

2010 Election Manifestos and Planning - Briefing Note

This week saw all three major political parties publish their manifestos for the May 2010 General Election. The Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative Party all address planning and development as part of their vision for government. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats both propose a more democratic and locally controlled planning system. Both also advocate the abolition of the Infrastructure Planning Commission and an end to 'garden grabbing'. Labour continues to promote its changes to planning law by focussing on efficiency rather than reform. What follows is a brief summary of these potential changes.

The Labour Party

The Labour Party manifesto does not introduce sweeping changes to the current planning system and planning laws. The party uses the manifesto to further reaffirm what it sees as the strengths of its own system and to attack Conservative plans to reform the system entirely. They claim that overhauling the system would negatively impact on Labour's 'low-carbon revolution'. The proposals they put forward all aim to work within the current planning framework. These include:

- Reforming the council house financing system to allow local authorities to build up to 10,000 council houses a year by the end of the next Parliament;
- Making savings in regeneration funding through funding cuts;
- Maintaining the 60% target for new homes being built on brown field sites;
- Introducing a new system of land management to better manage pressure on land use as a consequence of competing uses, such as development and food production;
- Strengthening protection of local services, making it harder for local councils to grant planning permission for changes in land use;
- Continuing the modernisation of the UK's infrastructure through major projects such as high speed rail links; and,

- Putting forward new areas and habitats for protected status to link up existing greenbelt areas.

The Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats plan to increase the amount of local control over the planning process but also strongly advocate the protection of green space and land that is deemed to have important local amenity. (The Liberal Democrats had previously proposed to scrap Regional Spatial Strategies however this is not mentioned in the manifesto). There is some overlap between what they and the Conservatives are proposing, but the Liberal Democrats' vision for the planning system can be seen as less comprehensive, forming a smaller plank in their agenda. This includes:

- Abolishing the Infrastructure Planning Commission, returning decision making to a local level;
- Reducing the scope of the role of Regional Development Agencies to focus on economic development and prevent the overlap of services provided by existing bodies;
- Creating a new third-party right of appeal where planning decisions go against the local plan;
- Subjecting planning applications for retail developments to a local competition test;
- Protecting access to playing fields by closing loopholes that bypass planning procedures and allow them to be sold or built on;
- Creating a new designation for green areas with attached importance to the local community;
- Gardens being defined as green-sites, as an attempt to stop garden grabbing by developers;
- Preventing housing development on sites with a major risk of flooding; and,
- Forcing new second homes to go through a specific planning application process in areas where they threaten local communities, as well as giving councils the power to charge higher council tax on such properties.

The Conservative Party

The Conservative manifesto incorporates elements of its planning green paper, 'Open Source Planning', to create a sweeping new vision for the UK's planning system. Of the three parties, their manifesto proposes the most radical changes to the planning system. However, their more controversial proposal, the third party right of appeal, is not mentioned in the manifesto. Conservative plans include:

- Abolishing the Infrastructure Planning Commission, replacing it with a new, democratically accountable body that will provide a fast track process for major infrastructure projects;
- Using private or hybrid bills to promote new 'major projects', although the term 'major projects' is not defined;
- Referring all other 'major projects' to planning inquiries with binding timetables, with a minister giving the final approval over these projects;
- Abolishing regional spatial strategies;
- Creating a national framework that provides a guiding vision for all development;
- Incentivising local sustainable development from the perspective of local communities;
- Allowing communities to plan the direction in which they develop through neighbourhood plans that are incorporated into a collective local plan, as well as removing the power of planning inspectors to re-write local plans.
- Amending the 'Use classes Order' to allow any building work permitted by the local plan in pre-designated areas;
- Forcing developers to subsidise local communities for loss of amenities and the cost of additional infrastructure;
- Significant projects, such as housing, undergoing collaborative planning with the local community;
- Speeding up plans that receive no objections from local neighbours through a new system of approval;
- Limiting appeals against local planning decisions to cases that involve an abuse of power or failure to comply with the local plan;

- Encouraging county councils and unitary authorities to compile infrastructure plans, as well as encouraging them to cooperate with other public bodies;
- Empowering local neighbourhoods to prevent 'garden grabbing'; and,
- Creating new housing trusts to allow local communities to grant planning permission for new housing in villages and towns.

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About Local Dialogue

Local Dialogue is a specialist stakeholder communications agency with a successful track record of advising on and implementing consultation and communications programmes for developers, end users and the public sector.

Local Dialogue understands both the development process and the workings and motivations of communities and local authorities, as well as regional and national government.

Working as an integral member of the project team, we provide tactical advice and practical communications/consultation support at all stages of the development process from local development frameworks to initial proposals, planning applications to public inquiries right through to construction and launch.

Local Dialogue was founded in 2000 and currently employs 20 consultation and communication professionals in offices in London and Leeds.

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