Policy priorities for the new government

Key issues

Great Repeal Bill

In order to enable smooth transition out of the EU, the Government proposes to save all legislation currently coming from the Commission and Parliament by a single act of Parliament. This is all very well, but a key concern of the planning profession is what happens then. Will this Bill provide powers to Ministers to then alter under secondary legislation what has been saved? How will Parliament and civil society be engaged and empowered to shape the post-EU legislative and regulatory landscape?

The RTPI will be looking in detail at this issue in coming months.

Planning

The Queen’s Speech reaffirmed the Government’s commitment to build new homes, many of the mechanisms for which were outlined in the Housing White Paper (to which the RTPI responded). While the RTPI have generally called for less tinkering with planning policy and legislation (due to the adverse impact this is having on their ability to plan and deliver), there are some sensible measures proposed from the White Paper that should be brought forward sooner rather than later and that we have called for in our 2017 election manifesto.

Of utmost importance now is for local authorities to have plans in place. Our election manifesto calls for incentives for local authorities to cooperate. This can be aided by some of the Housing White Paper proposals to strengthen the duty to cooperate. Other practical recommendations that can be brought forward as soon as possible include:

- Make examination and consultation requirements for local plans more proportionate
- Boost local authority capacity to deliver (including raising planning fees)
- Allow local authorities to dispose of land with the benefit of planning permission they have granted themselves
- Introduce measures to support neighbourhood planning
- Help make better use of public sector sites
- Deter unnecessary appeals
- Make the status of ‘endorsed recommendations’ by the National Infrastructure Commission clear
- Gather evidence for low build-out rates on sites with planning consent
- Support right to build task force
- Make clear that local planning policies should support measures for the future resilience of communities and infrastructure to climate change
- Ensure housing requirement policies address needs of a wide range of people, such as older or disabled people
- Support local authorities to make use of new regulations such as brownfield registers and permission in principle, to be proactive in planning and de-risking sites for development
Industrial Strategy

Government has reaffirmed its commitment to spreading prosperity and opportunity across the country through a new modern, industrial strategy, with consistent leadership from Greg Clark who has retained his position as Secretary of State for BEIS.

The RTPI supports a more coordinated and directional approach to economic planning, which provides an opportunity for the government to demonstrate progress against UN Sustainable Development Goal 9, to “build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation”.

The government should proceed with measures to strengthen the Industrial Strategy as we recommended in our comments on the Green Paper. This includes setting out a mission-oriented agenda which links to the strategy to wider government ambitions around housing, environment and climate change (see below), and considering the spatial implications of industrial growth in different parts of the country in terms of how they might affect demand for housing and infrastructure.

Infrastructure

In the Queen’s Speech, the government proposed legislation to build and operate the next stage of the High Speed 2 network, improve the protection of critical infrastructure, and support automated and electric vehicles. They also reaffirmed commitment to the £23bn National Productivity Investment Fund.

Our Election Manifesto called on the government to give local authorities the power to capture the uplift in land value that follows when land is earmarked for development, allowing the benefits of growth to be reinvested into high quality affordable housing and infrastructure for communities. These were absent from the Queen’s Speech, despite being mentioned in the Conservative Manifesto.

Devolution

The Queen’s Speech focuses on devolved powers in Northern Ireland, which includes planning. The RTPI considers the restoration of the devolved Government in Northern Ireland to be a priority, which is essential to provide strategic leadership for planning and the delivery of infrastructure.

Housing

The Queen’s Speech confirmed the Government’s intention to follow through with plans outlined in the Housing White Paper, in particular to facilitate more homes being built where they are needed, increase transparency in the land market, and get more people building homes.

Detail on some of this was lacking. There was no stated target for housebuilding to confirm the one million new homes promised in the Conservative Manifesto. There was also no confirmation that the Government will continue with the manifesto’s ‘Digital Land’ agenda, which built on the transparency plans of the Housing White Paper.

One disappointing omission was anything relating to helping local authorities and communities capture rises in land value. The Conservative Manifesto outlined plans to reform Compulsory Purchase Orders to help local authorities purchase sites at closer to existing market value. This was not mentioned in the Queen’s Speech.

In addition to the planning recommendations above, the following should be done now:

- Give local authorities the power to capture the uplift in land value that follows when land is earmarked for development, allowing the benefits of growth to be reinvested into high quality affordable housing and infrastructure for communities. The Compulsory Purchase Order plans outlines in the Manifesto provide one opportunity for this. This would also enjoy cross-party support.
• Confirm and elaborate on the ‘Digital Land’ plans outlined in the manifesto. Opening up the Land Registry and making information on land more transparent has cross-party political support and broad support from developers and civil society.

• Get more people building homes by offering ready permitted sites to SME builders, keeping housing associations building, and providing direction on suitable land for housing.

• Use the Industrial Strategy to set a mission to deliver one million new homes. This would capitalise on the benefits to the economy and labour market from developing national expertise on modern methods of construction like modular housing, build up skills in the construction and built environment professions, and stimulate infrastructure investment.

Climate change

Climate change is one of the most urgent issues facing our country, and the planet. The UK is a signatory to the Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, where SDG 13 requires the government to “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”.

The Queen’s Speech reaffirmed continued support for international action against climate change, including the implementation of the Paris Agreement. The government has proposed legislation on automated and electric vehicles, which includes a commitment to improving national charging and hydrogen refuelling infrastructure, and supports their ambition for almost every car and van to be zero-emission by 2050.

While these are welcome measures, our Election Manifesto calls for more ambitious actions are needed to reduce emissions in line with our national and international commitments, and to tackle dangerous levels of air pollution experienced in many of our towns and cities.

The uptake of electric vehicles will need to be accompanied by a rapid transition towards renewable and low-carbon electricity generation, to ensure that the increased demand from the transport sector is consistent with emission reduction targets. Transport demand needs to be managed through investments in public transport, walking and cycling infrastructure, and cities need to the resources to establish congestion charging zones which restrict polluting vehicles. New development must be accompanied by transport infrastructure which encourages sustainable travel patterns.

The government’s Industrial Strategy can catalyse growth and productivity by focusing on the opportunities of the low-carbon economy. Our Election Manifesto states that it should include a mission to make all new buildings zero carbon, and a concerted effort to drive energy efficiency in existing buildings. While the Smart Meters Bill proposed in the Queen’s Speech is welcome, this is again just one of many actions that will be required.

The Government needs to publish its ‘Clean Growth Plan’ as soon as possible, setting out rigorous actions to deliver on our international commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals and Paris climate obligations. It must show how the government intends to meet the legally binding carbon budgets set out by the Committee on Climate Change, and should recognise the critical role of planning in delivering low-carbon built environments.

Mental health

In the Queen’s Speech, the government proposed to reform mental health legislation and ensure that mental health is prioritised in the National Health Service in England.

These proposals can be strengthened by recognising the positive role of planning in delivering better and more inclusive places, those which provide people with access to jobs, opportunities and security, and promote both physical and mental wellbeing. The RTPI has published advice on planning of built environments for people living with dementia, and our upcoming research on the ‘Location of Development’ will set out the latest evidence on the relationship between urban form and public health, including the benefits of green space and active travel.
Useful links

Queens Speech
Background notes on Queen’s Speech
Housing White Paper
Conservative Manifesto
RTPI 16 ways to address the affordable housing crisis
RTPI 2017 Election Manifesto

About the RTPI

The Royal Town Planning Institute champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. We represent over 24,000 members worldwide, supporting them throughout their careers. We shape planning policy, raise professional standards and are the only body in the UK to confer Chartered status to planners, the highest professional qualification.