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The Planning and Infrastructure Bill: A Call for Balancing Efficiency and Democracy



This moment presents a unique opportunity to embed democracy within strategic planning, ensuring that public engagement is not a mere formality but a meaningful process that empowers people to shape their communities.



Last week, the Government introduced the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (the Bill) to the House of Commons. As the Bill progresses through parliament, this blog by Oram Policy and Research Fellow, Liz Williams takes stock of what it may mean for democratic engagement.

The much-anticipated Planning and Infrastructure Bill is the latest in a flurry of changes to the English Planning system. Labour is focused on accelerating housing and infrastructure delivery to achieve their ambitious targets – 1.5 million more homes and 150 significant infrastructure projects with planning highlighted as both the lever for transformative change and the main obstacle to progress. After months of taking aim at both nimbys and newts, the government is set to deliver a “planning process that works for the builders, not blockers”.^[1]

Streamlining Infrastructure Delivery and the Risk to Democratic Accountability

Chapter one of the Bill seeks to streamline and increase certainty in the delivery of Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP). It proposes to update National Policy Statements every 5 years, reducing opportunities for judicial review and limiting consultation. Likewise, the new Bill will allow applicants to correct an application ahead of examination rather than resubmitting a new planning application – removing another administrative burden.

However, the removal of Category 3 persons from pre-application consultation is worrisome. This change risks eroding democratic accountability in favour of speed and efficiency. While efficiency in planning is important, sidelining affected individuals may undermine public trust and generate more opposition.

The Role of Community Participation in Planning

In January, we published *Planning with Purpose: A Values-Based Approach to Planning Reform*, which proposed meaningful recommendations for reform by untangling the multiple competing values that circulate within the planning system. The section on community participation investigated where and how communities engage in planning and the implications of switching consultation from “if” to “how...homes and infrastructure are built”.^[2] Participants highlighted that current engagement mechanisms in development management often foster adversarial, binary participation – either objecting or supporting development.^[3] Nevertheless, they emphasised the importance of local people having a say in their area. Meaningful community participation at a strategic level (*the how not the if*) could promote more sustainable, healthy, affordable homes. As one participant noted:

“We’re not NIMBYs, we’re not YIMBYs, we’re SHIMBYs – Social Housing in our Backyards. That’s what we want: social housing... So, we produce alternative visions, master plans, and neighbourhood plans...The problem is, unlike what happened in the 70s with Waterloo, too often they’re not taken seriously, they’re ignored.” – Community Group Leader 1

Local people having a say in their area fosters a sense of ownership and accountability. When communities are actively involved in shaping development, they can help ensure that projects align with local needs and aspirations. This not only enhances social cohesion but also improves the likelihood of long-term success for planning initiatives. Furthermore, inclusive planning processes can help mitigate conflicts, reduce legal challenges, and create spaces that genuinely serve the interests of the people who live there while reducing risk for local authorities and developers.

Addressing the Gap in Strategic Planning

The introduction of Spatial Development Strategies (SPS) and the adoption of a broader strategic planning system is a step in the right direction. However, the Bill lacks a clear definition of strategic planning, which could lead to disparate interpretations and implementation of housing, infrastructure and environmental goals. We recommend adopting a statutory, standard definition such as:

“An overarching vision established through diverse (public, private, civil) involvement that outlines long-term objectives at different levels (national, regional, local) supported by detailed action plans and measurable indicators to create positive economic, environmental and social spatial outcomes”. [4]

A clear definition would provide greater certainty for newly established strategic bodies and improve coordination across planning levels. Additionally, a standard definition creates greater public confidence regarding the process and delivery outcomes, ensuring a more predictable and transparent system for all stakeholders.

Furthermore, the Bill should explicitly include a provision for upfront public engagement in strategic planning. Currently, communities can only provide input once plans have been drafted, limiting their influence. Excluding communities from planning processes in NSIP and SDS will generate backlash and alienate voter bases. A more inclusive approach, as demonstrated by the London Plan, would help secure local buy-in, strengthen social cohesion, and improve wellbeing. Newly formed strategic authorities should also receive resources and training to conduct effective engagement.

This moment presents a unique opportunity to embed democracy within strategic planning, ensuring that public engagement is not a mere formality but a meaningful process that empowers people to shape their communities. Providing mechanisms for robust participation at this level can help create long-term, sustainable planning solutions that reflect local priorities and build public trust in decision-making. Strategic planning should not just be about efficiency but also about fostering a culture of democratic participation and shared ownership of development outcomes. It can be a powerful tool for bringing everyday people on the journey of a just transition.

The National Scheme of Delegation: Balancing Efficiency and Accountability

Regarding local decision-making, the Bill also promises to introduce a national scheme of delegation, allowing planning officers to make judgements on less controversial applications instead of committee members. While this could streamline approvals, it raises important questions about who determines delegation criteria and how democratic accountability will be maintained.

Empowering councils to set their own planning fees and requiring mandatory training could help address resource and skill shortages. However, this could be taken further by mandating online

planning committees to enhance public accessibility and transparency, which could foster a more modern, inclusive and accountable system.

Community Benefits: A Step Forward – But is it Enough?

One of the Bill's most tangible wins for communities is the introduction of a community benefit scheme. Households near critical infrastructure projects could receive up to £2,500 off their energy bills over ten years—a gesture towards compensating affected residents. However, a more holistic approach could deliver broader community-wide benefits, such as local employment opportunities, skills training programs, and improved community facilities.

While direct financial compensation is appealing, it raises a critical question: is monetary relief worth the loss of meaningful community influence in shaping the places people live and work?

In a Nutshell

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill signals a shift towards a more efficiency-driven planning system. However, this push for speed must not come at the cost of democratic accountability and meaningful public participation. In fact, these values do not need to be positioned at odds with each other. Strategic planning should be about more than just delivering housing and infrastructure—it must also be visionary and embed democratic principles, provide meaningful opportunities for engagement, and empower communities to shape their future. A clearer definition of strategic planning, stronger consultation mechanisms, and accessible planning committees could help achieve a mission-driven approach that provides sustainable homes, infrastructure and communities.

[1] Pennycook and Rayner, 2025, Press Release, '[Biggest building boom' in a generation through planning reforms](#)

[2] His Majesty King Charles III. 2024. [The King's Speech](#). 17 July 2024. London.

[3] 26 workshop participants included the public, private and 3rd sector

[4] Albrecht, L., 2004. [Strategic \(Spatial\) Planning Reexamined](#). Environment and Planning B Planning and Design. 31(5):743-758.

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