

Wimborne Civic Society's responses to the Civic Voice 'King's Speech' Survey

August 2024

1. Do you believe we have a housing crisis in the UK? Please explain your thinking.

Civic Soc Response: Yes, in that there are many people needing somewhere to live, but the causes of the 'housing crisis' are many and various. It's not just a matter of building more houses; landlordism, second homes, accommodation bought for investment and deliberately left empty, overuse of Air-bnb, lack of rent controls, opportunity for exploitation afforded by a lack of regulation, all these things contribute to the 'housing crisis'. (See Nick Bano's article in The Guardian, 19.iii.24, review of his book in The Observer, 21.iv.24.)

2. How familiar are you with the Government's recent planning announcements?

Civic Soc Response: The broad intentions are clear, but there is a great deal of detail yet to be published. The new term, 'grey belt', sounds like an excuse for building on Green Belt land. The stated intention to prioritise brownfield sites is welcome (and has been advocated by Wimborne Civic Society for several years). Requirements for all new housing to be properly 'climate-proofed' with solar panels and/or air source heat pumps etc. will be essential to combat the Climate Crisis, and it remains to be seen whether the government will take bold enough action.

3. Do you believe these planning reforms will effectively "get Britain building again" and deliver 1.5 million new homes by 2029?

Civic Soc Response: It seems unlikely. There are not enough builders or trained construction workers and the necessary infrastructure will take too long to put in place to reach the target date. The current rate of building - approx 150,000/yr - is probably the best that can be achieved using purely private sector companies. The ambitions set out will be met only by large-scale **public**, i.e. local authority, housing (as was the solution to the post-war housing crisis).

4. How do you think we can achieve the 300,000 national housing target?

Civic Soc Response:

- i. By a detailed, careful analysis of the **causes** of the present situation, rather than assuming the more means better.
- ii. By setting out a clear, accessible, climate-proof regulatory framework for **all** new building (not just houses).
- iii. By enabling local authorities to build at scale, particularly social, rented and 'affordable' accommodation.

5. Chancellor Rachel Reeves said, "we need the private sector to build homes. We are not going to be in the business of building those homes directly." What do you think of this statement?

Civic Soc Response: Relying entirely on private developers to deliver the stated numbers won't work; most housing is controlled by a small number of very big firms, whose actions are determined largely by their own interests (e.g. the 'building out' crisis, with companies having permission for huge numbers of houses, but not building them because they're waiting for more favourable market conditions). Housing associations and local authorities are not constrained by these factors and are hence in a better position to deliver the housing units desired.

6. What are your thoughts on the media announcements declaring that these reforms are essentially a 'war on NIMBYs'? Who do you think they mean by this?

Civic Soc Response:

It's not yet clear how the government's targets will be pursued in practice. If the community turns out to be as important to the process of local development as is claimed, there wouldn't necessarily have to be such a 'war'; if, on the other hand, central government repeats the errors of the planning white paper of 2020 ('Planning for the Future', an appallingly dystopian vision) with its ruthless centralisation, then resentment, disagreement and worse will be inevitable. If mandatory targets are proposed, this does not bode well for community involvement in the planning process.

The term 'Nimby' is being applied here to ANYONE who raises concerns or objections to a planning development, including those who raise valid questions.

7. How do we ensure that civic societies and community organisations are viewed as part of the solution to local issues, rather than as a NIMBY movement? How can we challenge this thinking?

Civic Soc Response: Civic societies are in a good position to put themselves forward as allies in finding appropriate solutions, 'critical friends' for local authorities and well-informed local voices. Civic societies need to promote themselves effectively and explain to the local populace what they do. They must also demonstrate that they have a genuine understanding of the underlying issues that are often associated with proposed developments which ultimately mean that those developments may or may not benefit the existing local community.

8. What are your thoughts on the new Government's commitment to appointing 300 new planning officers?

Civic Soc Response: According to RTPI (2019) there are about 18,300 town planners in England, 300 represents a 1.6% increase, this will have minimal noticeable impact. However, we welcome any increase provided they are all properly trained and qualified, know their local areas and once again are able to spend time talking to members of the public. It is essential that the total includes a substantial number of conservation officers, currently an endangered species among planning staff.

9. What do you think needs to happen to make housing schemes more acceptable to the general public?

Civic Soc Response:

To make housing schemes more acceptable to the general public:

- 1) The local authority must demonstrate to their community that there is an actual need for new housing i.e. that the stated need is not simply being imposed on the area to fulfil a government quota.
- 2) The supporting infrastructure which includes doctors, pharmacies, schools, shops and employment as well as roads, services and transport must be created alongside house building and not once building is completed or even not at all.
- 3) New housing needs to be of appropriate design for the local area, tailored to meet local needs and in the right places (nationally, regionally and locally).

10. Are you supportive of the new Government's plans for the 'grey belt' to help address housing need?

Civic Soc Response: The members of the society are divided on this question. We all strongly believe in the principle of the 'green belt' and have concerns that the criteria for the new definition of 'grey belt' will be insufficiently clearly defined such that it allows a creeping expansion of development into other 'green belt' areas. Some of us recognise that the examples of 'grey belt' being pushed in the media e.g. 'derelict garage forecourts in a green belt area' do constitute areas that could validly be turned over to housing development; a carefully crafted set of criteria allowing development in green/grey belt would be an essential pre-requisite.

11. During the election, Angela Rayner promised that "new homes and new towns" built under a Labour government would have "only exemplary design with real character." Do you agree with this statement?

Civic Soc Response: We agree with it as an aspiration, but much of what is currently being built does not reach this standard, so asking the very same builders to build faster and more will not result in an improvement, rather the opposite.

12. Thinking solely about your area, do you think that the houses being built are addressing local housing need?

Civic Soc Response: No, not any more. There are too many expensive unsold houses and not enough affordable ones and though the number of homes in the area has increased by 25% over the last 5 years, there has been no commensurate increase in infrastructure. There needs to be good quality first time and young family homes with off street parking designed to maintain quality of life and community aesthetics. Involving the community in planning processes can ensure that new developments meet the needs and desires of residents.

13. If training was available by Civic Voice to help improve your understanding of design, what would you want to see covered?

Civic Soc Response: 'Climate-proof' design that would be a pleasure to live in.

14. Would you be interested in attending further discussions to help shape a Civic Voice response to the National Planning Policy Framework consultation when it is published?

Civic Soc Response: Yes

15. Finally, when thinking about new housing in your local area, what one word would you use to describe it?

Civic Soc Response: Inappropriate