

Targets on steroids, affordable & infrastructure promises on placebos

Community Planning Alliance: reaction to Labour's planning proposals, July 2024

We've tested Labour's planning proposals against our three campaign principles and are very concerned that the drive for growth will not result in homes for those most in need, protections for the environment or the necessary infrastructure to support the huge proposed increase in homes:

1. Right houses & infrastructure in the right places

Huge new top-down targets in addition to new towns of up to 25,000 homes are proposed. Labour now wants to build 1.85m homes instead of the 1.5m in its manifesto. The targets take no account of the fact that population growth only results in a requirement for around 200,000 additional dwellings per annum (some of which can be achieved via empty homes, repurposed offices/shops and a requirement to deliver permissioned developments). Housebuilders build homes, not local authorities, for whom the targets will be mandatory.

Promises of golden rules, a new towns 'code', 50% affordable homes for grey belt and 40% for new towns are only deliverable if financially viable, yet there is no evidence or track record to back the promises up. Already when it comes to grey belt, developers have been given an opt-out clause.

For the all-important social housing spending plans, we have to wait until the autumn budget.

2. Better environmental protections

The environment, natural capital and biodiversity barely features in the government's new proposals. While London's housing target has been slashed from 100,000 to 80,000 a year, the hugely increased targets and green belt release will lead to extensive loss of habitat, countryside and farmland. A footnote in the National Planning Policy Framework that gave a degree of weight to the importance of food producing land has been removed. Some of the highest targets are in areas with National Parks and Landscapes.

Sustainability does not just mean using 'green' construction. Consideration should be given to the location, especially where it currently supports climate mitigation or nature's recovery, or if the proposal would result in higher car use and carbon emissions. The most sustainable developments are compact/high density and already well connected.

We will be seeking to understand to what extent Labour has adhered to the Environmental Principles Policy Statement in setting out the new policies and what quantitative evidence, from natural capital assessments to air quality modelling, there is to support planning policy and decisions.

3. Community participation

Instead of seeking participatory planning and co-creation, the government puts communities at the bottom of the pile in the race for growth. This is manifested as follows:

- Targets – top-down and mandatory and taking no account of local nuances;
- New towns – decided by a panel;
- Likely exclusion of communities from the ability to challenge a planning application once it is in a local plan.

Exuberant celebrations from the development lobby indicate who is most likely to benefit. The lack of understanding of how the system works means we risk a huge increase in car-dependent, infrastructure-last greenfield developments without appropriate levels of affordable housing, leaving brownfield undeveloped. Housing targets are on steroids, while the promises remain on placebos.