

POSITION PAPER

# Meeting UK house demand, moving beyond the planning system

JAN  
2026



Across the UK, national governments have looked to reform the planning sector. Propertymark explores if this will be enough to build the homes we need.



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# Introduction

Since the introduction of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, homes have required consent from local authorities to be built. It has been argued that the existing planning system is no longer fit for purpose, that it is blocking the delivery of new homes.

That has been the UK Government's approach through legislation on Planning and Infrastructure, proposals that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) calls "central to the government's plan to get Britain building again and deliver economic growth". This legislation confirms that the UK Government believes that reforms to the planning system are fundamentally required to build 1.5 million homes within the 2024-2029 Parliamentary term.

Across the UK, national governments have acknowledged and are looking to address the need for additional homes.

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## Scotland

In November 2024, the Scottish Government published their Planning and the Housing Emergency Delivery Plan<sup>1</sup>, which also focuses on "unlocking the potential of planning" as the solution to the country's housing emergency.

## Wales

In December 2013, the Welsh Government set out proposals to reform the planning system in Wales through the establishment of 'Positive Planning'. Positive Planning was a set of proposed reforms that would help the Welsh Government set out national and regional objectives that would provide greater certainty for developers. Local authorities would be encouraged to work together to support larger, cross-boundary plans and work towards more consistent planning services.

Later in January 2014, the Delivering More Homes for Wales report of the Housing Supply Task Force 2014, would support the proposals to move towards Positive Planning<sup>2</sup>. Even with this commitment, many of the challenges the Welsh Government sought to tackle in 2013 remain. Despite high aspirations for change, when specifically looking into increasing the supply of affordable housing, a May 2025 report from the Affordable Housing Taskforce highlighted that there was still inconsistency of approaches across local authorities, shedding doubt on progress made towards the objectives set out in 2013<sup>3</sup>.

## Northern Ireland

In contrast, the Northern Ireland Executive's Housing Supply Strategy includes commitments to improve the planning system, but this is only one of nine objectives that success would be judged on<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the Executive's plan to improve the planning process is focused on prioritising projects with particular strategic or economic value and is not necessarily an indictment of the planning process in general.

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Judging the actions of each UK nation (aside for Northern Ireland), it would appear that the single major reason behind the UK's lack of supply can be directly pointed at the planning system.

On 9 June 2025, the UK Prime Minister announced a new AI tool to digitise the planning system, which he stated was responsible for why it takes so long to build anything in the UK. But do challenges with the planning system capture the entire issue? There are certainly frustrations with the planning system, which reports cited by UK nations highlight and professionals working within the sector are all too familiar with.

*Through a series of roundtables held with Propertymark members in September 2024, agents called the planning system overly complicated and that it disincentivised development. A lack of strategic oversight between local authorities and incentives for landowners lead to situations where some areas see considerable development and others are left behind.*

Despite these issues however, the speed in which homes have been approved has increased in recent years. In the last 10 years alone, over 300,000 units were approved for development in 50% of calendar years<sup>5</sup>. Even with that level of plans approved, the number of units where work had started frequently fell below half that level. Only around 180,000 homes have been built a year on average over the past 25 years. With that approval to development rate, double the number of homes would have to be approved through the planning system to regularly build over 300,000 new homes every year.

Even with the reforms, doubling the capacity of the planning system would be a colossal task given the existing financial and staffing pressures on local authorities. While there is certainly a case for reform, particularly consistency and greater resourcing for local authorities, to focus on reforming the planning system as the only solution is to fail to understand the larger picture. We therefore propose that a wider view of existing pressures on housing supply must be considered on top of issuing planning reforms. Only by doing so will the UK's housing supply meet demand.

Rather than focus on improving the planning system as a means of increasing housing supply, this position paper looks into three other areas that will need to be considered alongside planning reforms which risk undermining the capacity of the UK to build new homes if ignored.

These include:

- 1. The historic role local authorities played in the years the UK built well over the UK Government's 300,000 a year target** – between 1953 and 1973, an average of over 340,000 homes a year were built. During this time, local authorities built an average of 48.5% of all homes. In the past ten years, the UK has built an average 181,000 homes with local authorities building 1.3% of this number. Unlocking the potential for local authorities to build homes can support the return to annual housing completions to historic levels. Propertymark recommends exploring ways in which local authorities can build more homes, especially affordable housing which could reduce pressure on the private rented sector.
- 2. The number of properties that have received planning permission but where works haven't started** – in 2025 the Institute for Public Policy Research highlighted that the number of homes that had received planning permission but had not been built since 2015 exceeds 1.2 million, almost exceeding the UK Government's 1.5 million target<sup>6</sup>. This highlights that the failure to successfully legislate to incentivise developers to build homes is yet another factor beyond just the planning system contributing to the low number of homes being built

3. **The capacity for the construction industry to build 300,000 new homes a year** – the construction industry is currently facing considerable skills shortages and stagnant productivity. This undermines its ability to build 300,000 new homes a year, irrespective of the restrictive planning system. The UK Government must take action to improve the take up of construction skills and support more entrants into the construction workforce.

In addition to these areas, we will look at proposals for reforming the planning system and how proposals can be improved, including:

#### **Supporting small and medium-sized developers who face larger barriers to development**

Under the current planning system, it is often more profitable and time efficient to focus on a smaller number of larger projects. However, larger projects take longer to build, including after receiving planning permission and are not always viable for smaller developers. The UK Government should encourage smaller developers to contribute to national housing targets by incentivising smaller projects.

#### **Addressing skills gaps within planning departments**

Local authorities struggle to recruit and retain planning officers. Given proposals from the UK Government to delegate more planning decisions to officers, these skills gaps need to be addressed if this proposal is to improve the speed in which planning decisions can be made.

#### **Ensure Local Plans respond to demand for all property types and tenures**

Given the scale of housing need, there is a risk that local authorities will prioritise planning applications that deliver the largest number of homes. This risks homes being built that are not required or exacerbate local social issues such as a lack of rented homes, or homes more suitable for the elderly or disabled. The UK Government should mandate requirements for Local Plans to demonstrate existing demand for all tenures, including specialist types of property, and ensure that planning applications can respond to this demand.

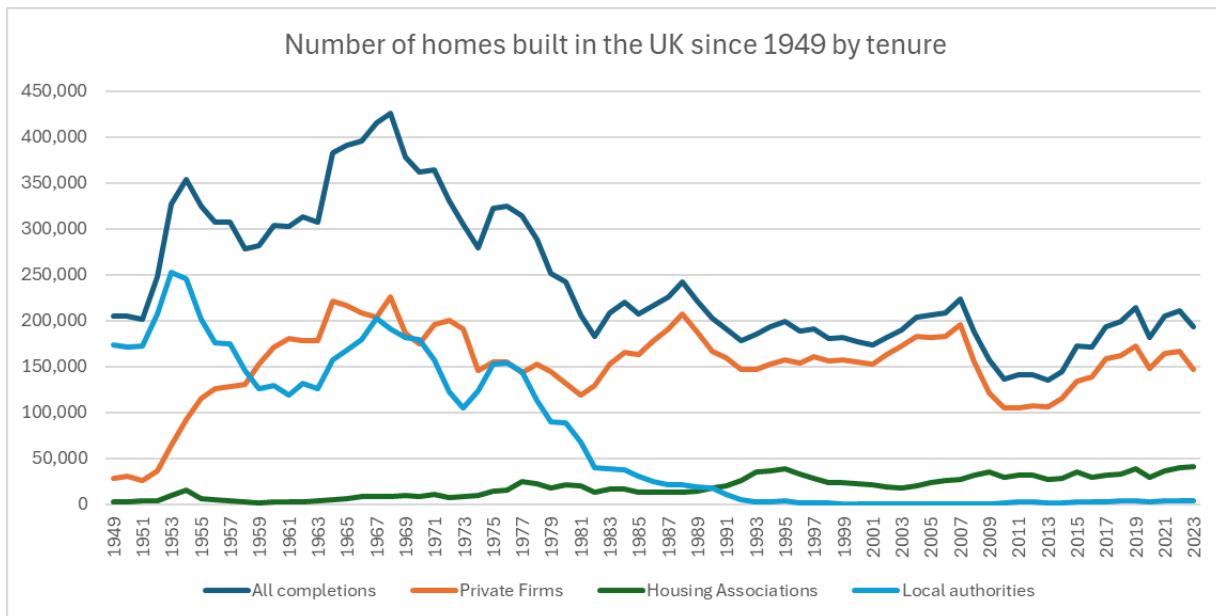
#### **Take an infrastructure first approach**

When new homes are built, it is essential that they are not left empty. Leaving homes and new communities without the wider infrastructure they need to be desirable places to live risks the UK Government chasing hard targets rather than dealing with the housing crisis.

Beforehand however, it is important to understand the history of housebuilding in the UK, how that relates to the planning system and where major gaps in supply have arisen.

## Scale of the housing shortage

To get a better understanding why the UK needs to build more homes, it is important to understand the number of homes built in the UK since the end of WW2. It may feel like the UK has always faced a housing shortage but that was not always the case.



Source ONS<sup>7</sup>

From the graph you can see that the number of homes built in the UK peaked in 1968 with 425,830 homes built. However, since the 1970s, the number of homes built in the UK has declined, only increasing slightly in recent years after an all-time low of 135,590 in 2013. Looking at the last decades the UK Government has figures for, between 2004 and 2023 the number of new homes built across the UK was 3,626,7505. This is almost 50% less than the number of homes completed between 1964 and 1983, which reached 6,373,630.

It may be reasonable to assume that this was due to the need for homes being greater during this period than it was during the past 20 years. This however is certainly not the case when we look at the number of homes built compared to increases in population size.

***While over 2.74 homes were built for every new person living in the UK (this includes births and net migration) between 1964 and 1983, between 2004 and 2023, only 0.44 homes were built for every new person living in the UK<sup>8</sup>.***

So not only has there been a decrease in the number of new homes built, but the UK population has also risen faster in recent years, meaning we need more homes than ever before. There are of course other factors to consider, such as the number of homes demolished, the percentage of empty homes, the size of new homes and the percentage of the population who are at the age when they are seeking a property. However, considering the scale of the difference between these two periods, it is not surprising that the UK Government and the industry has called for action to be taken.

# Impact of housing shortage

Building fewer homes in a vacuum is not necessarily a cause for concern. After all, supply could be following demand. However, over the past 20 years the number of homes built in relation to the number of people living in the UK has fallen sharply. This has led to a considerable gap between demand for homes and existing supply across all tenures.

## Social housing

There are currently 1.33 million households on local authority housing registers in England<sup>9</sup>. These people are living in the private rented sector, their own home, temporary accommodation or are homeless but are still looking for social housing. While this is short of the peak of 1.85 million in 2012, local authorities were required to consider all applications at the time, but this was removed following the Localism Act 2011<sup>10</sup>. However, since 2018 the number of households on housing registers has increased, indicating that demand has increased again recently, despite the ability for local authorities to have greater control over types of applicants. The demand is particularly acute in certain areas, with families needing to wait 107 years in Westminster before they would have access to a social home with three or more bedrooms<sup>11</sup>.

## Private Rented Sector

In recent years especially, average rent costs across England have risen faster than real wage growth.

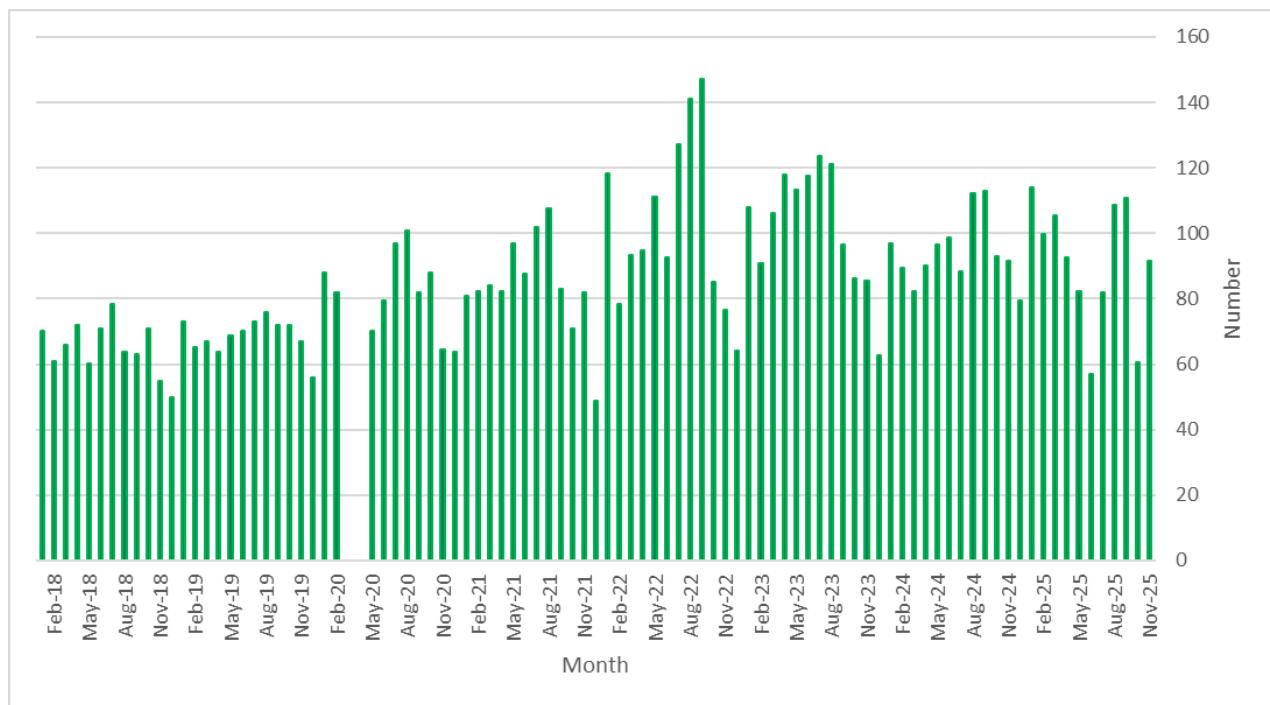


Source ONS <sup>12 13</sup>

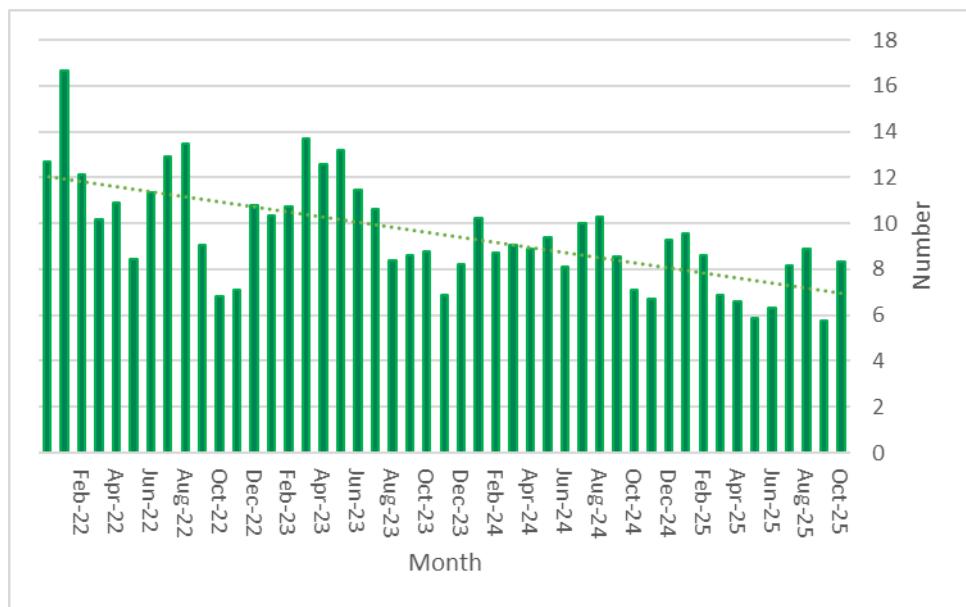
A significant cause behind this has been the lack of supply within the Private Rented Sector. With demand for social housing rising and homeownership becoming less affordable, a greater number of people are turning to renting, as well as staying in rented homes for longer

Between January 2015 and March 2017, the average number of renters registered with Propertymark agents remained consistent between 30 and 40. This has since increased considerably, with the total number of tenants applying for a new property rarely falling below 60 since April 2017.

During this period, Propertymark agents would usually have between 8 and 10 properties available, rarely more and with some periods of having less than 6 properties. With the exception of six individual months, agents had over 6 tenants applying per property available. From March 2021 this did not fall below 11, fuelled by a combination of demand and falling availability of supply. The graph below shows the total number of tenants applying for properties on average at each Propertymark member branch.



The second graph showcases the number of new applicants per property available; this does not include existing tenants already registered with the agent looking for properties, but it demonstrates that demand for properties remains high. Additionally, it demonstrates that while tenants are staying in properties for longer<sup>14</sup>, demand for rental properties remains high.



Source: Propertymark

## Homeownership

Given the under delivery of homes, it's no surprise that the price of homes when compared to inflation has increased to record levels over the past 20 years. Much like rent increases, the cost of homes has often considerably outpaced wage growth. According to the Office for National Statistics, the housing affordability ratio, average house price divided by average annual wage, was 8.44 in England in 2022<sup>15</sup>.

This is only slightly less than a high of 8.74 in 2021 but almost double the housing affordability ratio in 1999, which was 4.37. England especially has seen an almost constant increase in housing costs in relation to incomes, whereas Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have seen their housing affordability ratios fall since the 2008 financial crisis. As of 2022, the housing affordability ratios in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland sit at 6.38, 5.29 and 5.10 respectively.



Source ONS<sup>16</sup>

As of 2024, the average age of first-time buyers in the UK is 33, the oldest in two decades<sup>17</sup>.

# Causes for the decline

## Local authorities

After the Second World War, local authorities built the majority of UK housing stock. It wasn't until 1959 when private firms built more homes than local authorities, and even then, there were still some years, such as in 1977 and 1970 when local authorities still built more homes than private firms. However, the number of homes built by local authorities saw a sharp decline in the 1980s, where local authorities built 85% of homes in 1951, to 8.8% of all homes in 1990, to its lowest point of 0.06% of all homes in 2004. In recent years, local authorities have begun to build more homes, but the total number of homes built pales in comparison to even the 1980s as they only built 2.2% of all homes in 2023.

Excluding local authorities almost entirely from housing development creates a major problem, as it leaves the delivery of the UK Government's housing targets dependent solely on the capacity of private firms to build enough homes each year. To achieve the UK Government's targets of 1.5 million homes during the Parliamentary year, 300,000 homes would need to be built every year. This is a figure that the private sector has never built. The most homes ever built by the private sector in the UK was 226,070 in 1968. If the UK Government wishes to unlock the potential of home building, it must consider the role that local authorities have to play in the development of new homes.

### Recommendation

**Governments and policy makers must take steps to review the causes behind the decline in local authority development, to reverse the changes that took place in the early 1980s so that local authorities can build more homes, as they had done so when the UK met its housing targets.**

## Role of the Planning System in the decline

However, this would require considerable public funding at a time when there is no appetite for large scale investment in the public sector. Perhaps therefore what the planning system requires is a complete overhaul, one that reflects that most of our homes are built by the private sector.

If we believe that the reforms to the planning system are primarily responsible for the decline in the number of homes built, then there should have been a significant reduction in the number of homes built in the years following the reforms. However, if we look at some key reforms in 1968, when the Town and Country Planning Act 1968<sup>18</sup> introduced requirements for the public to have its say in planning decisions and the major local authority shakeup from the Local Authority Act 1972<sup>19</sup>, there doesn't appear to be a great correlation between a significant drop off point after this legislation. In the years following, the number of homes built by local authorities would fall slightly, but they would increase in the mid-1970s. During the same period, the number of homes built by private firms fluctuates and increases in the late 1980s. If the reason was solely due to planning reforms, we would expect a considerably larger decline shortly after these dates and for there to be no increase. As it stands, the planning reforms of 1968 and 1972 may have had an impact but it is difficult to fully quantify how much.

Perhaps it is not the reforms in the 1960s and 1970s that are the issue, but how planning decisions are made. While the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 certainly worked to deliver more homes between the early 1950s and late 1970s, the planning system facilitated the delivery of homes by local authorities, especially as local authorities were only required to submit planning applications from 1976. In the decades following the late 1970s, the role that local authorities play in building homes has fallen considerably yet the planning system has not been reformed to reflect this. If local authorities are not

going to build more homes, we need a planning system that incentivises the private sector to build more homes.

### **Recommendation**

**The UK Government should examine in detail how the planning system has changed on a practical level since the 1970s. Any unnecessary requirements that do not lead to higher quality proposals or a faster application process should be considered for removal from the process.**

### **Incentivising smaller projects**

In its current form, the planning system incentivises larger projects, however these projects typically take longer to complete per home built. Therefore, one way to increase the number of homes built every year is to incentivise smaller developments, enabling smaller firms to develop homes that can be approved and completed more quickly.

In more recent years, even as planning applications are approved faster as mentioned earlier, research from the University of Warwick looking at over 18 million planning applications between 2000 and 2023 across the UK found that two thirds of all newly permitted developments are for large projects of over 50 units<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, in 2023 homes from development projects with over 500 units now make up 38% of all approved units, an increase from around 5% in 2000<sup>21</sup>. This is largely due to the relative cost-effectiveness of applying for fewer larger projects and that larger projects are less likely to be rejected. However, larger projects typically take longer to be approved, with larger projects of 500+ units taking over 4.4 times longer than developments of a single property.

Larger projects face considerable delays, sometimes unintentionally due to the complexities of managing a large project but once planning has been approved there isn't always a set deadline to finish the project. Since larger developers can apply for, and develop, multiple projects at once, they are financially incentivised to stagger the number of new homes coming to the market in a given area, preventing a fall in house prices. By contrast, smaller developers are more financially incentivised to complete projects quickly as they will not have the capacity or financial resources to delay or maintain multiple projects. While a larger number of smaller projects across the UK would be more efficient and likely lead to more homes built every year, difficulties for smaller firms to apply for smaller projects through the existing planning system makes it difficult and costly for new developers to be set up. Additionally, smaller sites can be left undeveloped as interest from most developers remains on larger projects.

### **Recommendation**

**Introduce a streamlined planning process and financial incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises, encouraging new start-ups and the involvement of smaller firms in development projects.**

## Recent legislative proposals

In recent years, the UK Government has taken steps to reform the planning process in order to accelerate the number of homes built every year, with the most recent legislation at the time of writing being the Planning and Infrastructure Bill that was published in March 2025<sup>22</sup>. At the time, these were flagship proposals from the Labour Government at Westminster, aimed at getting Britain building again and driving economic growth. The proposals, while welcome, fell short to meet the considerable number of homes that need to be built every year. Within the Bill there are two areas that could potentially undermine efforts to increase the speed in which planning proposals are approved. While connected to the Bill, these proposals can be popular with legislators, making it important to cover and suggest alternative recommendations.

The first is the commitment from the UK Government to place large-scale developments and new towns at the heart of their development strategy. As stated earlier, large scale developments take longer to receive planning permission and are not feasible for smaller developers. While the legislation takes steps to make it easier to design and approve large-scale projects with the additional infrastructure new towns need, larger projects will still take several years before the new homes are built. Smaller developments can be designed and approved more quickly, supporting the development of new homes in areas where large scale projects are not feasible or would face considerable local backlash.

### Recommendation

**In addition to large-scale developments, Government and policy makers must also promote the extension of existing towns and cities, which would be smaller but enable small and medium-sized enterprises to build more homes.**

Additionally, successive UK Governments have looked to review the way that local authorities approve planning applications, expanding the role that planning officers play in approving applications. These planning officers are not elected officials, so it is argued that they are less susceptible to political influence. However, historically planning departments have faced difficulty in recruiting planning officers. In fact, a 2023 skills survey conducted by MHCLG found that 91% of 118 planning departments across England which responded to the survey reported having difficulty recruiting for at least some planning officer roles in the previous 12 months, with half of planning departments reporting vacancies<sup>23</sup>. In addition to difficulties hiring planning officers, 72% of planning departments experienced difficulties in retaining staff over the previous 12 months.

Increased delegation to planning officers will increase the workload for existing planning officers, exacerbating existing skills issues and risking a higher turnover rate if positions cannot be filled. Rather than forcing a system of delegation by default, the UK Government should require local authorities to establish a clear system of delegation, one that would enable a quicker planning approval process but based on the skills available to the local authority. This ensures that local planning applications would not take longer during periods where fewer planning officers are available.

### **Recommendation**

**Require local authorities to set their own local scheme of planning delegation that can be clearly communicated with developers. Local authorities must be able to demonstrate that the scheme they've produced is in the best interests of local residents and/or leads to quicker planning decisions.**

Other proposals in recent years have included setting out that planning priorities should be clearly set out in Local Plans, which applications should aim to meet. If met, these applications should be streamlined through the process and approved more quickly. The challenge from this is, if applications are given the approval by default, then they risk not receiving the level of scrutiny that is required, especially for larger projects.

As an alternative, development projects must focus on the demand for specific tenures, size and types of buildings. Given the pressure on local authorities to meet housing targets, we risk applications being prioritised not on meeting demand for housing from within the local authority and projected migration from outside the local authority, but on the application that can provide the largest number of homes. If numbers are prioritised, we could see homes left empty or certain communities unable to find sufficient housing and struggling to move home.

### **Recommendation**

**Require local authorities to set requirements for tenures and specialist housing need within their area as part of their Local Plan. These requirements must be based on evidence of existing demand and any additional potential need over the next 15 years.**

Even if Local Plans are able to demonstrate contributions to supporting housing need across all tenures and types, new homes and communities need additional infrastructure to ensure they are desirable places to live. This is because chasing housing targets with no regard for tenure or the purpose they would serve within the communities risks new homes being left empty.

However, infrastructure can impact more than one local authority or require local authorities that border each other to cooperate. In two-tier areas (where county and district councils share planning responsibilities) there can often be frustration and a delay in the coordination and delivery of plans where Transport Plans for a county-wide area do not match up with district council local plans or where there is no Waste Management Plan in place for new developments. This issue must be tackled to accelerate the planning process, align infrastructure with housing proposals, and ensure local residents directly benefit from new developments.

### **Recommendation**

**Ensure a greater coordination of Local Plans with educational needs assessments, Waste Management Plans and Transport Plans across two-tier authorities.**

**Whilst the introduction of more Unitary Authorities across England will create a single planning authority which can help reduce conflicting policies and improve resource allocation for planning services, this must be managed effectively in order to not reduce capacity and local representation in planning decisions.**

## **Moving beyond planning reforms**

As previously stated, over the past 25 years, private firms only built an average of 150,159 properties. Even if twice the number of applications are approved, Propertymark is concerned that the industry does not currently have the ability to deliver the number of homes the UK needs without additional support and regulation.

One major mitigating factor in increasing the capacity of the construction industry is its low productivity compared with other sectors. When comparing the entire UK market sector against the construction industry, market sector output per hour is 250% higher in 2020 than it was in 1972<sup>24</sup>. Output per hour in the construction sector however is only 14.6% higher in 2020 than 1972 and in recent years has actually fallen from its peak of 32.9% higher than 1972 in 1999. When looking at output per hour between 1998 and 2020, output per hour for the entire economy grew by 28.8% while it decreased by 25% for the construction of buildings.

One of the key factors impacting the industry's productivity is shortages in the workforce. According to the Construction Skills Network Labour Market Intelligence Report 2024-2028<sup>25</sup>, the industry needs 50,300 extra workers every year to meet the expected levels of work, an increase from 45,000 from the year prior. Additionally, 31% of construction employers stated that finding suitably skilled staff was their key challenge.

### **Recommendation**

**Establish a national recruitment and skills campaign for the construction industry, supporting the development of a larger, more productive workforce.**

Another indicator that accelerating planning proposals should not be the extent to supporting the delivery of new homes is the 1.4 million homes that are believed to have received planning permission but have not yet been built<sup>26</sup>.

Looking at UK Government planning application statistics for England, 1,096,000 homes were granted planning permission in England between 2021 and 2024<sup>27</sup>. Despite this, development began on only 614,240 new homes, leaving 481,760 homes which did not start being built. Not only is this considerably lower than the number of homes which received planning permission, but the number of starts includes any homes that had been granted planning permission before 2021, so not necessarily would have one of the 1,096,000 homes that received planning permission between 2021 and 2024.

Improving the planning process alone will not be sufficient to ensure 1.5 million homes are built, especially when close to this number of homes have received planning permission but remain unbuilt. To ensure these homes are built, the UK Government must consider measures to accelerate the development of homes which have been approved., Potentially including restrictions on developers who have approved projects to incentivise building these homes.

#### **Recommendation**

**Require local authorities to review projects that have received planning permission but have not started or where severe delays have prevented projects from progressing. Binding resolutions for developers and other organisations involved in the delay must be issued with the most severe delays, larger projects or critical infrastructure delegated to the Secretary of State to resolve.**

## Recommendations

1. The UK Government should examine in detail how the planning system has changed on a practical level since the 1970s. Any unnecessary requirements that do not lead to higher quality proposals or a faster application process should be considered for removal from the process.
2. Governments and policy makers must take steps to review the causes behind the decline in local authority development, to reverse the changes that took place in early 1980s so that local authorities can build more homes, as they had done so when the UK met its housing targets.
3. Introduce a streamlined planning process and financial incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises to encourage new start-ups and the involvement of smaller firms in development projects.
4. In addition to large-scale developments, Government and policy makers must also promote the extension of existing towns and cities, which would be smaller but enable small and medium-sized enterprises to build more homes.
5. Require local authorities to set their own local scheme of planning delegation that can be clearly communicated with developers. Local authorities must be able to demonstrate that the scheme they've produced is in the best interests of local residents and/or leads to quicker planning decisions.
6. Require local authorities to set requirements for tenures and specialist housing needs within their area as part of their Local Plan. These requirements must be based on evidence of existing demand and any additional potential need over the next 15 years.
7. Ensure a greater coordination of Local Plans with educational needs assessments, Waste Management Plans and with Transport Plans across two-tier authorities.
8. Whilst the introduction of more Unitary Authorities across England will create a single planning authority, which can help to reduce conflicting policies and improve resource allocation for planning services, this must be managed effectively in order to not reduce capacity and local representation in planning decisions.
9. Establish a national recruitment and skills campaign for the construction industry, supporting the development of a larger, more productive workforce.
10. Require local authorities to review projects that have received planning permission but have not started or where severe delays have prevented projects from progressing. Binding resolutions for developers and other organisations involved in the delay must be issued with the most severe delays, larger projects or critical infrastructure delegated to the Secretary of State to resolve.

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