

Insight focus

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Leading the recovery: Welsh Government's Building Better Places

Overview

The Welsh Government has published its policy position on how the planning system can assist in the COVID-19 recovery period titled 'Building Better Places'. It is intended to sit alongside Planning Policy Wales (PPW) and is a key consideration in both plan preparation and development management.

'Building Better Places' expands on the recent letter issued to Chief Planning Officers from Julie James dated 7th July 2020 which acknowledges that the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are predicted to be severe and felt across all sectors, including those in construction and the built environment. 'Building Better Places' emphasises both the primacy of the plan led system in Wales but also the need to have places and place-making at the heart of the recovery process.

The policy agenda seeking to deliver better places and placemaking develops the principles already enshrined in PPW. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the need for good quality places for people to live, work and relax. 'Building Better Places' seeks to ensure

that the economic hardship owing to the pandemic does not outweigh the above principles and policies.

We welcome the recognition in 'Building Better Places' of the urgent need to have up to date Local

Development Plans in place as soon as LPA's are able to do so. However, we expect substantial delays across Wales in bringing forward up to date LDPs particularly given the Minister's 7th July letter to Chief Planning Officers setting out the need for background evidence work to be-revisited in the light of the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. With most LDP reviews going back to first principles with uncertainty about when consultation can take place these new LDPs are unlikely to be adopted for 4 to 5 years.

Given that 17 of the 25 LPAs have LDP's older than 4 years there are many parts of Wales where LDPs no longer provide a short term supply of deliverable land. An immediate supply of development land is essential if we are to build the better places envisaged by Welsh Government and lead the recovery that is desperately required. New development delivering positive social and economic outcomes as well as addressing climate change concerns needs to be happening on the ground in the short term and can't simply await the completion of the LDP review process in five years time.

Welsh Government has recognised this issue and in respect of development management, 'Building Better Places' states "PPW and the NDF can be used



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directly in the decision making process, particularly where an LDP is silent or out-of-date on an issue. The WG will support decisions taken in this context, particularly in the short-term until an LDP is adopted". This is a very important concession and allows for new development in the short term that truly embrace the principles and policies of delivering better places and placemaking.



LICHFIELDS

'Building Better Places' identifies 8 key issues drawing from pertinent points of PPW which it is stated should be applied immediately to ensure we affect change in the most positive way possible. These are:

- Staying local: creating neighbourhoods
- Active travel: exercise and rediscovered transport methods
- Revitalising our town centres
- Digital places: the lockdown lifeline
- Changing working practices: our future need for employment land
- Reawakening Wales' tourism and cultural sectors
- Green infrastructure, health and well-being and ecological resilience
- Improving air quality and sound

Housing

'Building Better Places' identifies house-building as an important part of the Welsh economy and that delivering new social and market homes can make a significant contribution to economic recovery and social cohesion. The need to increase housing output is acknowledged, with a focus on increasing the delivery of affordable housing. Lichfields own research supports the need for increased delivery of all forms of housing both market and affordable. In reality the private sector has a key role to play in supporting delivery of affordable housing so it is essential that sufficient deliverable housing land is available for private house builders to assist WG in meeting this objective.

In respect of residential development, key expectations include building great places to live, with easy access to services and appropriate infrastructure and greenspace; well-designed energy efficient homes; having reliable and good quality communication systems; inclusion of allotments & community growing spaces and protecting Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land. There is an expectation through creativity and innovation for various agencies, infrastructure partners and public sector providers to come together to deliver truly sustainable sites. Meaningful engagement and consultation with existing communities is also encouraged at an early stage.

Active Travel

'Building Better Places' seeks to build on the positive transport modal shift that has taken place during the pandemic and requires the planning system to support developments which are sited in the right locations, where they can be easily accessed by active and

sustainable travel modes without the need for a car.

Retail and Commercial Centres

'Building Better Places' recognises the changing role and function of existing retail and commercial centres and is requiring LDPs to allow these areas to operate as flexibly as possible. LDPs are expected to set out a clear vision for each centre as well as establish realistic and sensible boundaries for these centres, with the identification of sites for redevelopment.

Employment

The significant increase in people working from home, particularly in the office-based sectors of the economy is expected to continue even when all restrictions are lifted, meaning that there is potential for significant surplus existing stock. Economic forecasts are therefore expected to be re-examined and where appropriate, employment allocations reviewed. This is likely to present opportunities for redevelopment of surplus sites in urban areas with good public and active travel links.

Tourism

PPW already places a great deal of importance on the role of tourism for the economic prosperity of Wales. It recognises the opportunities that the sector has to be a catalyst, particularly in rural areas. Building Better Places is no different. Of particular note, the document highlights the connection between tourism and Wales' cultural sector, which often go hand in hand and/or can work in parallel to attract and complement investment in communities – something not fully drawn out in PPW.

Building Better Places highlights the opportunities to use empty buildings, historic buildings and disused land as part of regeneration schemes.





Health and well-being

The Welsh Government has clearly and rightly emphasised health and well-being as a consideration for the planning process, consistent with the National Sustainable Placemaking Outcomes and the Well-being of Future Generations Act. 'Building Better Places' explains how the planning system can create direct and indirect opportunities to support healthier lifestyles.

Final Thoughts

Lichfields welcome the principles behind 'Building Better Places'. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted issues in the way that our built environment currently functions and the different ways we want and need to interact with it in the future. These are pressing challenges which require responses in the short and medium term if we are to deliver successful social, environmental and economic outcomes.

Plan making may ultimately be the best way to do this but realistically this is unlikely to lead to any changes on the ground for another 5 to 6 years. In the interim there must be support for well-considered development proposals that reflect the building better principles agenda in sustainable locations. For it to have any impact, development sites must be deliverable, including both greenfield and brownfield sites, with greater collaboration particularly between public and private sectors. Lichfields look forward to engaging with all relevant parties to bring forward great places to live, work and relax to aid in the recovery process.

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Contact Us

Birmingham

Jon Kirby
jon.kirby@lichfields.uk
0121 713 1530

Bristol

Andrew Cockett
andrew.cockett@lichfields.uk
0117 403 1980

Cardiff

Gareth Williams
gareth.williams@lichfields.uk
0292 0435 885

Edinburgh

Nicola Woodward
nicola.woodward@lichfields.uk
0131 285 0670

Leeds

Justin Gartland
justin.gartland@lichfields.uk
0113 397 1397

London

Neil Goldsmith
neil.goldsmith@lichfields.uk
020 7812 3525

Manchester

Simon Pemberton
simon.pemberton@lichfields.uk
0161 8376 1988

Newcastle

Jonathan Wallace
jonathan.wallace@lichfields.uk
0191 292 072

Thames Valley

Daniel Lampard
daniel.lampard@lichfields.uk
0118 334 1920