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ROUNDTABLE

Roundtable Discussion: Midhurst, 7th October 2025

Housing and Infrastructure vs the Environment - Are Conflicting Priorities Stifling Housing Delivery?

As pressure mounts to deliver 1.5 million homes over the next five years, the planning system is grappling with an impossible balance: how to reconcile housing need with environmental protection, infrastructure demands, and technical complexity. At our Midhurst Roundtable, a panel of professionals from across planning, ecology, transport, design, and development came together to discuss how well-intentioned policies are colliding - and why this tension may be paralysing delivery.

Participants

Nick Cobbold, Partner at Bell Cornwell, Town & Country Planning Consultants
Karen Tipper, Senior Associate at Bell Cornwell, Town & Country Planning Consultants
Luke Cleary, Land and Planning Manager at Forays Homes
Alice Lack, Planning Director at Martin Grant Homes
Alison Galbraith, Director and Principal Landscape Architect at The terra firma Consultancy Ltd
Paul Whitby, Director and Principal Ecologist at Ecology Co-Op
Chris Blamey, Director at RGP, Transport Planning and Infrastructure Design Consultants
Nathanael King-Smith, Director at MH Architects

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>
> Nick Cobbold

The Weight of Good Intentions

Nick Cobbold (Bell Cornwell) opened the discussion by noting how the planning landscape has changed over his career.

> "Protected landscapes, ecology, flooding, accessibility, sustainability, heritage - all are vital considerations, but together they've created paralysis. The government says it wants 1.5 million homes in five years. Is that even realistic within the current system?"

Luke Cleary (Forays Homes) agreed: "On the ground, every project seems to bring a new constraint - nutrient neutrality, biodiversity net gain, flood zones, highways. None of these policies are wrong, but they don't work together."

Alice Lack (Martin Grant Homes) added that inconsistency is a growing problem: "Policies keep changing, and different consultees interpret them in different ways. The uncertainty is huge - it's not just slowing projects down, it's making some sites undeliverable."

Chris Blamey (RGP Transport) said infrastructure was often the tipping point:

> "Transport and access can make or break a scheme, but they're rarely addressed early enough. Everyone wants sustainable transport, but it costs money and land - and when viability's already tight, something has to give."

Paul Whitby (Ecology Co-Op) and **Alison Galbraith (The terra firma Consultancy Ltd)** both argued that ecology and landscape are often brought in too late. "If we're involved from the start," said Paul, "we can design solutions that work for both people and wildlife. But when we're brought in at the end, it's damage control." Alison added, "Landscape isn't a constraint - it's about making development fit its context. When you plan with the landscape, you usually get better outcomes."

Nathanael King-Smith (MH Architects) (Nat) summed it up: "We're constantly redrawing layouts to satisfy one set of technical constraints after another. The system rewards box-ticking, not problem-solving."

The Politics of Planning

When asked whether the system could ever deliver 1.5 million homes, **Nick** was blunt. "No. Local authorities don't have the resources, and even if materials and labour were available, the process itself couldn't cope. Politicians talk about growth but act to restrict it - sometimes in the same breath."

He cited an example: "I wrote to my MP about extending the Surrey Hills National Landscape - the same government claiming we must 'build our way out' of recession. His reply admitted the change would make permissions harder to obtain. That contradiction says it all."

Alice argued that public engagement is skewed. "The planning portals make it easy to object but not to support. People who need homes rarely speak up - the system amplifies opposition."

Luke agreed: "It's dominated by the time-rich, not the time-poor. Retired residents can submit long objections; working families don't have that luxury."

Karen Tipper (Bell Cornwell) recalled a consultation she ran. "Daytime sessions were full of retired residents opposing development. Evening sessions, when working families could attend, were full of people saying, 'We need schools, doctors, better transport.' They weren't against change - they just wanted it done well."

Nat added, "Those vocal minorities have influence. Councillors and MPs listen to them. Nationally, politicians say we need homes; locally, they campaign to stop them. It's about votes, not planning."

Karen was clear: "Planning shouldn't be political. Look at Brighton's Gas Works site - allocated 25 years ago, only approved at appeal after members refused it.

> The right development in the right place shouldn't depend on politics."

The Cost of Poor Decisions

The panel agreed that political refusals come at a high price.

Nat said:

> "People don't realise that losing appeals costs councils hundreds of thousands of pounds - money that could go to local services. The Brighton Gas Works appeal cost around half a million."

Nick added, “Even when inspectors find councils completely wrong, they rarely award costs. Authorities have learned to phrase refusals vaguely - ‘in the absence of sufficient information’ - so they can’t be found unreasonable. The system protects poor decisions.”

Alice described it as “theatre”:

> “Committees spend hours finding a defensible reason for refusal when everyone knows it’s going to appeal.”

Karen suggested more transparency: “Imagine if every council had to publish how much it spent on lost appeals. ‘Your councillors cost you £500,000 this year.’ That might make voters think differently.”

Chris said, “And the public doesn’t understand planning obligations either. Developers pay huge Section 106 contributions for infrastructure, yet residents still ask, ‘Where’s the new school or surgery?’ - not realising the funds are already sitting in council accounts.”

Nick noted that “some councils are hoarding millions in unspent Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Section 106 funds. It’s effectively a hidden tax on development.”

Biodiversity Net Gain: Good Idea, Flawed Execution

Paul acknowledged that Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) had promise. “It’s early days, but the framework’s there. Over time, it should deliver real benefits, as we saw with the Thames Basin Heath approach once it bedded in.”

Karen agreed, but highlighted the cost: “For small developers, it’s brutal. One client wanted a small pub car park - £28,000 in off-site credits. It’s unviable. The principle makes sense, but the implementation doesn’t.”

Chris said small sites were hit hardest: “You can’t count biodiversity in private gardens, only in designated open space. Even a small green scheme ends up buying credits.”

Luke gave a striking example: “We had an equestrian site with high on-site net gain, but the council’s ecologist refused it, saying the homeowners might ‘steal the land’. We’d offered a legal agreement to secure it. Now we’re paying for credits miles away. That’s not ‘local net gain’.”

Paul added:

> “Many officers just haven’t had enough training. We spend half our time explaining the regulations to councils.”

Nick pointed out how BNG had become “front-loaded and bureaucratic. It was meant to be dealt with by condition, but councils now demand full metrics before validation. It’s turned into an expensive legal exercise.”

Alison said there were positives too: “BNG has forced earlier collaboration between ecologists and designers, which can improve layouts.” But the panel agreed inconsistency between authorities remained the biggest obstacle.

A Postcode Lottery

Nick described it as “a total postcode lottery. Every council has its own validation list. One insists on a Section 106; another accepts a condition. There’s no national standard.”

Nat added, “Some authorities share officers - one ecologist across multiple districts. Everything slows down. A national design and validation framework would help massively.”

Paul noted that planning has also become a “catch-all” for issues already regulated elsewhere. “If something’s a statutory matter - like disturbing bats - that’s already covered by licensing. There is a legal case proving that conditioning further surveys is possible, but it is rarely adopted by planning authorities.”

Karen said the approach was often bureaucratic. “You might have survey evidence, but because one season’s missing, they’ll hold you up for months.”

Alice said it was not just time but cost: “We’re spending £50,000 to £100,000 on surveys before even knowing if a site will get permission. It’s wasteful - financially and environmentally.”

Consistency, Collaboration, and Common Sense

The conversation turned to practical solutions. Paul said, “For big sites, full surveys make sense. But you don’t need exhaustive data to decide a principle in outline.”

Nat noted that constant regulatory churn was part of the problem. “Officers can barely keep up. We need a few years of stability to let the system breathe.”

Nick added, “Planning is the only regime that front-loads everything. You can get outline permission, then wait years before building - by which time all the surveys are out of date.”

Luke gave a telling example:

> “We were told to fell a healthy tree because its roots might be affected. Instead of monitoring it, we had to remove it pre-emptively. That’s not mitigation - that’s madness.”

When People Matter More Than Policy

Alison pointed out that outcomes often depend on the individual officer.

> “Some are pragmatic, others inflexible. That level of inconsistency makes planning unpredictable.”

Luke said, “It shouldn’t come down to personalities, but it does. You can’t plan a business around which officer you get.”

Nat observed that this is why small developers are disappearing. “Large housebuilders can absorb risk and delay - SMEs can’t.”

Karen added, “The system needs open, face-to-face dialogue again. Everything’s hidden behind emails now, and that kills problem-solving.”

Nick agreed. “We’re not short of policy - we’re short of people with experience and confidence to apply it sensibly.”

Design Review Panels: The Good, the Bad, and the Abstract

Alison described design panels as “challenging but sometimes valuable.” “Verbal and written feedback often conflict, and some members are very theoretical.”

Nat added, “We’ve had schemes where DRP advice completely contradicted the case officer’s view. It’s like two parallel worlds.”

Karen said, “You can get positive feedback at Design Review Panel (DRP), but councils aren’t bound by it. It’s frustrating when that input isn’t carried through.”

Nick noted, “It can be exhausting - the repetition, the moving goalposts. Even experienced professionals lose heart.”

The consensus was that DRPs can be useful when pragmatic, but often operate in a bubble detached from real-world viability.

Planning as Coordination - and the People Who Make It Work

The discussion closed with a focus on collaboration and skills. “Planning should be the glue that holds everything together,” said Nick. “Younger planners need to see the value of integrating disciplines - ecology, design, transport, landscape - not treating them as silos.”

Nat added, “Whatever your role, your job is to make the client’s life easier - flag issues, offer solutions, and communicate. That’s how you build trust.”

Alice agreed: “You learn so much by being in the office, hearing conversations, and seeing how others handle clients. That can’t be replicated online.”

Karen noted that remote working in local authorities has eroded that learning culture. “Some officers haven’t been in an office for years. That lack of informal learning shows.”

Nick linked it to a wider skills shortage. “We’ve been recruiting for months but there seem to be very few strong candidates. The technical skills are there, but confidence and client-handling are harder to find.”

Paul said ecology faced the same issue. “Graduates are easy to find, but experienced staff are scarce. It’s improving, but many left after years of poor pay and long hours.”

Nat ended on a hopeful note: “We’ve had great success with placements. With mentoring, younger staff thrive. Personality and curiosity matter as much as qualifications.”

Nick concluded, “We haven’t solved the system’s problems in our discussion today - but we’ve shown how much comes down to people, experience, and attitude. If we can get that right, the rest might just follow.”

Let’s talk!
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