

## **Response to Consultation on National Planning Policy Framework and National Model Design Code Proposals**

St Albans Civic Society is a non-political charity whose objectives are to encourage high standards of architecture and town planning, to stimulate public interest in and care for the beauty, heritage and character of St Albans and its surroundings and to encourage the preservation, development and improvement of the features which contribute to make St Albans a pleasing place to live and work. Conservation Areas form a large part of our city.

We welcome the planned greater focus on delivering high quality design in the planning system by using design guides and codes but we are seriously concerned that the wider reforms which are proposed to the planning system will mean that high quality design will remain an aspiration rather than a realistic deliverable. We have responded to the earlier consultations (Planning White Paper, August 2020 and Supporting Housing Delivery and Public Service Infrastructure, December 20).

We set out below the specific comments we have on the proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework and following that our general comments on the Design Code proposals:

### **Chapter 4 Decision Making**

We strongly object to either of the proposed changes in respect of Article 4 directions as they will each reduce local ability to pro-actively manage proposed development. The proposals in the Supporting Housing Delivery White Paper are to extend permitted development rights to a much larger range of properties and also to extend the rights to Conservation Areas. These proposals, if enacted, will remove a local voice and is a contradiction to the Government's stated aim to increase localism. The proposal to further restrict the use of Article 4 will reduce even more any ability at a local level to influence the shape of future development. This will result in the very opposite of the aim to Build Better, Build Beautiful.

### **Chapter 5 Delivering a Sufficient Supply of Homes**

In new para. 80(e) it is proposed to delete the word "innovative" and we are bemused by this suggestion. Surely innovation should be encouraged? In new para 131(b) of Chapter 12 the new wording refers explicitly to encouraging innovative design and we applaud that.

### **Chapter 12 Achieving Well Designed Places**

Whilst the proposal for all local planning authorities to design guides or codes consistent with the principles set out in the National Design Code is an admirable one it is far from clear how this could be delivered in practice. Most, if not all, local authorities are short of funds and, equally critically, short of the expertise to deliver these design codes. Where is the expertise to come from?

## General Comments

Proper consultation on planning proposals is essential. If the proposed planning reforms in the White paper are confirmed in legislation, then once a design code has been set, development will be allowed to go ahead without further consideration by planning authorities or communities. We believe strongly that it is vitally important that detailed planning applications should continue to be considered by planning authorities, with opportunities for consultation with the community.

We welcome the proposal in the National Design Code for good community involvement in the production of the local design code but are very concerned by the wider proposals that mean that at the current individual planning application stage for Growth and Renewal Areas, there will be no opportunity for input at that stage. It will never be possible to have design codes that cover every eventuality which is why it is so essential to retain the opportunity for public scrutiny at the detailed planning application stage.

The widening of permitted development rights (and the proposed extension to Conservation Areas) will prevent a planned approach to town and city areas and will seriously undermine the delivery of high-quality design. This is likely to lead to the loss of historic character within our Conservation Areas through inappropriate development and unsympathetic alterations and extensions. The MHCLG commissioned report provided evidence of the problems resulting from the current widening of permitted development rights. This demonstrated that this approach does not create high quality or beautiful development and the permitted development process does not enable communities to engage meaningfully with the shape of development in their local area. Making it harder for local planning authorities to make Article 4 Directions, as is proposed, will make it more difficult for local planning authorities to proactively manage their cities, towns and villages.

The draft National Design Code is a welcome start as is the proposal for development of local design codes. It is though notable that the draft code focusses almost entirely on buildings, whereas the space between buildings, and its design, is equally important. Jan Gehl is a Danish Professor of Urban Planning and his book *The Space between Buildings*, is an important text on this subject. The draft Code does make clear that local codes should be developed with full community involvement but there is a concern about the capacity of local planning authorities to deliver this development, both the shortage of funds and of appropriate expertise. It is far from clear how this expertise is to be developed and if, as is feared, reliance is placed on consultants then there is a significant risk that these local design codes will be formulaic and will not reflect the character of the areas.

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