MISSION 2

Devolution and Planning

Devolution brings the opportunity to improve the planning system as it forms a key part of local governance and has a particular focus on land use and development within an authoritative area.

It is well known that the current planning system is not fit for purpose. The planning system prevents rural economic growth and there is clear evidence that plans to invest in rural businesses are being abandoned through a lack of faith in local planning authorities.

KEY ASKS

1. The needs and interests of rural communities must be taken into account regarding planning policy, including much needed flexibility;
2. Local authority planning authorities must be well resourced with adequate capacity in terms of knowledge and skills;
3. All planning officers require mandatory training in terms of knowledge of agriculture, rural affairs and the rural economy;
4. Local plans must not be delayed;
5. A strong national planning policy must include a suite of permitted development rights, rural exception sites, and a third statutory purpose covering national landscapes.

1. Rural communities, how they function and their needs, must be understood. The criteria for sustainability must be flexible for rural areas in planning terms.

The devolution model, in its current form, does not acknowledge the difference in how urban and rural areas operate. This is not uncommon in planning policy as existing at a national and local level. This needs to change by acknowledging the key differences in how these areas not only function but also their needs. For the devolution model to work, it needs to consider rural and urban proportionately and equitably. It also needs recognise the importance of rurality in both local plan-making and decision-making.

The planning system in its current state does not appreciate the improvements that small-scale development can make for the viability of rural villages. In planning terms, these villages are often deemed as ‘unsustainable’. This creates a spiral of decline. Villages in rural areas must not be left behind. Without the adequate opportunity for growth, existing services and facilities within rural areas will continue to close and villages will continue to be

assessed as unsustainable in planning terms which will restrict the potential for growth. Settlements should be assessed on the services that could be supported if development were enabled rather than on what currently exists. A more coherent approach to sustainable development in rural areas is required, and devolution, through Spatial Development Strategies can achieve this.

2. **Provide additional resources for the planning system, with Planning Officers at a local level and a Chief Planner for every local authority.**

Devolution creates the opportunity for larger planning departments and improved resources. The CLA has previously called for an additional Planning Officer in every local planning authority. But any benefit from the £100m committed to by Central Government in 2024 for planning officers, along with 300 additional planning officers, on planning services is unclear. Research by Unison suggests a further 600 planners are required, with the House Builders Federation (HBF) estimating there to be a current shortage of planners. Planners with different skill sets will be required to develop Spatial Development Strategies as the preparation of these plans will differ from local plans. Planning Officers will be required in spatial planning policy teams and in development management teams which determine applications).

There is a need for local planning authorities to have a Chief Planner. One of the benefits of the role of Chief Planner is the linkage between development management and planning policy teams. Larger planning departments will be created through devolution and will need strong leadership. The creation of Chief Planners will be able to manage resources and improve services for applicants. Putting in place an adequately resourced planning service will reduce pressure on services that continue to be centralised, such as the appeals process led by the Planning Inspectorate.

3. **Mandatory specific rural and agricultural training for Planning Officers, housing and planning policy teams.**

It is widely recognised there are not enough planning officers to operate the current system. There are also knowledge gaps in the rural economy, heritage conservation, design, renewable energy, agricultural development, and natural environment conservation. The CLA has identified that 94% of rural businesses across England and Wales feel there is a lack of knowledge on rural issues and agricultural matters within the planning system. Given that there are key differences between how urban and rural areas operate, it is important that devolution is able to address this issue.

As devolved authorities are likely to have larger planning teams, there remains the risk that planning decisions could be made by someone without local and rural knowledge. It will be vitally important for all planning officers and members of planning committees are given training on rural and agricultural matters. For this to be achieved, there needs to be sufficient training providers at local level.

4. **The prevention of delays to the preparation of local plans in the wake of Spatial Development Strategies being developed**

One of the biggest professional challenges faced by planners is preparation of local plans. Despite the Government stating that local planning processes should not be interrupted by the creation of Spatial Development Strategies (SDS'), the preparation of local plans have been delayed through the progress of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and the Devolution Bill in Parliament. For example, development consultants Pegasus Group quote that 66% of local authorities outside London have out of date local plans (March 2025).

SDS' will be high level and will not allocate specific housing sites within a strategic area but provide broad areas for infrastructure, housing development and nature recovery. When established, local plans must conform with SDS' and undergo scheduled reviews. Although in the long term, the introduction of SDS' should alleviate the workload of local planning policy teams and streamline the preparation of local plans, it is important that this development is ongoing and not postponed.

5. **A strong national planning framework must include a suite of permitted development rights (not up to local discretion), the Rural Exception Site Planning Passport, a third statutory purpose covering national landscapes, and amendments to Green Belt policy.**

Although the aim of devolution is to bring power into the hands of local communities, in terms of planning, local decision-making needs to be supported by a strong national framework. This is for two reasons: supporting members where local NIMBYism is restricting their ability to develop; and supporting communities with ambition to develop.

There is also a risk with devolution that resource within local authority planning teams becomes less localised, and more focussed on delivering large housing sites and infrastructure projects. There needs to be a strong suite of permitted development rights to lessen the resource strain on local authorities, de-risk development for landowning businesses, and give greater flexibility to those wishing to develop. These permitted development rights not only cover housing but also commercial, tourism and agricultural development.

In addition to the Rual Exception Site Planning Passport (see Mission 3: Devolution and Housing) a permission in principle option for rural economic development needs to be introduced.

Local Authorities need to introduce greater flexibility in planning decision making, particularly through a third statutory purpose that would cover national landscapes. It is vital that rural businesses located in national landscapes are not hindered when seeking to deliver economic growth.