

Standing up for Hertfordshire's countryside

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Dear

NAO Report - Planning for new homes

The report, dated 8 February 2019, is hugely critical of various aspects of the planning system. The conclusions include “we cannot conclude that the planning system currently provides value for money in terms of delivering new homes effectively¹.”

Of particular concern to CPRE Hertfordshire is the lack of skilled planning staff at local authorities. According to the NAO report, between 2010-11 and 2018-18 expenditure on planning functions fell by 14.6% in real terms². During this period the demands made on the planning staff increased with the introduction of the current planning system, including the requirement for housing Plans.

The NAO Report, using work carried out by the Royal Town Planning Institute in 2017, notes that the “number of specialist staff in areas such as conservation, urban design and regeneration had fallen”³.

The National Planning Policy Framework, in Section 3, sets out how Plan-making is to be undertaken. The Strategic and Non-strategic policies of each local authority must be included. Of the Strategic policies, conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic all require skills that the RTPI showed are lacking.

The skill in urban design is key too. Delivery of the other Strategic policies in the NPPF requires effective urban design. Without it, there is a substantial risk that the huge scale of development that will take place across Hertfordshire, including in your constituency, will result in a series of dormitory estates. This may include roads too narrow and clogged for large vehicles such as buses to get through easily, no definable centres that will attract employment and a need for pretty well every inhabitant to have their own car or cars. This will make meeting air quality and climate change objectives much harder to achieve.

CPRE Hertfordshire makes every effort to protect the Green Belt. We will keep on at this task. We know and agree that more housing is needed. Studies have shown than more than the 100,000 houses included in the Plans of the 10 local authorities in Hertfordshire can be accommodated on brownfield sites. However, without the planning skills in the local authorities, it is very probable that these authorities will be unable to resist pressure from the house builders to build in green fields.

The NAO Report includes reference to the £345,000 that the MHCLG allocated to the RTPI Future Planners Bursary Scheme over three years to deal with the shortage of planners, what the Report calls “some efforts”⁴. Whilst we applaud this action, it is far too little and far too late. The local authority Plans will all be adopted (that is having been found “sound” by a Planning Inspector and so finally in in place and actionable) probably before any of the newly trained and qualified planners are in employment.

Members of CPRE, both the national charity and CPRE Hertfordshire, are often labelled as “NIMBY”s. We reject this: who if not me (I) will look after my backyard? That said, we think that the more honourable label of a QUIMBY (quality in my back yard) is what we should all be. If you agree, please press the Secretary of State at the MHCLG to consider carefully the NAO report and what to do about its conclusions. Whilst doing so, request that the SoS takes the pressure off local authorities in this county so that grossly inappropriate development in the Green Belt and on green field sites doesn’t take place until the local authorities have the skilled planning staff to manage how and where sustainable development takes place.

Yours sincerely

Richard Bullen
Honorary Chairman
CPRE Hertfordshire CIO

Footnotes

1. NAO Report, Appendix One, page 46, “Our conclusions”
2. NAO Report, page 30, Part Three, section 3.2
3. NAO Report, page 41, section 3.6 et seq.
4. NAO Report, page 42, section 3.11