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RTPI response to the Planning Committees working paper by MHCLG

January 2025

About the RTPI

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) champions the power of planning in creating sustainable, prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 27,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors. Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social environmental and cultural challenges.

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

The RTPI welcomes the ambition of providing greater certainty and efficacy of planning committees through the Government's proposals set out in this working paper. However, we believe that there are a number of additional measures that could be added to this package of reforms to improve the decision making of planning committees.

We support the Government's intention of giving skilled planning officers an appropriate amount of trust and empowerment. However, we wish to see that key decision making is undertaken by a competent professional who is suitably qualified or experienced to do so. Chartered status as a member of the RTPI, or individuals working toward this, would be the most practicable way of ensuring that decision making is undertaken by a competent professional. This will improve quality of decision making and provide necessary safeguarding through adherence to the Code of Conduct that specifies standards of professional ethics and mandatory continuous professional development.

Under the local authority's Scheme of Delegation, the powers to determine applications are delegated to the Chief Planning Officer. However, RTPI research has shown that just 23% of LPAs have a head of planning service reporting directly into the council's Chief Executive and 9% of councils had no clear 'head of planning service.'¹ Therefore, in order to improve decision making by planning committees, the RTPI wants to see the Planning and Infrastructure Bill introduce a statutory chief planning role following the model used in Scotland or proposed by the Minister during the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.² We believe that chartered membership of the RTPI should be an essential criterion for this role.

Finally, the RTPI would propose that hybrid and virtual planning committees are mandated in legislation through the Planning & Infrastructure Bill. Our research suggests that virtual committees can help a younger, more diverse audience to engage with

¹ [RTPI | Chief Planning Officers](#)

² [NC97 at LURB report stage](#)



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planning³. The Local Government Association also found “a range of benefits” of virtual planning committee meetings.⁴

(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?

Professional planners are already entrusted to handle the vast majority of planning applications across English planning authorities, with an average of 96% of applications delegated to officers.⁵ However, this can vary widely between authorities due to the type and number of applications. Applications which are referred to committees are often more complex or controversial in nature. RTPI recognises that there is scope to introduce clear rules across planning authorities that govern how applications are delegated, and this would be beneficial in providing consistency and clarity for applicants, officers, councillors and communities.

In consultation with our membership, whilst there was a general support for a national scheme of delegation, there was no consensus around which option would be preferred, nor if an alternative hybrid approach should be developed. Difficulties were raised with regards to Options 1 and 2, namely that compliance with the development plan is not always straight forward, and that the scheme does not necessarily account for those areas without an up-to-date development plan. If Option 3 were to be implemented a separate consultation on the list of exceptions would be necessary.

(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?

In consultation with our membership, there was no clear indication of what an appropriate hybrid approach would constitute. However, support was provided for the removal of post-permission matters from Committee such as discharge of planning conditions.

(d) Are there advantages in giving further consideration to a model based on objections?

Objections should only be considered by the decision maker if they are based on material planning considerations. As not every objection is guaranteed to be based on a material planning consideration, the RTPI believes that the volume of objection is not in itself a good measure for deciding on whether it be determined by a planning committee.

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

The RTPI supports the use of targeted planning committees for strategic development. The make-up of these committees could be a mixture of elected members and experts across relevant specialisms. The structure of committees should ensure that the Chief Planning Officer(s) and other necessary Officers (e.g. heritage, design and flooding), should have a right to attend and speak at committee.

(f) Do you have a view on the size of these targeted committees?

³ <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/7258/the-future-of-engagement.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/lga-response-ministry-housing-communities-and-local-government#key-messages>

⁵ [Planning Resource, 2024](#)



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We do not have strong views on prescribing the size of these committees, but we feel that the committee should number less than ten individuals. There could be a prescribed upper and lower limit for the size of these committees, i.e. no less than five and no more than eight or ten.

(g) How should we define strategic developments?

There should be a nationally set definition in secondary legislation based on development thresholds.

(h) Do you think the approach to mandatory training is the right one?

The RTPI is strongly in favour of mandatory training for committee members. This would include training for any new elected member to ensure they familiarise themselves with the way planning applications are determined, as well as proper committee protocol. There should also be a test that all members must pass before they are able to participate in planning committees. Furthermore, triggered by any significant national planning reforms additional training should be provided to update members on new legislative and policy positions. The training should be procured centrally and delivered by MHCLG via an approved training provider. This would be supplemented by locally provided training required from developments in local policy such as the adoption or preparation of a Local Plan.