

LABOUR AND CONSERVATIVES ON PLANNING

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We are in the middle of the campaign and both of the main parties, Conservatives and Labour, have published their manifestos.

We take a look at the parties' proposals for planning.

Both parties have a headline figure of the number of homes they will build over the next parliament. Labour has indicated they would see 1.5 million homes built while the Conservatives propose to build 1.6 million.

It is important to frame this proposal or aspiration in the context of delivery to date. It's reported that since 2019, there have been around 1 million net new homes created. Labour's target follows the largely accepted thinking that we need 300,000 new homes per year to meet need while the Conservatives appear to want to better this by 100,000 despite housebuilding not hitting these levels since the 1960s.

Neither party offers much in the way of detail about how they will achieve their target. Both prioritise brownfield while Labour recognises that this will be insufficient and so point to the 'grey belt' as a potential source of new development. Labour also cites that they will bring back the mandatory housing targets following their abolition last year. A worrying trend that will hamper this is the reduction of applications. There has been a drop of 11% in the past year.

In terms of resourcing, Labour promises to provide an additional 300 planning officers over parliament. This equates to less than one per council area and given that many councils have vacancies, one expects this won't provide any additional resources but will merely plug some existing gaps.

The Conservatives talk of supporting small builders by requiring councils to set aside land for them and lift Section 106 burdens on smaller sites. The speed at which the planning system operates is the biggest hurdle for most smaller developers and yet nothing in the manifesto to deliver against this. Limiting section 106 obligations too has been back n forth for many years yet more councils seek affordable housing contributions on smaller sites than ever before especially in London.

On infrastructure, Labour seeks to expand the types of developments that are considered Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs). The Conservatives want Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) payments to only be used for GP Surgeries, roads and local infrastructure rather than “community projects.” I suspect many residents would welcome this but seems to take away the discretion of councils to decide and evidence what infrastructure they require.

The Conservatives want to “reform our planning system” but only to deliver fast track permissions for infrastructure on farms. Expect more agricultural permitted development rights.

Labour’s reform ideas relate to spatial planning at the Mayoral and combined authority level. This has the potential to address some of those cross cutting issues on housing supply, location of larger developments and transport although will likely require major legislative changes so will be unlikely to impact for years.

Michael Portillo must have left his railway guide in Tory HQ as the manifesto also contains a commitment to reopen some Beeching lines. Much merit in such ideas but for real success this needs to be linked to other strategies on employment, leisure and housing. The Crossrail 2 project would have released land for the delivery of 200,000 homes if delivered. Delivering rail projects as part of a joint up strategy could work but rarely do when done in isolation.

As expected, the manifestos are light on detail. Both parties have high targets for housing yet no plan to actually deliver the significant increase compared to past years. Labour at least recognises that all development cannot be on brownfield land and need to look at Green Belt. Conversely the Conservatives again make the green belt sacrosanct. A clear difference.

Labour also points to more officers for planning departments. While 300 is not enough, it at least recognises that resourcing is an issue.

Still plenty of time before the election so expect more questions and interrogation of potential changes.

<https://www.housingtoday.co.uk/news/the-number-of-planning-applications-lodged-falls-by-10-compared-to-last-year/5129959.article#:~:text=Planning%20authorities%20saw%20an%2011,2023%2C%2095%2C238%20applications%20were%20received.>

<https://crossrail2.co.uk/discover/new-homes/>