



Historic England

Strengthening Planning Policy for Brownfield Development Historic England Consultation Response

Historic England is the government's statutory adviser on all matters relating to the historic environment in England. We are a non-departmental public body established under the National Heritage Act 1983 and sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). We champion and protect England's historic places, providing expert advice to local planning authorities, developers, owners and communities to help ensure our historic environment is properly understood, enjoyed and cared for.

We welcome the opportunity to submit a response to the consultation on strengthening planning policy for brownfield development.

We have restricted our response to those questions covering matters which have a greater bearing on the historic environment.

Overall, we support the appropriate re-use of brownfield sites, not least because it can result in the creative and adaptive reuse of any historic buildings on the site. If grounded in an understanding of the historic character of an area, re-use can lead to high quality development which reinforces a distinctive sense of place.

Detailed Response

Q1. Do you agree we should change national planning policy to make clear local planning authorities should give significant weight to the benefits of delivering as many homes as possible? If not, why not?

Historic England has concerns regarding this proposal as it may frustrate the delivery of wider, multi-faceted town planning objectives and could potentially lead to hyper-dense development (such as tall buildings) in inappropriate locations. Our concern is that this policy may have unintended consequences in prioritising the quantity of homes delivered on brownfield sites without proper consideration of the local context, character, design quality and accessibility of the site. Such impacts are likely to be felt most acutely on those brownfield sites in towns and cities subject to the urban uplift, where there is greatest policy pressure to deliver housing growth

Historic England recognises the need to build more homes to meet housing needs, and that the best way to do this is to encourage the optimisation of sites through a design-led approach. This can achieve increased densities in a way that responds positively to the context and character of the surrounding area as advocated by paragraph 128 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF. 2023).

We welcome the statement in paragraph 16 of the consultation document that these proposals would 'not remove legal requirements nor the importance of other

considerations....'. However, the proposal to give '**significant weight**' to the 'benefits of delivering **as many homes as possible**' [our emphasis] on brownfield sites could, unintentionally, result in undermining other planning considerations including character, design and conservation of the historic environment. For example, by potentially encouraging tall buildings in inappropriate locations, or the downplaying of negative impacts on the historic environment in and around brownfield locations.

The proposed amendment may lead developers to submit schemes that seek to maximise or exploit brownfield sites, which may in turn have an adverse impact on land values, leading to further development pressures; as opposed to optimising them in a way that delivers denser, good quality, beautiful places. This would be in direct conflict with the government's aims at securing higher quality, better designed and more beautiful development through the planning system.

The Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's report [Living with Beauty](#) (BBBBC. 2020) noted that, '*too much of what we build is the wrong development in the wrong place, either drive-to cul-de-sacs (on greenfield sites) or overly dense 'small flats in big blocks' (on brownfield sites). We need to develop more homes within mixed-use real places at 'gentle density'*'.

The impact of the proposed change is also likely to be considerable when considered as part of wider planning reforms. The consultation notes any changes, 'would become part of our proposals for National Development Management Policies'(NDMPs). The NDMPs, once in force, will have the same status as local plan policies and where there is a conflict between the two the NDMP will take precedence (see Section 93 of the [Levelling Up and Regeneration Act](#)). If adopted as an NDMP, paragraph 129(c) will therefore have far-reaching impacts which could potentially be adverse. It will take precedence over existing locally specific policies in adopted local plans including design policies and design codes, where there is a perceived conflict. This may impact the effectiveness of one of the key policy tools for delivering better design through the planning system, resulting in poor design and place-making.

That said, Historic England's own [research](#) shows that increases to residential density can be successfully achieved in historic environments, at a scale which responds to local character. We recognise that high density development in the form of well-designed and well-located tall buildings may be an appropriate development response in some circumstances. To that end, we have also produced guidance on the development of [tall buildings](#) to guide best practice.

We would welcome some further qualification within the policy about how the significant weight (applied to delivering as many homes as possible on brownfield sites) is assessed and balanced against other national and local policy requirements relating to design, character, conservation of the historic environment and infrastructure. It will also be important to establish parity of language regarding the weight of these tests: noting, for example, 'substantial' weight in paragraph 124.c of the NPPF and 'significant' weight in the proposed amendment to 129.

local planning authorities should take a flexible approach in applying planning policies or guidance relating to the internal layout of development? If not, why not?

Q3. If we were to make the change set out in question 2, do you agree this change should only apply to local policies or guidance concerned with the internal layout of developments? If not, what else should we consider?

Whilst Q2 and Q3 relate primarily to the internal layouts of new development (and therefore outside our area of interest) we offer the following observations.

The historic environment offers numerous examples of places that contain high density residential development while also achieving high-quality design and places. The historic Georgian and Victorian centres of London (such as Islington¹ and Kensington), Bristol, Bath and Newcastle make efficient use of land at “gentle” density’, using mid-rise building typologies, without the need to rely on tall buildings. These examples could act as a template to be used when seeking to make the best use of brownfield land.

However, Historic England also recognises that there can be barriers to building these types of fine-grained historic developments. As noted by the BBBBC, certain planning policies may prevent such development coming forward. This might be, for example, as a result of requirements for minimum distances between habitable rooms that favour suburban patterns of development.

Allowing flexibility in the application of these standards relating to external layouts of development could be beneficial if it allows for the construction of high-quality developments which might be informed by historic templates. However, such flexibility comes with obvious risks. Developers may seek to exploit any new flexibilities to over-develop sites. Any flexibility on external layouts would require robust national and/or local design guidance and the capacity within local authorities to ensure that the potential negative impacts outlined in our response are avoided.

Q6. How could national planning policy better support brownfield development on small sites?

Depending on the number and location of the small sites, design codes (or individual design briefs) could be produced to help bring those sites forward. It is possible for well designed, small-site or infill development to bring heritage benefits. For example, unsightly vacant plots or inappropriate, redundant buildings in conservation areas could be redeveloped in a way to deliver enhancements to the surrounding area.

Policy & Evidence: Policy Department

26 March 2024

¹ According to ONS data the highest population density in the UK, of over 16,000 people per square kilometre, is found in the Islington, with Kensington ranking fourth.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2019>