

Minister: Planning legislation 'won't be any time soon'

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Legislation to enact reforms proposed in the government's Planning for the Future white paper "won't be any time soon", the housing minister has said.

Speaking at the LGA's environment, economy, housing & transport board today, Christopher Pincher said his department did not view the end the closing of the consultation on 29 October as "the end of the process", but "the beginning of the process to make sure we get a tight set of proposals which are legislatable".

Many of the proposals in the white paper have been met with fierce opposition from councillors and MPs concerned about a reduction in democratic oversight in the planning system. The consultation received more than 44,000 responses.

Mr Pincher said while the timing of the ensuing bill is out of his hands, "it won't be anytime soon".

He indicated the planning white paper's proposals for land to be designated in local plans into three zones; 'protected', 'renewal' and 'growth' – could be adapted in response to consultation feedback.

He said there has been "some interest" in how the renewal area, which covers existing built areas, will work – "whether that can be split down into sub categories".

"That is something which we will go away and reflect on."

Mr Pincher also attempted to alleviate concerns over the government's proposals for a nationally set infrastructure levy to replace section 106 agreements and the community infrastructure levy by suggesting a more localised infrastructure tariff is still on the table.

Mr Pincher said the proposals for a national infrastructure levy had been "an area of significant concern" in the consultation feedback – "from developers, from local authorities and from other stakeholders as well". He told councillors the issue had been raised of "whether a national levy proposal is the right one or whether...a more localised levy system is appropriate".

"There is some further work to do in that area," he added.

Mr Pincher also spelt out his resolve to create incentives to encourage developers to build on land that already has planning permission, amid criticism from many in the sector that the current planning system was being unfairly blamed for low build out rates.

He said he was “very keen” to look at incentives to encourage developers to build where they have permissions, but also cautioned of the need to avoid “perverse consequences”. “We need to make sure we balance those incentives there may be to SME [builders].”

Mr Pincher also said there had been “broad support and encouragement” for digitalising the planning process in the consultation feedback, and for a “map based system which is far more engaging, accessible and usable”.

However, many of the consultation responses highlighted that council planning departments would need more resources to deliver the reforms.

Mr Pincher revealed the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government plans to undertake a “comprehensive skills and resourcing review” and “consult and explore opportunities for a new fee approach” to ensure councils can “execute effectively” the proposals contained in the planning white paper.

Mr Pincher also heard concerns about the government’s intention to introduce the new style streamlined local plans described in the white paper in 2024. Board chair David Renard (Con) said there is “great concern around how we will transition from the existing local plan arrangement into the new local plan arrangement”.

Mr Pincher responded that the ministry “will look to make sure we have that transition plan in place”.

“Fundamentally it is important for local authorities to continue with their plan making process...because having an up to date local plan will be the best springboard into the new system.

“We want to work with you to determine how best to roll it out. I don’t think we want multiple planning systems operating at the same time, by the same token we will need to use go ahead authorities to act as path finders for our proposals and we will want to work with you to see how we can best achieve that.”

The board's deputy chair Linda Gillham (Ind) said she has been told “there are a lot of neighbourhood plans out there that have stalled because people just don’t know whether to go forward with them or not”.

“Planning consultants are reporting that neighbourhood plans have lost their momentum because they are not sure of the future.”

Mr Pincher said he was “keen to spread neighbourhood plans”, which “tend to be in places which are rural and in the south”. “We need to move northwards and get more neighbourhood plans into urban communities. Finding ways of getting that baked into the final planning proposition we come out with will be very useful for the democratic process.”

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