

Fixing our broken housing market – The Housing White Paper



Heavily trailed in the media for almost a week, the government's long-awaited Housing White Paper was published for consultation yesterday. The government hopes that it will fix a "broken" housing market, seen as one of the greatest barriers to progress in Britain today.

In advance of the Paper's release, much commentary was made about the continued shift away from the Conservative's long-standing focus on mass home ownership, and towards recognition of renting as a genuine alternative to buying a house. The mandatory requirement for Starter Homes is not mentioned, and instead there is a policy expectation that housing sites deliver a minimum of 10% affordable home ownership and rented tenures. As predicted, it is proposed that powers relating to starter homes have been devolved to local authorities. Given the opposition by many local authorities to the starter home initiative, it will be interesting to see how many are actually delivered into the market. There is also now a wage cap for those seeking Starter Homes.

However, many of the other themes are somewhat familiar, with the White Paper seemingly aimed at reforming the current system, rather than overturning it – not least:

- High density development on brownfield locations in close proximity to transport hubs, and on surplus public sector land.
- Despite much media coverage, the Green Belt is to be maintained and protected except in "exceptional circumstances".
- Local plan making is to be tightened up but still used as a tool for enabling development. It should be based on meeting identified housing need, albeit potentially against a single, nationally recognised methodology.

Much of the news lies in the "sticks and carrots" that the White Paper contains in its detail, aimed at both developers and local authorities, including:

- Consideration of the expansion of existing local authority powers to force developers to complete development, and the reduction of the time period to implement consent from 3 to 2 years.
- Whether local authorities should be able to take into account a developer's track record when considering proposals.
- Raising planning application fees by 20% in June, with further rises possible and the potential for fees for planning appeals.
- Government intervention where local authorities are unwilling or unable to adopt local plan policies in a timely manner and, if housing delivery falls below prescribed levels, the NPPF presumption in favour of sustainable development will become automatic.

As the Minister for Housing himself tweeted, there is no silver bullet within the paper but in general terms it seeks to encourage developers to build, and local authorities to let them (and seemingly, in some circumstances, make them!). However, some of the measures being suggested against developers seem a little unrealistic, not least those relating to the completion of development. All in all, the White Paper has set itself a huge task, and many will question whether the measures set out within it are sufficient to do the job.

The government is welcoming comments until 2 May 2017. If you wish to discuss the contents of the White Paper more, or would like us to help you get your views across, please contact one of our nationwide team.

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