

PLANNING IN LONDON

Issue 136 — January–March 2026 | Executive Summary

1. Planning Enables; It Doesn't Deliver

The editors argue that endless revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework have failed to deliver housing, as the key question — who will actually build 1.5 million homes — remains unanswered. They condemn the Greater London Authority's record of building zero homes, Homes England's inability to act as a direct client, and the private sector's market failures at scale. The Leaders note that London's annual housing starts have fallen to fewer than 5,000 in 2024–25, down from 20,000 just two years earlier, while the target of 90,000 per year from 2028 is described as "an incredible fantasy." The state's underfunding of social housing is called a national scandal, with the NPPF's expectation that the private sector will fund affordable provision described as fundamentally flawed.

2. New Kinds of Suburbia (Lee Mallett)

Mallett argues London is not a dense city and could accommodate far more housing through suburban intensification. He highlights two design-led initiatives: HTA's Placemaking Not Plotting report, which advocates design codes to create sustainable suburbs rather than wasteful housebuilder "plotting"; and Metropolitan Workshop's Homestead concept — a flexible neighbourhood block framework promoting greater density, shared amenity and social opportunities. He calls for a strong visual campaign to win public support for densification.

3. Key Opinion Pieces

London Housing Emergency Measures (Simon Ricketts)

The MHCLG/Mayor consultation package on emergency housing measures is deemed "underwhelming" — too caveated to provide the investor confidence needed. Ricketts argues the proposed time-limited planning route and CIL relief are overly complex, and that the section 106 model is broken. He calls for simpler, faster measures, while welcoming the Homes for People We Need campaign's case for substantial government subsidy for social rent homes.

Pragmatic Approach to Housing Crisis (Olivia Harris)

Harris welcomes the emergency 20% affordable housing threshold as pragmatic, noting housing delivery is at its lowest since 2014. She highlights £2–4 billion in unspent CIL sitting idle in council accounts while boroughs spend £5.5 million daily on homelessness. She calls for flexibility to redirect unspent CIL towards affordable housing viability.

Gateway 2 Delays (Sarah Rock)

The Building Safety Act 2022 Gateways process is causing severe delays for high-rise residential buildings — the average wait for Gateway 2 approval reached 48 weeks in London (statutory target: 12 weeks). The BSR is being restructured as an arm's-length body under MHCLG, with 100+ new staff hired, but improvements will take time to feed through.

Housebuilding Crisis & Viability (Andrew Golland)

London's housing starts have fallen to just 27% of levels five years ago. Golland critiques the November 2025 package — arguing that removing viability assessments does not make unviable sites viable, and that blanket 20% affordable housing policies will have mixed results by location. He calls for more sophisticated, regionally consistent strategic guidance on viability and Section 106 delivery.

Predictions for 2026 (Tim Foreman & Lawrence Turner)

Foreman (LRG) anticipates a stronger housing market in early 2026 as interest rates ease, but warns that regulatory burdens — biodiversity net gain, building safety levies, affordable housing

requirements — continue to suppress land values and viability. Turner (Boyer) argues 2026 must convert ambitious planning reform into real permissions and starts, identifying seven priorities: keeping plan-making moving, translating Grey Belt policy into real sites, treating planning capacity as national infrastructure, using technology to reduce friction, removing environmental blockers strategically, backing well-governed public delivery, and communicating differently with communities.

4. Briefings: Planning & Infrastructure Act and New NPPF

The Planning and Infrastructure Act has received Royal Assent. Key measures include: streamlining consultations for nationally significant infrastructure projects; bolstering development corporations for new towns; expanding compulsory purchase powers; establishing Spatial Development Strategies across regions; and creating a Nature Restoration Fund to replace case-by-case nutrient neutrality negotiations. Housing Secretary Steve Reed claimed the Act will "halve" planning delays. Reactions from the sector are cautiously positive on structure but sceptical about delivery without proper resourcing.

A major new NPPF consultation (December 2025) introduces National Decision-Making Policies (NDMPs). Key changes include a strengthened presumption in favour of sustainable development ("substantially outweighed" replaces "significantly and demonstrably"); a default "yes" to development within 800m of well-connected rail stations; new minimum density rules; simplified biodiversity net gain for smaller sites; and a new "medium site" category (10–49 homes) for SMEs. Lichfields (Clements & Spry) welcome the clearer, rules-based approach but flag that transitional provisions protecting recently adopted local plans could constrain delivery by an estimated 77,000 homes over five years across 39 local plan areas.

5. London Planning & Development Forum — December 2025 Meeting

The forum examined four topics:

- **Placemaking Not Plotting:** HTA's Ben Derbyshire and Andy von Bradsky presented recommendations for a greenfield development design code to improve housing quality, increase suburban density, and speed planning decisions.
- **Jumpstarting Housebuilding & SME Delivery:** Pocket Living's Hugo Owen highlighted that SMEs now deliver only 10% of housing output (down from 40%), with half at risk of insolvency. He called for presumption in favour of small sites, affordable housing exemptions for sub-10-home schemes, and a proportionate planning system for SMEs.
- **Camden High Street Upgrade:** Edgy Collective presented a public realm scheme with community planting and the Music Walk of Fame — a trail of commemorative stones along Camden High Street.
- **Parliamentary Select Committee Update:** NDMPs confirmed as non-statutory; NPPF updated at Christmas; new station-proximity policies and minimum densities expected to apply nationwide.

6. Features

Can We Create a Bedroom Bonanza? (Nicholas Boys Smith)

Create Streets argues for mansard roof extensions as a low-cost, high-value route to new bedrooms. Tower Hamlets' design-coded approach increased annual mansard applications by 688% and raised approval rates from 27% to 93%. Kensington & Chelsea's Redcliffe Road Local Development Order pre-grants permission, with five of twelve eligible homes already building within 18 months. Boys Smith urges the Mayor and councils to replicate this model at scale across London.

Helping First Time Buyers (Adrian Plant, SOWN)

Demand for shared ownership consistently exceeds supply. With Help to Buy ended, approximately 202,000 households — under 1% — live in shared ownership. Plant calls for government to back shared ownership with the same dedicated branding and campaign it gave Help to Buy, and to reconsider funding structures, particularly in light of reduced housing association capacity.

Shaping the World: Imagination in Place-Making (Peter Barbalov, Farrells)

Barbalov calls for a return to imagination and boldness in architecture, arguing that the so-called "London Vernacular" of stripped-down brick buildings has become characterless. Referencing Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*, he argues that imaginative architecture creates place, and that place-making — concerned with space, form, identity and civic pride — is the most important activity of architecture and urbanism.

7. Planning Performance (England, July–September 2025)

Applications received fell 3% year-on-year to 78,800. Decisions fell 4% to 76,200. Residential applications granted fell 3% to 7,100. Only 19% of major applications were decided within the statutory 13-week period. London's decision grant rate of 82% remains the lowest of all regions. The longer-run trend shows a steep downward trajectory in applications and decisions since a post-COVID peak in 2021.