

Roundtable with Lord Gascoigne

Chair of the House of Lords Built Environment Committee

Chaired by Lord Banner KC
Online via zoom



Lord Gascoigne

Introduction

This roundtable brought together a cross-section of stakeholders from the housing, planning, and development sectors for a wide-ranging conversation with Lord Gascoigne, Chair of the House of Lords Built Environment Committee. The discussion focused on the systemic challenges facing housing delivery in England, including delays in the planning system, the underutilisation of Section 106 funding, and barriers facing SME developers. Participants shared insights on the need for improved public engagement, stronger local authority capacity, and better alignment between infrastructure delivery and new development. The conversation also touched on the Committee's ongoing inquiry into New Towns, exploring what is needed to make large-scale development viable and supported at both national and local levels.



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Key Takeaways

- The planning system was described as a major bottleneck to housing delivery, with delays, inconsistency, and under-resourced planning departments cited as recurring problems. SME developers in particular face disproportionate burdens, with some noting that the process and requirements for a modest regeneration scheme can be as complex as for a new town. Planning committees often lack the expertise to assess applications effectively, and ill-informed decisions can lead to significant delays and uncertainty. There was strong support for planning reform that improves decision-making, streamlines the process, and builds capacity at the local level.
- There was consensus that traditional approaches to consultation are not fit for purpose, often engaging only a narrow demographic and fuelling resistance to development. Attendees highlighted the need for better communications and more inclusive methods to reach working people and younger residents, who are frequently left out of the process despite being most affected by housing shortages. Digital tools, strategic messaging, and professional consultation practices were suggested as ways to build trust and demonstrate the benefits of development, such as improved amenities and infrastructure.
- Many participants noted that local opposition to development often stems from the perception that new housing places unsustainable pressure on public services without delivering the promised infrastructure. Examples included increased traffic, pressure on GP surgeries, and a lack of school places. Developers reported being asked about infrastructure impacts that are the responsibility of central or local government, highlighting the need for better coordination. It was argued that for national housing targets to be credible, government must also commit to delivering the associated social and transport infrastructure.
- A significant concern raised was the failure to spend Section 106 and other developer contributions in a timely and transparent manner. Billions of pounds are sitting unused in local authority accounts, which undermines public confidence and reinforces the perception that development does not benefit communities. Participants called for reform to ensure these funds are allocated swiftly to visible local improvements and infrastructure projects, demonstrating the value of new housing and reducing resistance to growth.
- Shortages across the planning and construction sectors were seen as a major risk to the housing delivery pipeline. The lack of skilled planners, insufficient funding for statutory consultees, and a shrinking construction workforce were all highlighted. The apprenticeship system was criticised for being overly restrictive, with funding available for education but not for wages, a barrier for SMEs in particular. There was strong support for expanding training opportunities, reforming the apprenticeship levy, and investing in the skills needed to meet both current and future housing demand.
- The SME housebuilding sector was described as being in a state of near-collapse, squeezed by risk, planning delays, and a lack of policy clarity. Developers reported shifting away from residential projects due to the commercial and regulatory burden. Concerns were also raised about how nutrient neutrality regulations are being applied, with SMEs bearing the brunt of mitigation responsibilities despite accounting for a small proportion of environmental impact. There was consensus that SMEs are essential to a diverse and resilient housing market and need tailored support if they are to play a meaningful role in increasing supply.

Issues raised

- There was significant frustration over how environmental regulations, particularly nutrient neutrality requirements, are currently implemented. While intended to protect ecosystems, participants argued that these rules are being applied in a way that unfairly penalises housebuilders, especially SMEs, while ignoring larger contributors such as agriculture and water companies. It was estimated that over 150,000 homes are being held up due to this issue alone. Attendees called for a more proportionate and strategic approach to environmental regulation that balances protection with deliverability.
- Attendees described a “broken loop” in the consultation process, where communities are engaged too late, provided with inadequate information, or feel ignored, leading to increased distrust and resistance. There was a strong appetite to reframe consultation not as a statutory hurdle, but as an opportunity to build support by explaining the benefits of development, such as improved local services, employment opportunities, and enhanced public spaces.
- Developers argued that current policy and financial frameworks fail to reflect the risk profile of the private sector, particularly for smaller firms. They highlighted how return on investment in housing is often marginal, especially when policy uncertainty, regulatory burdens, and slow planning processes are factored in. There was a call for greater recognition of the commercial realities faced by developers and for policies that actively encourage investment rather than deter it.

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



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