

Date: 18th October 2023

Submitted via email to: planmakingconsultation@levellingup.gov.uk

To whom it may concern,

RE: Consultation- Plan Making Reform

On behalf of the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce (TVCC), we thank you for the opportunity to consult on the Plan Making reform proposals. The TVCC is the only accredited Chamber of Commerce for Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Swindon.

Having consulted with selected members of the TVCC, please find our responses to the survey questions below which reflects the views and needs of our business community. Please find our responses to the survey questions below:

Question 1: Do you agree with the core principles for plan content? Do you think there are other principles that could be included?

We Agree with the core principles for a simpler, shorter, and more visual approach and to the content as set out. Particularly agree about the need for clear, accessible maps and digitalisation of plans. We would suggest that there are planning authorities who have produced accessible plans under the present framework and could be shown as examples of good practice.

The requirements as set out in the bill may not necessarily lead to swift delivery of a simpler and shorter plan, even if mapping improvements are achieved.

Also, we ask at what audience or audiences is the plan aimed? It is important to have an accessible approach for the public, but what level of information is required for some interested members of the public and professionals within the field to understand in more depth, defend or challenge. There is a potential risk that an easily accessible version does not contain all the necessary information and must be supplemented by fuller appendices, with the added resource and time required to produce them, and the added risk of dispute about the respective validity of the slim and fuller versions. There is also a risk that increased digitalisation frustrates accessibility for some parts of the community.

We suggest that additional principles should be that: The content and accessibility of the plan serves all the principal audiences and stakeholders.

Question 2: Do you agree that plans should contain a vision, and with our proposed principles for preparing the vision?

We agree that plans should contain a vision, that:

- It should be shaped by local communities, including businesses and businesses representative organisations and other stakeholders.
- Informed by baseline information.
- Serve as a golden thread.

- Set out measurable outcomes underpinned by the evidence base.
- Sets out an employment land component in all local plans with dedicated employment land expertise that identifies a hierarchy of developable commercial land (quality over quantity).
- Employment land and uses should be given equal priority to housing, transport planning and master planning.

We are uncertain how the proposal for a key diagram will work since some visions or aspects of them will not lend themselves to spatial presentation.

We agree and would strongly recommend that planning authorities should make links between the vision and other relevant corporate strategies, e.g., housing, and economic development. This was an approach adopted by some local authorities and their partners for their Local Development Framework, including embedding a single corporate vision in the LDF and all major strategies. It ensured that spatial planning supported the overall vision for the area and that the rationale for the plan was better understood. Exemplars are therefore available.

Question 3: Do you agree with the proposed framework for local development management policies?

We agree with the proposed framework for LDMP. We question how the NDMP and LDMP will knit together, and which will be prioritised. The Consultation stresses the need to reflect the uniqueness of place and we would recommend that the bill strikes a balance between National and Local and avoids tying the hands of planning authorities dealing with rare challenges and opportunities.

Question 4: Would templates make it easier for local planning authorities to prepare local plans? Which parts of the local plan would benefit from consistency?

Agree templates may be helpful, with the caveat that they should be a flexible tool which does not straitjacket planning authorities by limiting focus on some issues or information or by requiring information or use of resources irrelevant to the local situation. Standardisation of mapping styles, symbols et al will be particularly helpful.

Question 6: Do you agree with the proposal to set out in policy that planning authorities should adopt their plan, at the latest, 30 months after the plan preparation process begins?

A target of 30 months is a good aspiration, but we wonder on what analysis of the activity required has this timescale been proposed. We believe there are considerable flaws and limited understanding of the time to deliver in the timescale as set out. Government has experience of setting timescales for processes under its control which have often been shown to be over-ambitious and should learn from that.

The achievability of such a target is constrained by numerous factors including requirements of both planning authorities and Government built into the bill, the resource, workforce and democratic context of planning authorities and their partners, etc. There is a risk that the pressure to deliver the target will weaken the effectiveness of the process and the outcome, resulting in plans which do not adequately reflect the needs and wishes of the area, and which are less defensible to challenge.

We also note that the proposals below avoid defining the period of the Examination of the Plan for similar reasons to those we list below. We suggest that you:

- Consider the reservations expressed regarding the Examination.

- Engage with a varied range of planning authorities, particularly those who have achieved well in the current regime, to develop a project plan with a realistic timetable.
- Set an indicative deadline based on that exercise and criteria for judging achievement and acknowledging obstacles.

The constraints include:

- Statutory and other requirements for evidence-based planning. The time it takes to research and collate, for example, the seasonal requirements of environmental evidence. Planning authorities are vulnerable to developer challenge at Plan and Development Control stages. There must be a balance between urgency, currency, and robustness.
- The requirements for public engagement. This is a positive move to ensure that authorities who have not commonly engaged with their communities on their Local Plan do so. However, genuine, inclusive, and effective engagement takes time to prepare, share information, engage, and digest.
- The need to research and develop other related policy and strategy, e.g., a housing needs survey, as a pre-cursor to the Local Plan. This may not have an impact of the timescale of the Local plan but will certainly delay its start date.
- There should be increased resources for local planning authorities. There is an acknowledged national shortage of planning professionals and, although Government plans to invest, creating a sufficient, trained, qualified and experienced workforce from the present low base will take several years.
- Financial capacity of local authorities. Even should the workforce be available, the financial capacity of most local authorities and the increasing demands of social care and waste management may mean that cannot fund the team needed. The capacity of other statutory consultees to contribute sufficiently and in a timely way.
- The Gateway review process as recommended here – see comments on the relevant questions.
- The democratic process:
 - Key decisions and approvals will go through the committee cycle, which however efficiently managed, adds to the timescale.
 - Elections, which in some local authorities are almost annually, will add to the timespan of decision making and potentially result in a change of policy direction.
- The practical necessity to engage with neighbouring planning authorities on, e.g., cross-boundary needs and solutions, or on integrating waste and minerals plans, may be hampered by mismatched timetables and policy priorities.
- The variable scale and nature of planning authorities may enable some to meet a far shorter target than others.
- Set out a clearer role for the planning inspectorate to scrutinise the employment land component of all local plans, with dedicated employment land expertise.
- LPAs can do more to plan proactively for employment land and ensure they can respond positively to inward investment opportunities.
 - The current focus on housing delivery is putting pressure on land supply for business uses. Businesses in many areas are struggling to find the land and premises they need to improve productivity, achieve their Net Zero goals, and grow.
 - There is a growing shortage of quality employment land and premises is a barrier to investment and growth. More priority must be given to business needs in the development control and plan making process.

- Achieving the optimum balance of jobs and homes, supported by investment in local and national infrastructure, must be a key part of our long-term strategy.
- New housing must not come at the expense of employment. Councils need to objectively plan for employment land, and for a variety of employment types, to ensure that the imperative to meet demand for housing does not force out other uses and create problems for the future.
- LPAs should be required to maintain a 5-year quality employment land supply, in the right locations, to balance the supply of housing land.
- To help secure inward investment, DLUHC and DBT should provide guidance to LPAs on planning for inward investment. DLUHC should set a formal requirement for local plans to accommodate a level of additional employment land allocation to meet inward investment needs, considering evidence from DBT as material consideration in assessing the soundness of the plan and adequacy of the LPAs current and future employment land allocations.
- Infrastructure Investment. Delivery of efficient and effective infrastructure is needed to support the movement of people, goods, and services, to ensure the availability of adequate water, power (e.g., electricity) and wider energy supplies, and to minimise damage and destruction resulting from flooding. Further, LPAs and government need to understand inward investment decision are not made in isolation. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is not a zero-sum game (i.e., a foreign owned company has wider strategic considerations when making FDI decisions which can be connected to new or expansion plans in two or more locations in different part of the country (not necessarily in one location only). There are often links to decisions being made in one location, affecting others in different local authority areas / devolved administrations.
- Cross boundary considerations. LPAs should have placed upon them the need for greater consideration of cross-boundary strategic issues, such as economic development, inward investment, housing, impacting on local spatial planning. We believe there is great strategic benefit in considering large scale development in the round, rather than in isolation of a single LPA boundary.

Question 7: Do you agree that a Project Initiation Document will help define the scope of the plan and be a useful tool throughout the plan making process?

Agree the principle. Planning authorities are or should be using programme management tools to define, manage and deliver the Local Plan. We recommend that the expectation is not over-prescriptive because some authorities will be accustomed to using effective tools which do not fit a specific PID model.

We commend the recognition that there will be extensive work before the launch of the process and recommend that this stage is thorough.

Question 8: What information produced during plan-making do you think would most benefit from data standardisation, and/or being openly published?

We see no reason why most of the information should not be openly published since if collated and used effectively it should inform stakeholders and enable understanding and support for the Plan.

The following should be made available and where possible presentation standardised:

- Demographics – past, present, and predicted
- Housing needs analysis incorporating assessment of the needs of the present and future population for number, affordability, and tenure of housing.
- Analysis of nature, trend and need within both the local economy and the economic footprint.
- Service and facilities need analysis.

- Travel patterns
- Environmental assessments

We note that other information, e.g., outcomes of public consultation, may be more difficult to standardise but should be made available in an anonymised form.

Question 9: Do you recognise and agree that these are some of the challenges faced as part of plan preparation which could benefit from digitalisation? Are there any others you would like to add and tell us about?

We recognise the challenges and that some will benefit from digitalisation.

We also recognise that digitalisation may exclude a significant minority of the community from engaging in plan development or using the plans when produced. Government should provide guidance, so that planning authorities can be supported and then required to evidence how they will engage with those suffering digital poverty.

Question 12: Do you agree with our proposals on the milestones to be reported on in the local plan timetable and minerals and waste timetable, and our proposals surrounding when timetables must be updated?

Support the principle of reporting on key milestones but, have great reservations about the feasibility of the timescales proposed. Recommend that planning authorities are required to publish their planned timetable but not prescribing the length of any stages and are required to publish a progress report at key stages.

Support the proposals for efficient timetable decision making and management. Many planning authorities already have established schemes of delegation, specific delegation and working arrangements which will enable this. Whilst these measures will mitigate the impact of the democratic process itself or the temptation for elected members to seek to delay unpopular decision making, the real challenge will be in decision making on the plans themselves.

Question 13: Are there any key milestones that you think should automatically trigger a review of the local plan timetable and/or minerals and waste plan timetable?

Not a key milestone but it is likely that a significant change of leadership of the planning authority which may happen once, twice, or even three times during a 30-month period, will result in a review of the Vision and objectives or of specific proposals.

Question 14: Do you think this direction of travel for national policy and guidance set out in this chapter would provide more clarity on what evidence is expected? Are there other changes you would like to see?

The guidance on expectation of evidence, proportionality etc is welcome. However, for it to be effective, Government and the Planning Inspectorate must support this advice at all stages of the planning and development process. Planning authorities are already vulnerable to well-resourced developer challenge and may be weakened by this approach unless Government asserts a similar expectation on all parties. Such an expectation is implied by point 3 in paragraph 89 and should be reinforced.

We express concern that planning authorities are not required to demonstrate that the plan is the most appropriate strategy for the area but just an appropriate strategy. We recognise that there may

be options for development and that the planning authority should look for the best mix. However political or stakeholder pressure may lead to a plan which appears appropriate in the short term and/or for some members of the community but not in the longer term and/or for the greatest number. How will the gap between “an appropriate” and “the most appropriate strategy” be judged.

Question 15: Do you support the standardisation of evidence requirements for certain topics? What evidence topics do you think would be particularly important or beneficial to standardise and/or have more readily available baseline data?

Support detailed guidance and methodologies but not prescriptive requirements.

- Demographics – past, present, and predicted
- Housing needs analysis incorporating assessment of the needs of the present and future population for number, affordability, and tenure of housing.
- Analysis of nature, trend and need within both the local economy and the economic footprint.
- Service and facilities need analysis.
- Travel patterns.
- Environmental assessments.

Question 16: Do you support the standardisation of evidence requirements for certain topics? What evidence topics do you think would be particularly important or beneficial to standardise and/or have more readily available baseline data?

In principle yes if there is flexibility. The approaches described may all be applicable but we note that there is so much flexibility built into them that the freeze can be overridden at various times and by various parties.

Question 17: Do you support this proposal to require planning authorities to submit only supporting documents that are related to the soundness of the plan?

In principle Yes. But who decides what is related and at Examination the Inspector, challengers and supporters may seek other information and the LPA may need to produce information in support of their proposals.

Question 18: Do you agree that these should be the overarching purposes of gateway assessments? Are there other purposes we should consider alongside those set out above?

Support the principle of gateway assessments and the purposes set out. Will gateway assessments be an opportunity to test whether the proposals match the evidence? If not, there is a risk that the approach will deliver a well-built plan delivered on time but not delivering on the needs of the area.

Question 19: Do you agree with these proposals around the frequency and timing of gateways and who is responsible?

Agree in principle with the number and timing of the first two gateways. We express concern about the timing or even existence of the third review, particularly if conducted by a Planning Inspector.

- How will this differ from an Examination itself or how will any overlap be avoided?
- How will a conflict between the outcome of a third gateway review that a Plan is ready to go and a judgement at an Examination that it is not fit for purpose be managed, particularly if, as proposed, the review is undertaken by a planning inspector?
- Who will be held responsible for that judgement?

We very seriously question the length of time attributed to the gateway reviews. Is this length necessary to achieve the required outcomes? Also, such periods and the preparatory work required of the planning authority will divert considerable and limited resources from the plan process. See all our comments about the proposed 30-month timescale.

To be effective and for the outcome to be embraced by the LPA, those responsible should demonstrate, in addition to the necessary analytical and programme skills and expertise in a variety of areas, most notably digital, to conduct any gateway review, the knowledge of or sensitivity to the nature of the area, its challenges, the planning authority, the democratic environment etc. It is more important to define the person specification than to consider from where such capacity should be drawn.

We question, based on experience of planning inquiries:

- Whether the Planning Inspectorate has the capacity, particularly given the shortage of planning professionals, to respond simultaneously to the needs of LPAs.
- Whether there are sufficient Inspectors with the appropriate range of skills, knowledge and sensitivities to the local area to undertake the task and to be credible to the LPAs.
- Whether the capacity of the Inspectorate will enable the necessary workload to be programmed so that it does not delay delivery of the plan.
- Will the same inspectors/teams be available for each review or will the demands on the timetable be made greater by introducing a new person/team?
- What resources will be required to support each review, whether the diversion of planning officers or support staff, from within the authority, or of assistance to the Planning Inspectorate.
- Whether the approach recommended will secure the ownership of the LPA.

We suggest that other options are considered:

- LPAs, some of which will already deploy gateway reviews as a standard part of their project management processes, are required to build defined gateway reviews into their programme plan and evidence the robustness of their approach including by demonstrating the independence of some inputs.
- Private sector specialists can be commissioned by LPAs or government to undertake the necessary work.
- Peer assessments.
- And we suggest, in line with the many other proposals, that to assist both the reviewer and the LPA a standardised approach, toolkit and template should be provided for each review stage. We recommend that this allows some flexibility for the reviewer.

Question 20: Do you agree with our proposals for the gateway assessment process, and the scope of the key topics? Are there any other topics we should consider?

Agree with the topics and see comments in Question 18 and 19 about the time and resources required and the skills and capacity of those undertaking the reviews.

Question 21: Do you agree with our proposal to charge planning authorities for gateway assessments?

Disagree both as a matter of principle and practicality. The tone of the proposals is that the gateway reviews are a form of regulation over which the authority will have no control or influence.

Government should pay. However, should local authorities be able to commission their own review and/or it be conducted in a partnership or peer approach this point may be revisited.

Local authority resources are under extreme pressure. The imposition of a substantial charge particularly as indicated by the extensive nature of the reviews proposed and the potential impositions arising from the gateway review will not generate ownership of the process.

Question 22: Do you agree with our proposals to speed up plan examinations? Are there additional changes that we should be considering enabling faster examinations?

Largely Yes. Although we question whether the exclusion of as much opportunity to debate, promote and challenge as presently exists will lead to a more litigious approach of those who disagree with the Local Plan.

We also note that the proposals avoid defining the period of the Examination for similar reasons to those we list as obstacles to achieving Local Plan completion in 30 months.

Question 23: Do you agree that six months is an adequate time for the pause period, and with the government's expectations around how this would operate?

In most cases Yes. However, some environmental assessments depend on the seasons and can take more than 12 months from launch to delivery. Recommend that the credibility and currency of any such assessment should be a requirement of the gateway reviews.

Question 24: Do you agree with our proposal that planning authorities should set out their overall approach to engagement as part of their Project Initiation Document? What should this contain?

Yes, although good practice guidance should be valuable.

It should include:

- All interested stakeholder groups from the public, private, public and third sectors. Most especially business should be consulted via accredited Chambers of Commerce.
- Outline of a range of engagement methodologies and the appropriate methodology/ies for any stakeholder/s.
- A statement of intent and methodology of inclusivity, i.e., how to reach as many stakeholder interests as possible including the digitally poor, people with disabilities, people with language and cultural barriers, the timing and location of events, the of a range of digital channels.
- Timetable of engagement to include lead times to invite participation, prepare materials and report back.
- Communication plan.

Some planning authorities will have well-developed approaches to stakeholder engagement and should be a source of best practice.

Question 26: Should early participation inform the Project Initiation Document? What sorts of approaches might help to facilitate positive early participation in plan-preparation?

Yes. A comprehensive communication plan which directly and through multimedia highlights the importance of the Plan, the range of opportunities to input.

Question 27: Do you agree with our proposal to define more clearly what the role and purpose of the two mandatory consultation windows should be?

In principle but the requirement should not be so prescriptive that it frustrates timely consultation on matters identified by the planning authority, a gateway review or earlier stages of participation.

Question 28: Do you agree with our proposal to use templates to guide the form in which representations are submitted?

In principle but not exclusively. Please define a process by which those in digital poverty, with disabilities, language and cultural barriers can make representations.

Question 29: Do you have any comments on the proposed list of prescribed public bodies?

Suggest:

- LSIPs
- Registered Social Landlords
- Hospital Trusts
- Parish and Town Councils
- Business membership organisations, such as the local Accredited Chambers of Commerce, (on employment related applications and policies).

We note that you have not asked about a list of private or third sector bodies with which Planning authorities should be required to engage but which would not be subject to a requirement to assist.

We suggest:

- Accredited Chambers of Commerce (to reaffirm)
- Other trade and sector bodies, e.g., Tourism Associations
- Individual businesses
- Schools and Colleges
- Community Councils
- Councils for the Voluntary Sector
- Community organisations which may facilitate access to difficult to reach groups.

Question 30: Do you agree with the proposed approach? If not, please comment on whether the alternative approach or another approach is preferable and why.

Agree with placing a requirement to assist on defined public bodies. We have identified above concerns about their capacity to assist. We also ask, what measures, including resources, Government intends to put in place to support planning authorities to secure their assistance in a timely way.

No strong views on the approach other than to observe that the earlier a body has notice of the need and timing of input the more likely they will be able and willing to do so.

Question 31: Do you agree with the proposed requirements for monitoring?

Yes, where they take a proportionate, tailored, and timely approach.

Question 32: Do you agree with the proposed metrics? Do you think there are any other metrics which planning authorities should be required to report on?

Agree those listed. Also suggest:

Housing:

- Number on housing register

- Net social housing units completed.
- Average value of house to average local wage.

Economy:

- Net change in GVA.
- Net change in jobs and indicator of ratio to population.
- Net change in economically inactive and indicator of ratio to population.
- Number of Inward Investment success (foreign owned companies) queries each LPA has turned down.

Waste:

- Tonnes waste to landfill

Question 39: Do you have any views on how we envisage the Community Land Auctions process would operate?

There is insufficient detail to comment on how these might operate. Our concern would be that they seem complicated and require a level of expertise that may not be available within planning authorities.

We recommend that Government looks again at the present measures for recovering value from development sites and particular examples of where they have been most successful in delivering, e.g., infrastructure to enable development; social and affordable housing; educational and other facilities.

Factors for success include:

- Robust evidence of need in developing the plan
- Early announcement of intent of principles and targets in the Local Plan – which sets developer and landowner expectations prior to sale.
- Strength of resolve by the planning authority and most particularly the Inspector at examination
- Engendering public understanding and support for the outcomes in the Examination and in later planning processes
- Developing skills and resources in planning authorities to negotiate.

We recommend that Government considers how to ensure the robustness of planning authorities.

We also recommend that Government considers the opportunities for expansion of measures such as Simplified Planning Zones and local development orders. These may take some time in establishing and agreeing the constraints but offer certainty to the developer for a long period of time. They have been shown to enable swift development, increased GVA and jobs, competitive advantage within and outside the UK, and increasingly may be a tool in delivering net zero.

Question 40: To what extent should financial considerations be taken into account by local planning authorities in Community Land Auction pilots, when deciding to allocate sites in the local plan, and how should this be balanced against other factors?

The primary objective should be delivery of a well-evidenced vision and objectives. Financial considerations should only be brought into play when other factors in the decision are marginal. If the CLA were combined with the robust approach described above in time expectations of value will fall.

Question 41: Which of these options should be implemented, and why? Are there any alternative options that we should be considering?

We welcome the recognition of some of the constraints on delivery we identified at Q6.

We welcome the principle of improving capability and capacity measures in planning authorities but express concern that the measures are too weak to deliver a comprehensive improvement in the sector within the immediate timescale. Given the overall shortage in number of planning professionals nationally, there is a risk that investment in a small number of authorities will result in the depletion of resources elsewhere. This depletion may be further exacerbated by an investment in planning inspectors and to serve the increased demands of the new processes.

We recommend that government through LSIPs and HE invests in the recruitment and training of a greater number of junior professionals as well as invests in the training and development of existing professionals particularly in skills gaps such as commercial negotiation and digital.

Question 43: Do you have any views on the potential impact of the proposals raised in this consultation on people with protected characteristics as defined in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010?

We have expressed throughout a concern for the means of inclusive engagement of those in digital poverty who may include a disproportionate number of older people, those with disabilities, with cultural or language obstacles to engagement. We have made recommendations to address that. An engagement plan which addresses the needs of these disadvantaged groups. Advice from those local authorities which have demonstrated success in inclusive engagement.

In submitting the above comments, and completing the online survey, we invite you to review and note the representations and comments made in these as being relevant to your wider programme of work, and business views. We would also like to draw your attention to the BCC's [Planning Manifesto](#) which aligns with our priorities and outlines why planning matters to businesses.



Paul Britton
Chief Executive
Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce Group

About the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce

The Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce (TVCC) is one of the largest accredited Chambers within the UK and the only accredited Chamber of Commerce for the Thames Valley region. The Chamber is a proven centre of excellence for trade and inward investment services.

Representing over 4,000 companies in membership, with an economy estimated in size to be more than £83,848m (2015), it is home to over 115,000 businesses, including: 11 of the world's top 15 tech companies; the No.1 University in the world (Oxford); fastest growing city (Reading) in the UK (EY); once again, the two highest performing cities (Oxford and Reading) according to PwC; the second largest trading city in the UK (Slough); the most productive city per capita (Slough) (Centre

for Cities) and the No.1 region, outside of London, for attracting inward investment. In addition, the Thames Valley Chamber credits a range of impressive statistics:

- 295,000 combined number of staff employed by members.
- 5000+ number of active trade customers.
- £3,847,682,487 – the value of Chamber facilitated exports during 2022.
- Average 150 new trade customers each year.
- 183 countries trading with our customers.
- 83 sectors represented by members and international trade customers.
- Consistently one of the UK's most attractive locations for attracting inward investment.
- 65% of international companies setting up or expanding in the Thames Valley have been supported by TVCC.