

## Getting the Country Building Again: Political Soundbites or Genuine Action?



It has been two weeks since Jeremy Hunt gave his Autumn Statement, within which the planning and built environment sectors featured heavily. There were some notable giveaways, with promises of reforms to speed up delivery, as well as injections of funding. Yesterday, 07 December, Michael Gove also confirmed the long-awaited new NPPF will be published next week.

Hunt highlighted of what we are all too aware, that 'it takes too long to approve infrastructure projects and business planning applications' and followed up the Autumn Statement with the publication of the Getting Great Britain Building Again white paper. But after 13 years of successive Conservative governments acknowledging the same, there has arguably been little beyond soundbites offered to truly transform the situation.

The initiatives in the Autumn Statement that have been positively received by the sector include:

- Investing £5 million in additional funding for DLUHC's Planning Skills Delivery Fund to help local authorities tackle the every-growing planning backlog
- £110 million of funding for the Local Nutrient Mitigation Fund
- Expanding the Affordable Homes Guarantee Scheme by £3 billion
- Reforms to the planning system to speed up critical infrastructure approvals and connections to the grid through the Connections Action Plan and Transmission Acceleration Action Plan
- Introducing premium planning services with guaranteed accelerated decision dates for major applications and fee refunds where this is not met

- £5 million invested to incentivise greater use of Local Development Orders
- Accelerating delivery of electric vehicle charging infrastructure, as well as consulting on introducing permitted development rights to end the blanket restriction on heat pumps one metre from a property boundary
- Investing an additional £32 million to help unlock thousands of new homes

However, are these announcements as good as the headlines in the speech suggest? Take the additional £5 million funding for DLUHC's Planning Skills Delivery fund for example. There are 324 local planning authorities in the country, if you theoretically split that additional funding equally it only equates to just over £15,000 per authority. This certainly does not seem enough to help plug the resources and skills gap; albeit it is a welcome top up.

More pertinent though, is the fact that these announcements, coupled with a tax giveaway, lead many to view the Autumn Statement as an indicator that the General Election will be called earlier in 2024. Whilst we can debate if we will see a Spring or Autumn election and the merits and pitfalls of either approach, the key thing here is that a general election will be happening. This rather begs the question of how many, if any, of the proposed changes to help the planning and built environment sector we will see the benefits from before further changes are potentially proffered.

It is widely assumed by many in the country that the Conservatives are going to lose the election, ushering in the potential for a Labour government. Of course, this is by no means a certainty, but the wind does appear to be blowing in that direction. So, whilst many in the sector reacted positively to Hunt's announcements, are they looking in the wrong direction? How is Labour proposing to unlock the housing and infrastructure crisis?

Labour has of course too vowed to 'Get Britain building again', but it is too early for them to put any meat on the bones of their proposals of how to do this until we are officially in general election campaign mode. With Hunt's Autumn Statement setting tongues wagging, having the opportunity to view Labour's pledges in more detail may arrive sooner than we think.

For now, for those of us in the built environment sector, we can at least take comfort that politically both parties recognise the importance of getting the country building. Let's just hope someone, whoever that may be, actually delivers.