

DRAFT 3RD September 2024

Civic Voice briefing report: In Conversation with Clive Betts MP and Ian Harvey

Introduction

On 3rd September 2024, a Zoom webinar was hosted with Clive Betts MP and Ian Harvey, focusing on key issues related to housing, planning, and government policies. The event attracted significant interest, with 176 people registered and 138 attendees on the call at its peak. The session brought together participants from various civic societies, local authorities and other organisations from across England.

Introductions

The session began with some participants experiencing technical difficulties, specifically with audio issues in hearing Ian Harvey. However, these were quickly resolved, allowing the webinar to proceed without further interruptions. Attendees introduced themselves in the chat, representing civic societies and organisations from across the UK, underscoring the diverse participation in the event.

Discussion Between Ian Harvey and Clive Betts MP

Government Acknowledgement of Civic Societies and Community Involvement: In a letter dated 2nd August, the Government recognised the vital role that civic societies play, stating, "*We recognise the important role that civic societies play in promoting the interests of local communities, and I would like to assure you that community involvement in place-making is at the heart of the planning system.*" Clive Betts reinforced this by stating that the current reforms offer more opportunities for communities to genuinely shape and influence where they live and civic societies could have a greater role to encourage individuals from all backgrounds to engage at the local plan stage. Challenges in engaging younger people in the planning process were noted, along with the importance of using social media to improve public consultation.

Housing Crisis and Affordability: A recent poll conducted by Civic Voice during August 2024 indicated that 71% of civic societies believe the UK is facing a housing crisis that needs urgent attention. However, many respondents felt that the current reforms rely too heavily on market-driven solutions, which may not adequately address the need for social and genuinely affordable housing. Ian Harvey posed the question to Clive Betts, asking if affordability and the shortage of social housing are the primary concerns driving this crisis and how the government plans to ensure the reforms effectively address these issues. Clive acknowledged that relying solely on the private sector would not suffice to meet the target of 300,000 homes per year. He emphasised that the Treasury and Government would need to find ways to make the reforms happen, citing that the last time new completions exceeded 300,000 was in 1969/70. Clive assured attendees that the Prime Minister's commitment to 1.5 million homes would be backed by the full weight of the Government. The chat function had several comments referencing the LGA report of 1.1 million unused planning permissions.

Use of Vacant Properties and Brownfield Sites: With over 600,000 vacant properties across the UK, Ian asked how the government could ensure that these properties are brought back into use and that development efforts focus on brownfield sites rather than encroaching on greenfield or greenbelt areas. Clive agreed that reusing empty properties is important but noted the challenges in doing so, stating that it is not as straightforward as people might think. He also pointed out that while there is a strong desire to build on brownfield sites, the high cost of land remediation makes it difficult to achieve the required scale.

Lack of Resources and Skilled Workers: Ian highlighted that several participants in the chat had referenced the issue of under-resourced planning departments and a critical skills shortage in the construction industry, making it challenging to achieve the ambitious housing targets. He referred to a Civic Voice survey where 78% of respondents indicated that planning departments are under-resourced. Clive acknowledged that a significant knock-on effect of Brexit has been the loss of construction workers, which has exacerbated the skills shortage. He emphasised that the Government needs to ensure that planning departments are suitably funded and staffed, potentially with ring-fenced resources, if necessary, to meet the imposed targets. Clive also highlighted that the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Select Committee had called for long-standing support to build sector capacity.

Regional Impact of Reforms and Mayoral Involvement: Ian highlighted that the reforms would likely have uneven impacts across the country and that members of civic societies are interested in seeing more regionalised approaches and possible variations in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Clive mentioned that Mayoral and Combined Authorities are already working closely with political leaders in the North, indicating that collaboration is strong, but acknowledged that more needs to be done to ensure that regional differences are adequately addressed in the planning reforms. Clive also referenced the fact he felt that 'Transport for the North' was ineffective.

Key Points from the Chat Room after being analysed afterwards

Housing and Planning:

Use of Brownfield and Green Belt Sites: Participants debated the prioritisation of brownfield sites versus green belt land, with concerns about losing high-quality green belt areas. The concept of 'grey belt' land and its potential for development was also discussed. There was criticism of the current planning system for prioritising developers' interests and calls for stronger enforcement and reform. The VAT disparity between new builds and renovations was also noted, with calls for equalisation to encourage the use of existing properties.

Social Housing and Developer Responsibilities: Participants highlighted the importance of building more social housing and the challenges posed by the current system. The role of developers in shaping local plans and the pressure they exert on planning authorities were also discussed. Attendees discussed the influence of legal professionals in finding loopholes and the need for more robust planning regulations.

Empty Properties and Housing Shortages: Attendees highlighted the issue of vacant properties and the need for policies to bring these back into use.

Affordability and Housing Targets: The chat reflected concerns about housing affordability and whether the government's requirement for 50% affordable housing on grey belt land is realistic. There was also discussion about the mismatch between housing targets and actual delivery.

Infrastructure and Community Development: Supporting Infrastructure: Participants emphasised the need for adequate social infrastructure, such as transport and schools, in new housing developments. The importance of long-term community development over short-term profit was a recurring theme.

Quality and Design Standards: Concerns were raised about maintaining high design standards to avoid creating future slums. The inclusion of accessibility features in housing developments was also discussed. The need for new housing to meet high environmental standards was emphasised, including energy efficiency and renewable energy use. There were concerns about the ecological impact of building on green belt land.

Regional Impact of Reforms: There was support for more regionalised approaches to planning and the involvement of Mayoral Authorities in the reforms. Attendees welcomed the idea of more localised decision-making but recognised the need for further action.

Conclusion

The event concluded with Clive sharing some of his thoughts about the next few years that he has spent his adult life campaigning on housing and remains hopefully that the next few years will see some of his long-term ambitions come to fruition. The chat finished with several people thanking Clive and Ian for organising the event.