



**Project  
Speed**  
Briefing

# *Project Speed* & meeting housing targets

February 2021



## As Government plots our economic recovery from the pandemic, it has emphasised the importance of investing in our built environment.

In June 2020, the Prime Minister highlighted the need to deliver new infrastructure and buildings quicker, under the banner of Project Speed.

At the same time, he spoke of “building back better” and the subsequent National Infrastructure Strategy emphasised that through Project Speed, “vital infrastructure like schools, hospitals, transport and other networks will be delivered better, greener and faster”<sup>1</sup>. A significant element of this agenda is aimed at increasing the rate at which houses are built, which includes the target of 300,000 homes per year<sup>2</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already produced examples of project delivery being accelerated, notably the Nightingale hospitals. Similar approaches will be required if we are to fully reshape how we deliver future infrastructure programmes.

The Association for Consultancy and Engineering (ACE) has produced this briefing note as part of a series on Project Speed, with others exploring hospitals, schools and rail. This paper was written following a joint industry roundtable held with housing group Thakeham Homes.

Find out more at [www.acenet.co.uk/project-speed](http://www.acenet.co.uk/project-speed).



### Planning for the future

We must ensure that the homes we build meet the needs of future generations.

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### Opportunity in the residential sector

Local authorities want to create vibrant, attractive communities. Pressure on resources and the time needed to create local plans, means it does not always happen.

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### Creating a sustainable vision

When exploring social value as part of a development, wider objectives such as sustainable communities and Net Zero placemaking should also be considered.

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### Digitising the planning process to speed up delivery

Recent moves are welcome, but the sector has been calling for wider digitalisation of the planning system across the board, including web-based Local Plans.

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### Use of design codes and guides

Design coding should consider wider local social and economic outcomes such as employment, infrastructure and how the development sits within a local community.

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<sup>1</sup> HM Treasury, National Infrastructure Strategy (2020); [www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-infrastructure-strategy](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-infrastructure-strategy)

<sup>2</sup> MHCLG, Government Announces New Housing Measures (2018); [www.gov.uk/government/news/government-announces-new-housing-measures](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-announces-new-housing-measures)

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

The Government has already carried out an extensive shake-up of the planning system in England and Wales to facilitate the ambitious target of 300,000 homes needed each year in the UK. Announced in 2020, the *Planning for the Future* white paper is expected to streamline and modernise the planning process, introduce a new focus on design and sustainability, improve the system of developer contributions to associated infrastructure, and ensure more land is available for development where it is needed<sup>3</sup>.

Reform to the planning system came after only 170,000 new homes were built in the UK, just over half of the national target<sup>4</sup>.

The ambition to streamline Local Plans, a key element of the Government's reforms, is welcome and will help deliver much-needed affordable homes. However, we must ensure that the homes we build meet the needs of future generations. They must deliver social value, be energy efficient enough to support Net Zero ambitions, while also creating spaces that people truly want to live and work in.

Creating such communities will require the appropriate social infrastructure as well as green spaces and enhanced natural capital. The APPG on Building Communities report, *Productive Placemaking* highlighted economic advantages when considering the wider placemaking agenda in planning.

The report discovered that, "developments that consider the impact of design decisions can have a positive productivity spill-over and health impact assessments within planning proposals are increasingly common. Improving specific aspects of development, such as air quality, green spaces and accessibility, can support economic productivity and relieve pressure from other sectors".<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the research highlighted how mental health and wellbeing issues are on the rise in the UK. Poor employee health and absenteeism due to poor building design is estimated to cost businesses £8.5bn per year, and as the pandemic requires people to spend more time in their homes this becomes an increasing concern<sup>6</sup>. The Chief Medical Officer's report in 2013 estimated that the wider costs of mental health problems to the UK economy is roughly £70 to 100bn a year<sup>7</sup>.

The APPG report concluded with recommendations suggesting the ONS revise measurements to consider how productive placemaking can be linked to improved productivity. This included how economic success can be tied to, "connectivity, opportunity and pleasant environments, underpinned by bold but flexible visions for the future".

In addition, the communities we build now must accommodate the national commitment to create a Net Zero society by 2050. The Committee on Climate Change report, *UK housing: Fit for the future?* warned that the UK's legally binding climate change targets will not be met without the near-complete elimination of greenhouse gas emissions from UK homes<sup>8</sup>.

The report found that emissions reductions from the UK's 29 million homes have stalled, while energy use in homes – which accounts for 14% of total UK emissions – increased between 2016 and 2017<sup>9</sup>.

3 MHCLG, Planning for the Future White Paper, (2020) [www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/907647/MHCLG-Plan-ning-Consultation.pdf](http://www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907647/MHCLG-Plan-ning-Consultation.pdf)

4 MHCLG, House building; new build dwellings in England - June Quarter 2019 data (2019); [www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/835887/House\\_Building\\_Release\\_June\\_2019.pdf](http://www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835887/House_Building_Release_June_2019.pdf)

5 APPG on Building Communities, Productive Placemaking (2020); [www.acenet.co.uk/media/6059/productive-placemaking-appg-on-building-communities.pdf](http://www.acenet.co.uk/media/6059/productive-placemaking-appg-on-building-communities.pdf)

6 APPG on Building Communities, Productive Placemaking (2020);

7 Chief Medical Officer, Annual Report (2013); [www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/413196/CMO\\_web\\_doc.pdf](http://www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413196/CMO_web_doc.pdf)

8 Committee on Climate Change (CCC), UK housing: Fit for the future? (2019); [www.theccc.org.uk/publication/uk-housing-fit-for-the-future](http://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/uk-housing-fit-for-the-future)

9 Committee on Climate Change (CCC), UK housing: Fit for the future? (2019);

## OPPORTUNITY IN THE RESIDENTIAL SECTOR

Local authorities have always been keen to create vibrant attractive communities. But in recent years there have been many challenges. Pressures on council resources is an obvious one, but others include the time taken to create local plans. The end-result is they often make developers conform with requirements that are no longer best practice or create over prescriptive design codes which, for example, might frustrate the use of the latest low carbon materials.

Furthermore, 250 local authorities have now declared a climate emergency<sup>10</sup> resulting in many councils putting in place ambitious climate change strategies. However, lack of clarity over these has impacted on the development of many local plans, and the ability to implement environmental objectives into plans going forward.

The engineering consultancy sector is keen to work with local authorities and forward-thinking developers to address these challenges and seize the opportunity that planning reform and Project Speed presents. Consultants can make a real difference in three areas in particular:

- Strengthening the local plan process to develop place-based plans that tie residential developments into a more holistic place-based strategy. Ensuring that strategic agreement on what exists in a place, will allow developers to understand constraints and opportunities with their consultants, helping to deliver greater social value, Net Zero, natural capital gain and health objectives tied into development.
- Digitising the planning process to ensure faster delivery of homes while creating a more proactive and strategic planning system.
- Improving the use of design codes and new homes standard to get the balance right between standardisation of design and innovation.

## CREATING A SUSTAINABLE VISION

Delivering the 300,000 homes needed every year as part of the wider Project Speed agenda will no doubt be a significant challenge for both the Government and the sector, considering only 170,000 homes were built in 2019<sup>11</sup>. Obstacles in the planning process are already being addressed, however, consideration must be given to the wider placemaking agenda. If the Government is committed to levelling-up, then working with the sector and developers that are already going above the minimum requirements set by local planning authorities will be vital. Where best-practice is already taking place, this must be highlighted and replicated.

Furthermore, when considering social value as part of a development, wider objectives such as the creation of sustainable communities and Net Zero placemaking need to be included. As outlined in the previously quoted APPG report, and reflected in the Government's planning white paper, the importance of open green spaces, promoting a healthy lifestyle by incorporating cycle routes and active travel, achieving a high level of biodiversity and environmental net gain and using technology and the right materials to improve indoor and outdoor air quality are all part of social value objectives.

The case study from Thakeham Homes, a developer based primarily in the South and South East of England, demonstrates how the sector is incorporating zero carbon placemaking to create a resilient, sustainable community. From 2025, every Thakeham home will be zero carbon in lifetime operation. This means that the amount of carbon emissions associated with the building's operational/regulated energy on an annual basis is zero or negative. The group have started to address the whole life emissions by also committing that every Thakeham home will be carbon neutral in production from 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Local Government Association, Climate Change (2018); [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/climate-change](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/climate-change)

<sup>11</sup> MHCLG, House building: new build dwellings in England - June Quarter 2019 data (2019); [www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/835887/House\\_Building\\_Release\\_June\\_2019.pdf](http://www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835887/House_Building_Release_June_2019.pdf)

Case study:  
**Wealdcross, West Sussex**

The development will provide a new local village centre around a village green with facilities under community-ownership, powered by community-scale battery storage to support the National Grid in balancing peak energy demands. The design has been landscape-led to achieve more than a 10% biodiversity net gain, whilst also making the pedestrian and cycle links along the river corridor – the easiest way of moving around the development rather than by car.

Providing the very basic requirements, such as schools and village greens under a section 106 agreement, Thakeham went further to produce zero carbon homes, including in the production phase. The development planning stage allowed Thakeham to map out a community that was built around the pedestrian or cyclist, minimising the use of a car within the project.



Creating a sustainable vision also means ensuring that strategic agreement on what exists in a place, will allow developers to understand constraints and opportunities with their consultants. The case overleaf demonstrates how having the flexibility to react and correctly allocate infrastructure investment allowed the Alconbury Weald development to progress at pace.

Case study:  
**Alconbury Weald, Huntingdonshire**

**A**lconbury Weald is a new mixed used development that has consent for a total of 5,000 new homes, 280,000m<sup>2</sup> of employment space, new schools and local amenities, and is set to bring 8,000 new jobs to Huntingdonshire.

The development is led by Urban&Civic which is responsible for delivering the infrastructure for the site, and Stantec, a key designer for the community. Together they are creating at pace a great place to live, work and learn.

A key innovation delivered by Stantec was the development of its ‘Monitor and Manage Adaptive Approach’ technique in assessing transport infrastructure needs. By providing a consistently monitored and assessed approach to the transport capacity on the serving networks of the site, Stantec demonstrated to the local authority that the overall development would be beneficial for the region. This helped the project stay on track, despite the financial crisis of 2008 slowing down similar projects elsewhere.

In a world of fast moving economic, technological and demographic changes, having the flexibility to react and correctly allocate infrastructure investment allowed Alconbury Weald to progress at a faster rate – meeting the demands of the wider transport networks as each phase was occupied.

Active engagement with the local authorities, the local public and key stakeholders enabled the site to progress collaboratively, ensuring that every voice was heard. This approach has enabled Urban&Civic to deliver infrastructure on the site at a rapid pace, including fully serviced ‘plug and play’ parcels for housebuilders. The model has proved to be hugely successful and has supported multiple developers to be present onsite simultaneously. This means a wide variety of homes at a broad range of prices are on offer to potential residents, but also is a significant contribution to the Local Authority’s five-year targets for the region.

As a project with a three decade lifespan, Alconbury Weald demands a flexible approach in its implementation that closely follows the ICE’s Charter for Sustainable Development<sup>12</sup> approach of, “meeting the needs of today without compromising the needs of tomorrow”.



<sup>12</sup> Institution for Civil Engineers (ICE), Charter for Sustainable Development (2015); [www.ice.org.uk/ICEDevelopmentWebPortal/media/Documents/Regions/UK%20Regions/ICE-Charter-for-Sustainable-Development.pdf](http://www.ice.org.uk/ICEDevelopmentWebPortal/media/Documents/Regions/UK%20Regions/ICE-Charter-for-Sustainable-Development.pdf)

## DIGITISING THE PLANNING PROCESS TO SPEED UP DEVELOPMENT

Digitising the planning system can help speed up the delivery of house building across the UK, with Government recognising this will be a significant step to help deliver the 300,000 homes required every year.

The recent white paper sets out the digital offer being considered by MHCLG, yet the sector has been calling for wider digitalisation of the planning system across the board, including the implementation of web-based local plans. This also includes the use of digital tools being used in the neighbourhood plan process. As such, investment will be required not only in hardware/software, but also in the skills within local planning authorities to procure and use these digitalised systems.

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) report, *Invest and prosper – a business case for investing in planning*, made recommendations that a Planning Delivery Fund of £500 million is required to enable the planning system to deliver outcomes efficiently, effectively and equitably while, “investing in efficiency-saving digital technologies can help support the shift from a largely reactive, regulatory planning system, to a proactive and strategic planning system”<sup>13</sup>.

Furthermore, schemes of whatever size can generate significant volumes of data which need to be conveyed to stakeholders, affected communities and the planning authority. This will include engineering and design, environmental, planning, land ownership, consultation, property and legal data – all necessary for a successful planning application and part of the compliance with the required in the planning process.

The advantages of having a complete, or at least partial, suite of digital datasets is usually denied to the stakeholders and planning authority who instead are only provided access to paper documents stipulated as comprising a compliant application.



### Case study: Virtual planning data

**W**SP in the UK is a major land referencing service provider and has developed a virtual planning information portal that, in addition to delivering the minimum requirement necessary for a compliant application, also allows the data to be examined in a practical and engaging manner throughout the consultation, planning application, consideration, and delivery phases.

At the application and consideration stage those familiar with the required document formats may examine them online, benefiting from automatic links between the relevant pages of the plans, book of reference, order schedules, environmental submissions and any other documents that make use of the spatial links, provided by the land referencing discipline’s plot numbers quoted throughout and provided to every affected party on their consultation correspondence and notices. Additionally, for those who just want to understand how they might be affected by the proposals, the data is also provided in a readily summarised form, extracted from the datasets, that compile the full suite of documents without the legal and planning contextualisation.

The advantages are significant. By being held and shared digitally, the application is consistent across the many technical disciplines that contribute to it, with all the spatial definitions provided in exactly the same way, eliminating the opportunity for error, overlaps or, worse, gaps.

In addition, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) performance is improved by digital accessibility with the burden of only having documentation in print format lifted and all the clever digital links used to create the application maintained for the use of the both the affected parties and the planning authority, making it much easier for these users to access and digest.

For those less familiar with the structure of planning applications and without the inclination to attempt to piece together exactly how they are affected by cross-referencing between several documents simultaneously, a ready summary is provided that uses only the references of their own names, addresses or plot numbers provided in the written correspondence they have received.

13 RTPI, *Invest and Prosper - a business case for Investing in planning* (2020); [www.rtpi.org.uk/media/6721/investandprosper\\_oct2020.pdf](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/6721/investandprosper_oct2020.pdf)

## USE OF DESIGN CODES AND GUIDES

There is recognition that design needs to be considered in a broader context compared to how it is set out in the Government white paper. Design coding must consider more than just the development itself but also consider the wider local social and economic outcomes such as employment, infrastructure and how the development sits within a local community.

Design therefore needs to be more than about looks but must also incorporate liability, sustainability and affordability – how the development sits in a local community. A broader set of metrics are needed which could fast-track the development process. The Construction Innovation Hub (CIH) Value Toolkit could be a model for ensuring a wider range of environmental, social and economic outcomes are met<sup>14</sup>. Through the introduction of the toolkit, the benefits of local plans could be more tangible to local people.

The consultancy sector is already using tools to ensure that design encompasses more than just the look of a project by considering the longer-term outcomes benefiting a community and providing social value. The case study below shows how Mott MacDonald were able to use Equality and Health Impact Assessments (EHIA) of a planned estate redevelopment in Southwark to ensure that Council targets, including new jobs and homes, were met and approved by the local community.



### Case study: Tustin Estate, Southwark, London

**T**ustin Estate is a five-hectare brick-built housing estate located in the London Borough of Southwark. Constructed in the 1960s and 1970s, the estate is home to a long-standing and diverse community and is made up of 526 properties spread over six low rise blocks and three 20 storey towers, a one form entry Primary School, retail units, the Tustin Community Centre and open spaces.

Many of the blocks need significant reinvestment, prompting Southwark's decision to explore options for improving the Estate in 2019. The estate is subject to the Old Kent Road Area Action Plan which established a minimum target of 20,000 new homes and 10,000 new jobs in the area, it is also part of Southwark's Great Estates programme. This guarantees that every estate is clean, safe, and cared for, while ensuring residents are at the heart of decision-making to improve their estates.

Tustin Estate will be a leading example of this programme. As part of improvements to programme planning, the Council required a sound understanding of the potential effects of their proposals on the community and those people who may be most sensitive to change.

Mott MacDonald were invited by Southwark to deliver a two-stage Equality and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA) of the improvement programme, intended to help the Council demonstrate that it has eliminated discrimination, advances equality of opportunity, and fostered good relations between different sections of society.

In the first stage, Mott MacDonald assessed a suite of options for improvements to the Estate and focused on the potential impacts of the proposals on people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

The second stage focussed on putting forward a preferred option for redevelopment. Mott MacDonald worked closely with the resident steering group throughout the project, attending regular meetings, ensuring the community was informed and had opportunity for engagement. By delivering outputs that were clear, accessible and in responding to the Residents' Manifesto, it maintained the trust Southwark had built up with the community to date.

The EHIA has now been completed, and residents are currently reviewing this report, as well as other information on the preferred option, to inform their decision on a local yes/no ballot. Should the residents vote in favour of the redevelopment, the EHIA will be submitted as part of the planning application.



## CONCLUSIONS

At its heart, Project Speed is about combining quicker delivery that fits the world we want to live in post-pandemic. Nowhere is this more important than in residential developments, where the need to ease the housing crisis must be combined with creating communities that are sustainable in the broadest sense.

The approaches set out in this brief show that this is possible.



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