

# Roundtable - Accelerating Housebuilding with Hashi Mohamed - Barrister, Broadcaster & Author and Marc Vlessing - Co-founder & Chair, Pocket Living

15 Great College Street & Online via Zoom



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## Introduction

The PLG's recent roundtable discussion was convened to address the pressing challenge of accelerating housebuilding in the short term, against the backdrop of the government's ambitious target of 1.5 million homes and the response to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Bringing together key stakeholders—including policymakers, developers, housing experts, and local government representatives—the meeting explored the systemic bottlenecks, cultural dynamics, and potential solutions to enhance housing delivery.

The conversation highlighted both opportunities and challenges in the current planning and housing landscape, with particular focus on the roles of SMEs, the capacity of local authorities, the evolving responsibilities of Homes England, and the need for effective collaboration across sectors. This document outlines the key takeaways from the session, capturing the insights and proposed actions that emerged to support the sector in meeting its immediate and long-term objectives.



## Key Takeaways

- Local authorities are struggling with significant capacity and resource constraints that severely impact their ability to process planning applications and local plans effectively. Many councils are overwhelmed by housing benefit obligations, understaffing, and demoralised planning teams. To alleviate these issues, it was suggested that more officers be allocated to speed up decision-making, Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) be used to bring in short-term resources, and organisations like Homes England provide direct support to councils. Without addressing these challenges, there is a growing risk that the planning system will devolve into costly and inefficient "planning-by-appeal."
- Small and medium-sized developers (SMEs), once responsible for 50% of housing output, now contribute just 5%, primarily due to regulatory hurdles, high costs, and capital limitations. The economic viability of small-scale projects is being eroded by inflation, planning delays, and administrative burdens. To support these developers, participants proposed increasing access to upfront capital from Homes England and pension funds, simplifying viability assessments, and reducing regulatory costs. SMEs, which are often better suited to delivering high-quality, locally tailored housing, play a crucial role in addressing the housing crisis and supporting economic growth.
- Homes England was seen as pivotal in overcoming many of these challenges. Suggestions included regionalising the agency to establish local expertise and decision-making power, creating a dedicated unit to identify and unlock stalled sites, and simplifying funding streams for developers—especially SMEs. Homes England could also take a more proactive role in supporting councils with compulsory purchase powers and instilling confidence in local planning authorities. Strengthening the agency's capacity is viewed as critical to meeting national housing targets.
- The group recognised the importance of recent planning reforms and government initiatives, such as new town projects and decisions made by the Secretary of State, but concerns were raised about their immediate impact. Participants proposed short-term actions, such as liberalising Section 106 agreements to unlock stalled sites and focusing on practical housing solutions that can deliver visible results before the next general election. It was also suggested that inefficiencies with statutory consultees be addressed, as delays caused by late or absent responses significantly impact project timelines.
- Regulatory barriers, particularly those related to nutrient neutrality, were identified as significant obstacles for developers. Delays caused by misaligned regulatory oversight from bodies like Natural England and DEFRA were cited as a key frustration. The need to streamline these processes and ensure that regulations are proportionate and do not overburden the planning system was emphasised.
- A broader cultural shift is also required to improve collaboration between planners, developers, and local communities. The current adversarial nature of these relationships hinders progress, and participants stressed the need for mutual respect and cooperation. Changing the local political narrative to view housing delivery as a positive outcome, rather than a threat to community character, is

essential. Public skepticism about development can also be addressed through better engagement and communication.

- The discussion highlighted that the housing crisis is not confined to the Southeast but affects both urban and regional areas nationwide. Addressing this requires a mix of high-density urban development and lower-density regional projects. Leveraging devolution and regional boards to create localised solutions was suggested, but participants noted the need to balance this with the risks of fragmentation and factionalism. Building competence within local and regional bodies to match private-sector expertise is critical to delivering these solutions effectively.
- A recurring theme was the existential threat posed to SMEs by high planning costs and prolonged delays. Participants highlighted that small developers often lack the capital reserves to sustain themselves through extended planning processes. To support these businesses, it was suggested that planning policies should be made more flexible and economic realities better accounted for. A model that allows SMEs to complete one project and seamlessly transition to the next without major capital outlays would significantly improve their viability.
- Finally, the discussion underscored the need for stronger leadership at all levels. Examples of effective leadership included the efforts of Rayner and Pennycook to foster a more positive culture around housing and planning. Regional leadership within Homes England was also seen as critical to addressing localised challenges effectively. Additionally, greater alignment between district and county councils could unlock viable sites and foster better collaboration. Introducing financial or policy incentives for local authorities to prioritise housing delivery, alongside mechanisms to hold underperforming councils accountable, could further accelerate progress toward the government's target of 1.5 million homes.

## Recommended Actions

- To address these challenges, strengthening local authority capacity is essential. This includes providing more planning officers and inspectors to accelerate decisions, utilising Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) to address short-term resource gaps, and expanding support from Homes England for councils facing specific obstacles.
- Supporting SMEs is another priority, with proposals to simplify viability assessments, reduce upfront costs, increase access to funding through sources like Homes England, and reform planning policies to allow quicker project transitions.
- Streamlining regulatory processes was also recommended, particularly by addressing delays caused by statutory consultees and aligning regulatory requirements, especially those related to nutrient neutrality.
- Unlocking stalled sites is critical, with recommendations to simplify Section 106 agreements and establish a dedicated Homes England unit to resolve blockages in stalled projects.

- Fostering a more collaborative culture between planners, developers, and communities is necessary to reduce adversarial relationships and shift public perceptions by emphasising the benefits of housing for local economies and communities.
- Regional leadership must also be strengthened, with calls to regionalise Homes England to provide localised expertise and leverage devolution to create boards addressing specific housing needs.
- Finally, a focus on quick wins, such as unlocking stalled sites and fast-tracking small developments, could deliver tangible results before the next general election. These actions aim to tackle immediate challenges while creating a foundation for sustainable housing delivery in the future.

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.



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