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Planning Development Management  
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
Floor 3  
Fry Building  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF

13 February 2025

Dear Sir / Madam

**RE: London Property Alliance response to the Planning Reform Working Paper: Planning committees**

I am writing on behalf of [London Property Alliance](#) ("LPA"), to provide our response to the planning reform working paper on Planning Committees published on 9 December 2024.

London Property Alliance brings together the Westminster Property Association ("WPA") and the City Property Association ("CPA"). It is a not-for-profit membership and advocacy body representing the leading owners, investors, professional advisors and developers of real estate operating in the City of London and City of Westminster. The Alliance provides a unified voice for the real estate sector across central London. You can view our current membership lists [here](#) and [here](#).

The LPA fully supports the Government's ambition to speed up the planning process and support better decision making as part of its objective to unlock economic growth across the country. We believe that changes to the planning committee process would help to achieve this. Indeed, the findings of our *Good in Central London* report shows how flexible planning policy alone can deliver an extra 400,000 jobs, 43,000 homes and £100bn in economic growth by 2041.

Planning resource and capacity within local authorities is a major barrier to the development required to deliver this level of growth, causing delays that hold up the much needed investment that will generate our new homes and jobs, while increasing costs for investors and undermining confidence in the process. However, we also agree that decision making via planning committees can contribute to these delays.

Across London boroughs in 2024, applications which were heard at committee took on average 45 weeks (almost 1 year), compared to those delegated at 12 weeks (3 months)<sup>1</sup>. The bottleneck caused by committee capacities and the additional work required for officers to prepare for committee meetings undoubtedly exacerbates other delays within the development management system.

The uncertainty caused by committee decision making, especially on smaller applications, can also discourage investment. Committee decisions themselves – especially repeated referrals – can also add to delays.

However, simply looking at these statistics and concluding that the blockage is caused solely by committee decisions would be incorrect. The planning system is incredibly complex and has increased in

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<sup>1</sup> Data extracted from the Planning London Datahub on 10 February 2025; note that not all applications are reported to the Datahub and not all applications which went to Committee were major applications

complexity particularly over the last few years. The list of requirements for applicants and planning officers to consider within major applications is lengthy and continues to grow rapidly. It includes technical matters which are increasingly being considered prior to the grant of planning permission (rather than post-submission through the use of planning conditions or obligations). Alongside this, changing planning policy at a national level and potential changes to plan-making systems and environmental assessments will likely result in further resource spent to facilitate the new requirements. This is all within the context of local authorities which are severely under-funded and under-resourced. We would therefore urge that the proliferation of complex issues layered upon the planning system should be halted, and reversed.

Notwithstanding the above, we agree that changes and streamlining could be made to existing planning committee processes, including increasing the use of delegated powers, especially for smaller applications. Any changes coming forward should be mindful of two points in particular:

1. That decision via committee for appropriate applications is a cornerstone of the planning system and in many instances is entirely appropriate to ensure that fair and justified decisions are made giving due regard to the development plan and relevant statutory duties.
2. That any processes put in place should be cautious of creating areas of legal vulnerability which would be susceptible to legal challenge. Any national scheme of delegation set by the Secretary of State should have sufficient flexibility to try to avoid this. Legal challenges can create considerable delays and costs for all parties in the process.

In addition, any changes which are made, need to enable an element of flexibility to respond to local circumstances and not create additional areas of legal vulnerability. As a wider point, we would be happy to engage further with the Government regarding our concerns about planning capacity and resource within local planning departments, and the resulting impact which this has upon the delivery of development.

In our Appendix I on p3, we have provided more detailed responses to the specific questions within the Working Paper and would very much welcome further opportunities to discuss these matters more widely with Government.

If it would be helpful to discuss any aspect of this further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,



**Charles Begley**  
Chief Executive  
London Property Alliance

## APPENDIX I: Responses to questions within the Planning Committee Working Paper

### a. Do you think this package of reforms would help to improve decision making by planning committees?

We agree with the principle of a national scheme of delegation, the creation of strategic planning committees and mandatory training for committee members. We support greater consistency and clarity of what applications should be (in theory) determined at committee and what should not. In general, we support the greater use of delegated powers, especially for smaller applications. We consider that any National Scheme of Delegation should be on a non-statutory basis and by use of strengthened guidance perhaps with examples. A statutory method is likely to be too restrictive, and create vulnerability to legal challenge.

### b. Do you have views on which of the options we have set out in regards to national schemes of delegation would be most effective? Are there any aspects which could be improved?

### c. We could take a hybrid approach to any of the options listed. Do you think, for instance, we should introduce a size threshold for applications to go to committees, or delegate all reserved matters applications?

**Options 1 (delegation where an application complies with development plan) and 2 (delegation as default with exceptions for departures from the development plan):** Broadly speaking, the LPA would not support Options 1 and 2 within the Working Paper as they both rely heavily on planning officer judgement as to whether applications ‘comply with’ or are a ‘departure from’ the development plan. Particularly in densely built up urban areas, such as central London, it is very rare that proposals will comply with all policies in the development plan. Whether or not schemes comply with the development plan as a whole is a complex judgement and balance, reached by officers and, where appropriate, committees.

These options would also not allow for any eventuality for proposals to be heard at committee when officers have recommended them for refusal.

The Paper acknowledges that “the judgement on compliance with the development plan may be complex” and seeks views on how this compliance “could be defined in a clear enough way”. We agree that this is an important, and complex, issue. Whether or not proposals comply with the development plan or depart from the development plan are matters which are often analysed in depth at planning inquiries and within the Courts. National guidance is unlikely to be able to provide clarity for officers and applicants. This could result in more legal challenges being launched (by applicants and/or by third party objectors).

Under option 1 it may also result in officers looking for reasons for applications to not ‘comply’ with the development plan to push decisions to a committee level.

These options do not allow proposals to be heard at committee which may have been recommended for refusal. As noted above, planning judgements can be complex and there may be instances arising where

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applicants disagree with an officer's balanced judgement in respect of competing planning objectives (for example, heritage harm created by height of buildings vs provision of housing and affordable housing or even at a smaller level limited harm caused to local amenity vs provision of a commercial use). Whilst it should not be an enshrined right, there should be some flexibility in these instances for these applications to be heard at committee, with planning committee members making the final decision.

**Option 3 (delegation as default with a prescriptive list of exceptions):** The LPA supports some elements of Option 3 but not all. We agree that it would be helpful to have a list of which applications should generally be considered at committee, and basing this on size and scale seems sensible. However, we do not agree with the suggestion at para 21 that this would be 'prescriptive' and would 'leave little room for local interpretation'. As acknowledged by the Working Paper, setting such a list in a prescriptive manner may miss controversial local applications.

We therefore consider that any National Scheme of Delegation should be set out as guidance to local authorities, with the ability for them to flexibly apply the scheme and enable departures where justified. The use of examples would be helpful. It may also be helpful to set out a minimum threshold of local interest that should be reached before committee is considered; it should not be necessary for small applications to be considered where there are only a handful of comments or objections.

Conversely, some applications, whilst small in nature, can cause significant local interest and it is right that those applications be considered carefully at planning committee where the matters to be decided are complex. Likewise, there may be instances where proposals comply with the development plan but there is a need for them to be considered at planning committee. The LPA would not support the principle of bringing into force a prescribed National Scheme of Delegation for which there would be no opportunity for local authorities to apply appropriate local flexibility.

In respect of types of applications to be considered at committee, we agree that in theory committee decision making should be reserved for major planning applications and other applications for minor development and other types of decision (e.g. standalone listed building consent, discharge of conditions, reserved matters, non-material amendments etc.) should be delegated. However, again, we would suggest that any National Scheme of Delegation set out the types of application as a guide only with the ability for officers to agree to take applications to committee where specific circumstances require. Again, we note the potential use of guidance on the level of local interest that should be reached before consideration by committee is appropriate. A handful of comments should not necessarily lead to a committee decision.

#### **d. Are there advantages in giving further consideration to a model based on objections?**

Models based solely on a specific number of local objections can be quite restrictive and subject to manipulation to force applications which would otherwise be delegated to be determined at committee. However, as noted above, there is a role for strengthened guidance to limit occasions where a handful of comments automatically leads to a committee decision. We suggest there should be a flexible approach that allows for a committee decision where officers conclude there is widespread local interest in proposals that goes beyond the immediate vicinity of the site.

This should include at the request of the applicant and members. Subject to this power being used sensibly, this could result in better quality and more robust decision-making which could in the long-run reduce vulnerability for legal challenge and subsequent delay.

**e. Do you agree that targeted planning committees for strategic development could facilitate better decision making?**

In principle we support the proposal for targeted strategic development committees for strategic development. Within Westminster and the City of London, such committees are unlikely to be required given that often strategic development which comes forward is smaller and more piecemeal in nature. Westminster City Council already has a Strategic Planning Committee supported by two smaller Sub-Committees and we are of the view that this structure works well. Likewise, the Planning Applications Sub-Committee in the City of London already operates in a quasi-strategic manner. Should targeted strategic development committees be brought forward, we consider that these should not be mandatory for all local authorities, as they will not be relevant in all instances.

**h. Do you think the approach to mandatory training is the right one?**

The LPA's experience of the planning committees in both Westminster and the City of London is that members are well informed of their duties and the applications and policy decisions which are put before them. Both Westminster City Council and the City of London carry out training for members, which the LPA supports. We consider that this training results in good quality decision-making and therefore we support the principle of mandatory training for members involved in planning committees.

The scope of training proposed (including, but not limited to, planning legislation, the role of the development plan and national planning policy, the planning application process, enforcement, and the code of conduct for planning committees) appears to be sensible but it should ensure it is tailored to address locally specific issues. Issues such as the release of green belt land are complex but not directly relevant to some urban areas, such as the centre of London. Conversely, there are issues such as daylight and sunlight, World Heritage Sites, and the strategic function of central London's economy that are distinct to this area on which members should be trained and aware.

We have no comments on how this training would be provided (in person vs online).

We note the suggestion of a government procurement for a provider to provide training, presumably on a nation-wide basis. We have no comment on procurement issues, but urge the Government to ensure that, beyond the 'basics' of planning, that any specific local nuances are fully understood. For example, within the City of London, the aspirations of the Corporation's 'Destination City' Programme are often reflected within planning applications. Understanding the status of any development plan documents and associated guidance at a local level would also be key.

LPA has contributed to member training in areas in which it is active and would encourage Government to continue to allow for this type of engagement.