what's still missing



Matthew Carmona

A long and winding road to clarity

For many years I have tracked the twists and turns of national policy on design quality.¹ A recurring theme has been the persistent inability on the part of government to set out a clear and confident national ambition for design without overcomplicating it, hedging it with caveats, or introducing contradictions that ultimately undermine its effectiveness.

Advocates of high design quality are always met with the familiar chorus of objections: that decent standards will somehow impede development, or that design is just too subjective. These arguments are simply wrong, as The Place Alliance's recent research report *Tackling Inequality in Housing Design Quality*² has once again demonstrated. So against that backdrop, it was with genuine surprise – and some delight – that I read the most recent revisions to the design paragraphs of the draft *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF).³ They exhibit a clarity of ambition and structure rarely seen. It is worth looking at them closely.

How to judge the changes?

Like a good academic, I need some criteria to judge the changes against. To find them, we only need to look back to 2024, when the last consultation on the NPPF was launched. On that occasion it was to roll back (among other things) the final edits made under the then Secretary of State Michael Gove. These amounted to the liberal insertion of the words, 'beauty' and 'beautiful' throughout the design paragraphs. Frustrated by the constant tinkering and the inconsistencies it produced, I proposed my own redrafting of the current eleven design paragraphs. The principles underpinning this redrafting were simple, and can be used now to judge the latest changes.

First, the design section of the new NPPF should address these three fundamentals:

- to establish unequivocally a high level national ambition for design quality;
- to set out clearly how that ambition should be operationalised through the planning system; and
- to cross-reference and empower national guidance that provides a more detailed design framework

A structured framework

In one important respect, the proposed new NPPF is different from its predecessors. It now sets out explicit national decision-making policies, structured in a way that feels closer to the sorts of policies found in local plans. At the same time, these policies remain non-statutory material considerations, with government stepping back from the statutory national development management policies envisaged in the *Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023*. Even so, the new structure matters. Instead of a continuous narrative, the document is organised into distinct policies. In Chapter 14, 'Achieving well designed places', this results in four policies: **DP1**: A strategy for design; **DP2**: Local design guides, local

design codes and masterplans; **DP3**: Key principles for well designed places; and **DP4**: The design process.

As elsewhere in the proposed framework, plan-making comes first (DP1 and DP2), followed by decision-making (DP3 and DP4). Taken together, they do a good job of addressing the second and third fundamentals (operationalising design and empowering guidance). However, the first fundamental (setting out a clear national ambition) is less convincingly addressed. Let's take them in reverse order.

A single national design framework

One of the most welcome changes is the simplification of national design policy and guidance. *The National Design Guide*, the *National Model Design Code* (Parts 1 and 2), and the *Design Process and Tools Planning Practice Guidance* are to be consolidated into a single *Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance*, a draft of which was put out to consultation around the same time as the NPPF.

At its core are seven features of well-designed places, which will now also sit at the heart of the NPPF design chapter. Crucially, the framework states that these principles should be used in the absence of locally produced design policies, guides, codes or masterplans. Together, this creates a coherent and consistent set of principles and a national backstop in cases where nothing else exists.

Making design expectations work in practice

The revised framework is also far clearer about how design ambitions are meant to be delivered through the planning system. It sets out a logical sequence:

- establishing a local design policy framework;
- articulating expectations for key sites through tools such as design codes and masterplans;
- addressing design quality holistically through the seven features; and
- applying these expectations consistently in decision-making, including through design review.

Community engagement remains important, but its emphasis has shifted upstream, towards the preparation of guides, codes

Design matters

and masterplans, rather than being overly concentrated at the application stage. This makes sense. Early engagement is far more effective in shaping an agreed design vision and delivering it efficiently.



Henslow Mews, Cambridge. The draft *National Planning Policy Framework* implicitly encourages beautiful, sustainable, high-quality design such as this, but lacks a bold statement of ambition

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No statement of ambition

Which brings us to the all-important question of national ambition for design. The good news is that the proposed policies avoid the mealy-mouthed contradictions of earlier incarnations, which would extol the virtues of good design in one paragraph only to constrain its meaning in the next. The less good news is that they lack a single, powerful opening statement of intent, such as the one in the current NPPF:

‘The creation of high-quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve. Good design is a key



aspect of sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities.'

This unequivocal declaration is absent in the new draft. One might argue that it is implicit in the more formal, testable policy language and the new guidance. But in a field long-plagued by uncertainty and inconsistency, explicit ambition still matters. A bold opening statement would go a long way to ensure that a strong national design ambition is beyond doubt.

What is still missing?

In 2024, I also identified several omissions from what became the current NPPF. Changes to the new one should remedy this:

1: Beauty and place quality

Following a period in which 'beauty' became a politicised and controversial priority, references to it have now been almost entirely removed from the design paragraphs, surviving only in the broader statement of the planning system's purpose at the start of the proposed new NPPF. This is unfortunate, as research, including my own,⁴ showed that the emphasis on beauty helped raise design ambition nationally.

While there is a danger in fixating on the aesthetic dimension of design, there is also a risk of under-emphasising what is, for most of us, the primary means of understanding and interpreting the qualities of places. The new policy talks about the need to 'create visually attractive, distinctive and characterful development', but as research that I have yet to publish will show, there is something uniquely powerful about the desire for beauty, and having reclaimed the term, it seems a shame to abandon it now.

2: The Nationally Described Space Standard

This statutory guidance⁵ is a critical resource, and in the new framework it has been promoted from a footnote into the main text, although only tentatively. Authorities are warned that they should not seek to adopt standards that cover matters relating to the internal layout of buildings unless they are to implement the *Nationally Described Space Standard*. In other words, it is acceptable to adopt it, but it is not mandatory or even

Design matters

necessarily encouraged. In a policy framework that goes a long way to bringing health centre stage in planning policy (including in design), this remains a glaring omission.

3: Planning versus highways

Perhaps the most persistent obstacle to placemaking is the disconnect between planning and highways. Despite positive language in the new policy – particularly TR4: ‘Street design, access and planning’, which promotes safe, inclusive and attractive streets – highways authorities remain under no obligation to comply. Reference to *Manual for Streets*⁶ is a welcome first, but without stronger alignment, car-dominated environments will continue to undermine place quality.

That said, the framework’s firmer stance on density may force change. For the first time, a recommended density appears: 40 dph (dwellings per hectare) near rail stations, rising to 50 where connectivity is good. This is a major step forward, though still too timid. We know, for example, that development of less than 40 dph is unlikely to support even a regular bus service, so these densities should – by default – be the minimum. Anything less is simply unsustainable and therefore contrary to the very purpose of the planning system – as set out at the start of the proposed NPPF – and its drive to deal more convincingly with climate change.

4: Design quality as a universal requirement

Finally, design expectations are at risk of being treated as optional when the so-called ‘tilted balance’ (the presumption in favour of granting permission where housing supply is inadequate) still applies. While the new framework states that poorly designed development should be refused, experience suggests that housing shortfalls often override this. An explicit statement that design standards apply **always** and to **all** development – not as a discretionary extra – would finally resolve this long-running problem. Perhaps it could be part of the high-level statement of ambition discussed earlier.

A qualified success

The design section of the proposed NPPF is short – just over 1,000 words (down from 1,333 currently) – but its influence will continue to be immense and will increase further when supported by the new and internally consistent *Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance*. A final slight worry, however, is new advice in section PM6c, which states that:

'All plan-makers should, in preparing plans ... not duplicate, substantively restate or modify the content of national decision-making policies unless directed by other policies in this Framework.'

While the design paragraphs encourage the setting out of locally specific design policies, standards, guides and codes, this will be difficult without also covering the sorts of fundamentals contained in the national policy and guidance. A nutty challenge for policy-writers, but one that I am sure can be overcome.

Overall, despite some reservations, this latest iteration of the NPPF represents a significant step forward. It is clearer, more coherent, and more confident than anything that has gone before. On the long and winding road that is national policy on design, it marks genuine progress towards clarity – and for that, it deserves a big tick.

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Notes

- 1 See Matthew Carmona's blog, at <https://matthew-carmona.com>
- 2 See the report at <https://placealliance.org.uk/from-inequality-to-quality/>
- 3 *National Planning Policy Framework: proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system*. Closed Consultation. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), 2 Feb. 2026. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-planning-policy-framework-proposed-reforms-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system
- 4 'Appealing design'. Webpage. Place Alliance. <https://placealliance.org.uk/research/appealing-design>
- 5 *Technical housing standards – nationally described space standard* www.gov.uk/government/publications/technical-housing-standards-nationally-described-space-standard
- 6 *Manual for Streets*. Department for Transport, 2007. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7e0035ed915d74e6223743/pdfmanforstreets.pdf>

Off the rails

Robin Hickman reveals how the case for Heathrow's proposed third runway has been built around notions of economic growth – with environmental and social goals pushed aside



Robin Hickman

Heathrow's proposed third runway: rationality or rationalisation?

Infrastructure provision is often viewed as a technically rational, even neutral, process, with an assumption that projects are planned to achieve wide-ranging public policy goals. In practice, infrastructure planning is better understood as a contested and political activity, reflecting the values dominant politically and in society at any given time.

In recent decades, neoliberalism (the belief that free markets and private ownership deliver better outcomes than

state provision) has become the prevailing ideology shaping UK politics. It seeks to maximise private profit through market mechanisms such as privatisation, deregulation and financialisation (including using infrastructure as a private asset). These market-based approaches have become normalised, as if they 'naturally' help to achieve public policy goals.

Strategic aviation planning in the UK reflects this context, specifically the current proposal for a third runway at Heathrow. This is put forward by Heathrow Airport Holdings (HAH), the operator of the airport, and is planned to be operational by 2035, subject to planning approval and implementation.

Expansion of capacity at Heathrow was justified over 10 years ago, through the 2015 Airports Commission, which still provides the national government's approved view on strategic aviation capacity. The current Labour administration supports expansion of Heathrow, as well as at Gatwick, Stansted, Luton and many other regional airports – a huge bet on aviation as a catalyst for their central focus on economic growth. Yet, there are at least three problems with this position: first, the links between aviation growth and national



The flight path for Heathrow passes directly over residential areas in Hounslow and the noise and air pollution impacts will increase as the airport expands

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economic growth are not as clear as envisaged; second, even if economic growth does result, the distribution of beneficiaries is unclear; and, perhaps most importantly, third, there are significant adverse environmental and social impacts of aviation growth.

'Sustainable aviation' – perhaps the ultimate environmental oxymoron



The Airports Commission was put forward as 'independent', yet it included members with only pro-aviation-growth views, and none from dissenting environmental or community groups. Its recommendation offered an impossible narrative of 'sustainable aviation' – perhaps the ultimate environmental oxymoron – prioritising growth over the management of aviation capacity.

The proposed growth in aviation is huge. A third runway at Heathrow could lead to an increase in flights from 480,000 to 720,000 annually (equating to an increase from around 90 million passengers to 140 million each year). This is also not a small extension – it is increasing the airport's capacity by over 50 per cent. The suggested economic benefits, as put forward by the Airports Commission, are £55 billion for passengers (this assumes that business travellers will continue to fly at their current rates, which is disputed, and that tourists gain similar economic benefits from flying). There is also an estimated increase in national GDP of between £131 billion and £147 billion over 60 years, which seems marginal over this length of time, and is likely to be massively offset by the adverse environmental impacts.

Not mentioned, of course, are the profits that go to the operators of Heathrow and their shareholders – they are the most significant beneficiaries. The use of the Airports Commission was simply an attempt to depoliticise the debate, prioritising estimated economic benefits over the very

significant adverse impacts of aviation growth – climate change, noise (particularly acute at Heathrow), air pollution and social inequity.

How Heathrow ended up in private hands

The current framing of aviation policy builds on an interesting history of aviation growth at Heathrow. This is best understood through the political context (or ‘conditions’)¹ structuring these decisions – specifically who is involved in making them and whose interests they serve.

From public asset to private investment

Heathrow Airport Holdings’ ownership and operation of the airport results from a lengthy process of privatisation and wider deregulation of aviation planning, pursued in the UK from the 1980s. The British Airports Authority (BAA) was privatised in 1987 through a public share flotation, essentially becoming a state-supported private company. This was part of a wide-ranging programme of privatisation of national assets during the 1980s and 1990s, reflecting the political-economic ideology of the then Conservative government.

At the time, BAA was responsible for airport operations at Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted and some Scottish airports. The initial privatisation of BAA raised just £1.2 billion for the UK government, massively undervaluing the airports and the income they generate. The government then sold its ‘golden share’ in BAA in 2003, which had guaranteed protection against a private takeover. From this point onwards, the neoliberalisation of aviation was facilitated – and the airports could be used to generate private profit. The Airports Commission, as you might expect, describes this in positive terms:

‘Increased liberalisation in the aviation sector has enhanced competition between carriers, creating opportunities for market growth and making aviation more accessible, as route networks expand and fares decrease.’²

But this is the tired, neo-classical economics narrative used to justify profit maximisation. It specifically overlooks the motivations of the airport operators, who are essentially the asset managers.

Heathrow became more focused on commercial income from the early 2000s, including through aviation revenue (such as charges for landing, parking and passenger/freight handling) and retailing. Employment was outsourced and labour costs reduced – practices often with racialised dimensions, given that much of Heathrow's workforce is drawn from local minority ethnic communities.³ In 2006, BAA was bought in a hostile takeover for £10.1 billion by Ferrovial (a construction firm) and a Spanish consortium. Following a 2009 Competition Commission ruling, the consortium was forced to sell Gatwick (2009) and Stansted (2013). BAA was renamed Heathrow Airport Holdings in 2012 to reflect the revised operations. In 2024, Ardian (a private equity business) and the Saudi Public Investment Fund bought the largest stake of 37% in HAH for £3.2 billion.

Planning in whose interests?

The practice of aviation planning hence reflects these conditions. This is a story of controversial privatisation, commercialisation, hostile takeover, monopoly ownership, forced breakup, employment outsourcing, difficulties in financial management⁴ and eventual profit maximisation – representing a scandal in infrastructure governance that is rarely understood or discussed. The proposed expansion of Heathrow through a third runway is simply a means of generating further profit for the private operators. The UK government, through both Conservative and Labour administrations, consistently plays an enabling role – acting in the interests of HAH and Ardian. Heathrow operates not for the goals of public policy, but to line the pockets of its shareholders. This is why environmental and social goals are effectively ignored. This story is replicated across many of the privatised industries: government has been captured, relegated to serving private interests rather than the public good.

This process of infrastructure planning is far from technical rationality – instead, it reflects rationalisation on

behalf of the key actors.⁵ In today's neoliberal world, the wider political and economic structuring of infrastructure planning has become quite complex, indeed cynical, with infrastructure used as an asset for profit maximisation. This does not necessarily equate with building sustainable transport systems or cities – indeed is very likely to undermine them. This is the central problem: if we wish to deliver transport and urban development projects to contribute towards environmental and social public policy goals, then the currently accepted political framing needs to change too.

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Notes

- 1 The concept of 'conditions' is drawn from critical discourse analysis; see N Fairclough: *Discourse and Social Change*. Polity Press, 1992
- 2 *Airports Commission: final report*. Airports Commission, 1 Jul. 2015. www.gov.uk/government/publications/airports-commission-final-report
- 3 J Vernon: 'Heathrow and the Making of Neoliberal Britain'. *Past & Present*, Vol. 252, Issue 1, Aug. 2021, pp. 213-247. www.researchgate.net/publication/348739357_Heathrow_and_the_Making_of_Neoliberal_Britain
- 4 J Kay: 'Forty years of taxiing on UK runways'. *Financial Times*, 4 Jan. 2011
- 5 B Flyvbjerg: *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*. University of Chicago Press, 1998

