

REPORT TO PICKMERE PARISH COUNCIL

8th September 2020

AGENDA ITEM 8.1 – GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER – PLANNING FOR CHANGE

1. Background

- 1.1 The Government published this White Paper (consultation paper) on 6th August; the deadline for comment is 29th October 2020. It proposes radical changes to the planning system, which could clearly affect how the planning process affects Pickmere. The Paper is long (84 pages) and sets out Government's aims and objectives in great detail but in its proposals raise many detailed questions. If the Paper is in large part accepted and confirmed, the detail of any changes will emerge over the next 1-3 years. Many changes will require new statute. However, there is the possibility that many of its proposals/suggestions might not actually make their way into statute since they raise issues that would fundamentally alter the planning process as it affects constituencies currently held by Government supporters, not to their satisfaction.

2. The White Paper

- 2.1 The White Paper proposes significant changes to the following:
- Local Plans and Land Allocations content and procedures;
 - How Housing Need figures are provided;
 - Role of Design;
 - Section 106 & Community Infrastructure Levy systems; and
 - How the planning system will operate.
- 2.2 These are set within what are described in the Paper as three Pillars:
1. Planning for Development;
 2. Planning for Beautiful and Sustainable Places; and
 3. Planning for Infrastructure and Connectivity.
- 2.3 Information is presented here on the parts of the Paper that are potentially directly relevant to the Parish. The following is an extreme summary of the Paper's contents.
- 2.4 The Paper sets out in its initial statements the view that:
- The planning process is inefficient, opaque and secures poor outcomes.
 - The process is too complex, with a multitude of changes to the system originally adopted in 1947 leading to complexity, uncertainty and delay.
 - Planning decisions are discretionary rather than rules-based, which increases the cost of capital for development and discourages both innovation and the bringing forward of land for development.
 - Local plans are too complex and take too long.
 - Assessments of housing need, viability and environmental impacts are too complex and opaque.

- The system is too reliant on documents not data.
- The proposal for negotiating developer contributions to affordable housing and infrastructure is complex, protracted and unclear.
- There is not enough focus on design.
- It does not lead to enough homes being built.
- The whole system too often is unpredictable.

2.5 It seeks to tackle all of these criticisms in a whole range of ways, including:

- Establishing a Government-written set of planning policies.
- Setting out at national level the number of houses each local authority must provide for.
- Greatly reducing the length of local plans, effectively providing only detailed site allocations sufficient to meet Government housing etc. targets, together with detailed design codes and guides to govern the design of schemes.
- Requiring local plans to be prepared within a deadline of 30 months
- Replacing the current s106 agreement and Community Infrastructure Levy systems administered by district councils with a nationally imposed Community Infrastructure Levy, which will cover all forms of development, including changes of use and perhaps including developments that do not require explicit planning permission (so-called permitted development). It states that in this way more resources will be made available to provide affordable housing and other community benefits arising from development proposals.
- Local plans are to categorise all land as either a Growth zone (“suitable for substantial development”), a Renewal zone (“suitable for development”) or a Protection zone (areas that “justify more stringent development controls”). Effectively the identification of land within a Growth or Regeneration zone will effectively constitute an outline planning permission, leaving only the detail to be resolved through a planning application (thereby saving time and effort). Protection zones are intended to include such areas as Green Belt, Areas of Natural Beauty, etc. and the Local Plan will explain what is permissible in such zones.
- Considerable reliance to be placed on the production of design codes and guidance at a local level, against which the details of developments will be judged.
- Neighbourhood Plans continuing to play an important part in the planning system, although perhaps much more focussed than now on providing local design codes/guidance.
- Placing greater reliance on digital/high tech means of processing, publicising and dealing with planning applications and local plans, (though without any reference to how this will affect those in the community who are, and will remain, unable to use electronic devices).

2.6 The White Paper makes much of the need to aim for ‘beauty’ in design – a laudable aim, but difficult to secure in practice without developers’ views that that increases building costs and therefore property prices. However, it also refers several times to the need for “gentle

densification” of development – i.e. increased building densities – as one way of achieving increased housing construction.

- 2.7 The Paper emphasises the importance of having sufficient planning officer resources to implement the proposed systems, and it also states that there is a need to reinforce the enforcement of planning standards and decisions. It envisages that the changes it proposes will free up resources in district councils to assist these particular objectives.
- 2.8 In conclusion the White Paper is wide-ranging and does propose fundamental changes to the traditional town planning system. Many of the criticisms of the current system it describes are widely shared. However, part of the current problems with planning delay etc arise from the continued reduction in resources that local planning authorities have had to suffer, as well as the continually widening range of considerations that the planning system has to take into account - as led by central government.
- 2.8 It is difficult to suggest responses to the paper without going at great length into its fine detail. It raises various questions for comment throughout, but to answer those would require considerable input of time. Your Clerk is concerned though that in various ways it seeks to take away powers and abilities exercised by local planning authorities, and puts them in the hands of central government, thereby diluting local accountability.
- 2.9 However, as mentioned at the outset, the national press has reported that there may be significant objection to some of the fundamental proposals of the White Paper at a national political level from within the Government’s own supporters, so whether the Paper will in large part survive is perhaps questionable.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1 That the report be noted and any comments be passed to Government.

J Steel
Parish Clerk