



Ms Kate Barker
Barker Review Team
HM Treasury
4/E1, 1 Horseguards' Road
London SW1A 2HQ

Your reference:
Our reference: NPF 06 03 Barker II letter

Date: 27 March 2006

Dear Ms Barker,

The National Planning Forum (NPF) is pleased to have the opportunity, via your call for evidence, to make this contribution to your review. The NPF is the largest cross-sectoral forum focusing on planning in England. Our aims and structure are set out in the attached doc 1. At our meeting on 9 March, Liz Peace led a debate on your remit and questions. Liz Peace and our Chair, Henry Oliver, were mandated to convey the conclusions of that debate to you, and to offer the facility of the Forum as a source of further information and/or a sounding board at any stage in your work.

Despite differing views on how the new planning system is working out in practice, members of the National Planning Forum were able to identify substantial common ground with agreement across the sectors on:

- **the value of the planning system, and its role in ensuring more certainty, consistency, and improved environmental quality.**
The planning system contributes to the drive for higher productivity, considered in its widest sense, and to the creation of sustainable communities, both of which are Government priorities. It can enable improved competitiveness and higher investment levels via more sustainable patterns of development, and creation of quality environments that are inspirational, promote well-being, and in which people and businesses thrive. However:
 - there is still wide variability across the country in how the system operates, with some places not getting quality development in a sensible timescale;
 - targets are being met, but in some cases this is being achieved in an unacceptable way.

Outcomes on the ground are difficult to measure and are more intangible, hence the reliance on proxy indicators. However there are many examples of added value deriving from negotiation and refinement of plans and proposals. It would be very useful if more of these could be documented, as is happening for the Planning Advisory Service's Planning Delivery Agreement pilot, which is supported by the NPF.

- **there is no appetite for comprehensive change at this stage, but delivery of the planning system must continue to improve, and be simplified**

There is a clear view from all sectors of the Forum that major change now would be counter-productive, but that further improvement could be encouraged, for example by:

- setting the right targets - the Audit Commission pointed out in its recent report on the Planning System (Feb 2006) that “ *the government’s emphasis on speed is having negative effects on the quality of services delivered by some planning departments*”. All sectors see potential in targets for decisions on planning applications being within mutually agreed timescales, rather than the current 8 or 13 weeks; and
- giving the right messages in policy and Ministerial speeches that good planning requires a sound evidence base, shared understanding of the issues, improved clarity, reduced volume of paperwork, and collaboration to produce “win-win” solutions.

Simplifying where possible, even if that requires legislation, would also reduce burdens, saving cost and time, for example:

- not requiring Statements of Community Involvement for Local Development Frameworks to be examined by the Planning Inspectorate; and
- finding simpler ways of dealing with minor householder developments.

- **even if there is a case for review, there is no consensus on how to plan more effectively, despite attempts over many years**

The planning system has many of its roots in the economic and social goals of the last century. It has been updated to meet the higher aspirations and increasing complexity of the 21st Century. Some of that derives from the unique circumstances that exist in Britain, but much is influenced by the agenda of the European Union, to which we contribute, and which recognises the value to the economy of social cohesion and environmental assets. This is already fully reflected in the recent reforms on stakeholder and community engagement in planning, and on sustainability and environmental appraisal. It would be difficult to reinvent a planning system that copes with these imperatives in any simpler way than that so recently set out in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. This includes:

- the requirement for spatial planning to take into account the economy as well as social and environmental factors;
- front-loading of community engagement;
- emphasis on project management for processing of planning applications and preparing plans;
- a key role for sustainability appraisal and strategic environmental assessment of plans and programmes; and
- the focus on producing “sound” plans via a consensual, rather than adversarial, process

- **the current system can be made to work, but it must be properly resourced or the workload reduced and/or simplified**

Whilst the reality of competing priorities is acknowledged, the cost of the planning system is still relatively small compared with the quantum of the construction sector’s contribution to the economy. Additional funding, via Planning Delivery Grant and increased planning fees, has started to lead to improvements in delivery. However, as the Audit Commission found in its recent report *The Planning System (February 2006)* there is a shortage of

experienced planners, and a need to ensure that policy links more effectively to delivery at local level. This implies the need to continue PDG, support training of more planners, up-skill all those involved in planning, and support and encourage “best practice” in both plan-making and decision-making.

Workload reduction/simplification would enable the resources that are available to be targeted to add most value. Two suggestions for this are given under the second bullet above.

I realise that you are very busy, and that you are already meeting a number of organisations in order to inform your review. However, the NPF Executive Board is in a unique position to offer you a cross-sectoral perspective on the issues you are considering, and hope it will prove possible to meet you and your team during April. I would be pleased to make the necessary arrangements if you could indicate your availability for a meeting at a convenient location in London.

A summary of points made during the Forum debate is at doc 2.

Yours sincerely,

Kay Powell

Secretary: Kay S. Powell, 5 Verlands Close, Cardiff CF5 2BQ
e-mail: kay.powell@ntlworld.com tel: 029-20563001 mob: 07774 139 506

The NPF is the largest cross-sectoral forum in England focusing on planning. It was re-launched in 2003 with a mission to inspire planning and planners, and so to help deliver the new planning system and, via that, better outcomes and an improved quality of life.

The work of the Forum falls into five principal areas:

- Acting as a sounding board for all member organisations' policy initiatives
- Debating topical themes with guest speakers to raise awareness
- Agreeing protocols and concordats on positive planning
- Commissioning papers on best practice and research into planning
- Assisting with networking, fostering alliances and conflict resolution

We avoid duplicating the work of others, concentrate on areas in which all sectors have a common interest, and aim to be constructive in all that we do.

NPF Executive Board

The Forum itself is the principal decision-making body, with direction provided by the Executive Board comprising representatives of the five sectors. The current Executive Board is:

Chair	Henry Oliver, Campaign to Protect Rural England - third sector
Vice-Chair	Liz Peace, British Property Federation - business sector
Vice-Chair	Mike Hayes, Royal Town Planning Institute - professional bodies
Vice-Chair	Member tbc, Local Government Association - local government
Vice-Chair	Mark Southgate, Environment Agency - government agencies
Secretary	Kay Powell

The day-to-day work of the Forum is undertaken by the Secretary, with additional support provided by the Local Government Association and the Town and Country Planning Association.

Membership and working arrangements

The NPF has membership, primarily of umbrella organisations, drawn from all sectors. The Forum meets four times a year in full session at LGA House, Smith Square, London. In addition, members participate in working groups on specific topics on a task and finish basis.

The NPF is supported in cash and in kind by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, British Property Federation, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, Environment Agency, Home Builders' Federation, Local Government Association, Planning Advisory Service, Planning Inspectorate, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Royal Town Planning Institute, and Town and Country Planning Association.

To find out more about the NPF, visit our web-site at www.natplanforum.org.uk to see our home page, notes of meetings and publications including Best Practice Notes; or contact our Secretary at secretary@natplanforum.org.uk

EXTRACT FROM: Draft note of meeting: Thursday 9 March 2006**Local Government House, Smith Square, London****Attendance and apologies: 42 members were present; there were 13 apologies****Item 3: Barker II**

Liz Peace (BPF, and NPF Vice-Chair) introduced the debate, referring to the NPF Secretary's paper. She added that the recently published report by the Policy Exchange "Better Homes, Greener Cities" contained some ideas which were worth considering. ODPM's view appeared to be that this review was narrowly focused, but indications from the Treasury were that it could be more fundamental. She suggested that members should focus on the question of whether there needs to be a fundamental review, and then on individual questions. The Barker II interim report is due in June/July and final report by the end of the year. Points made included:

Business:

- the new planning system is not yet delivering more certainty of outcome
- concern about under-resourcing of local planning authorities, and scarcity of planners
- if there's a need for review, there should be a Royal Commission chaired by an eminent QC, to ensure the required level of expertise
- concern about the cost of planning applications
- constructive involvement of business in planning is vital
- PPS 4 is needed now – there is a lack of policy relative to that on housing, and no guidance on issues such as competitiveness, new development forms, live/work units
- concern at the continuing loss of employment land to housing
- Regional Economic Strategies and Regional Spatial Strategies need to be aligned better (eg using the same forecasts).
- useful that Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) now have a consultee role on major applications.
- good businesses need an effective planning system
- business is diverse; there's a need for stratified input to reflect the variety of different views
- major companies seeking to develop rarely have problems with planning, there's a need to look at the next tier and provide examples so that the real problems can be tackled
- there's no need for a fundamental review at present, but there is a need to simplify procedures and support delivery of plans.
- the pressures on business should be recognized, the focus need to be on achieving better outcomes
- short, more focused consultation on issues is needed, and less text
- system is complex, costly and still too slow

Local Government:

- new style development plans are starting to emerge and it would be wrong to pre-judge how they would work
- need to ensure a rounded, sustainable, approach
- the principles of the new system are sound, but the processes and procedures are causing problems
- a transitional stage; there's no best practice guidance available yet
- simplification of Sustainability Appraisal/Strategic Environmental

Assessment (SA/SEA) and Statements of Community Involvement (SCI) processes would help current and future rounds

- need to find a better balance between management effort and professional work
- agreed that plans should be brief
- need to bear in mind that, if local government reorganisation takes place in 2009, the first round of new-style development plans will have been adopted, and the boundaries will change for the first review.

3rd sector:

- the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution had done interesting work on “four-dimensional planning”
- with the advent of SEA and climate change the real question on about the planning system and parallel regime, including taxation, was whether it could facilitate development that is sustainable
- not everyone in the Treasury understands what planning is, what it does, how it works, and what it delivers – the Forum could help to explain this
- need to make the system work – members should make common cause, showing the many examples of where planning has inspired – case studies of regenerated town centres, coastal towns, small scale heritage and conservation
- the system doesn’t need fundamental review, but does need some important changes eg simplifying Local Development Frameworks so that they can be delivered, and planning for all city regions(not just the largest)
- the new system also needs a change of mind sets, an understanding of how we deliver planning in a market system, and requires planners to work with the market to deliver creative outcomes.

Professions:

- the property industry wants incremental improvements, not another review
- transition from old style development plans to new makes it difficult – the new system has a lot of merit and should be given time to bed down
- simplification is needed (eg shorter plans with soundly based, joined-up content; more effective processes for plan-making and development control)
- planners need the confidence to move on from SCIs to the undoubted challenges of plan-making; they need professional, more than managerial, leadership

Government agencies:

- we should learn the lessons of history, particularly the need for certainty
- the first pre-examination meetings are being held; there are positive examples of what’s happening, it will be important to disseminate these early examples and ensure positive learning

Liz summarised the broad consensus that had emerged from the debate, that:

- Forum members value the planning system;
- there is no appetite for a “root and branch” review of the system;
- the current system can be made to work, but needs to be properly resourced and/or some procedures simplified; and
- this is a good opportunity to highlight examples of good planning, and solutions.

Members endorsed the Executive Board engaging with the Barker team to present the views of the Forum. Liz asked members to send examples of good practice and ways of improving procedures to the Secretary as soon as possible.

