

## Caversham And District Residents Association

# Response to the Consultation on proposals for reform of the planning system in England from the Caversham and District Residents Association

### Introduction

Caversham and District Residents' Association (CADRA), with a membership of nearly 500 households, has represented the interests of its area for over fifty years. We are a well-respected and constructive partner of both the Borough Council and developers in dealing with planning matters - from the complex and strategic to comments on individual planning applications.

Caversham comprises the northern part of Reading, between the River Thames and the Chilterns AONB, with a population of around 30,000. It is centred on a medieval village, now a Conservation Area. It was extensively developed in the Victorian and Edwardian periods; development has continued since then, on a larger scale to the limits of Caversham's boundaries and through smaller-scale infill. The adjoining areas of South Oxfordshire intermittently come under heavy pressure for major housing development – a process in which CADRA gets involved both at the plan-making and application stages. Caversham therefore spans all three of the area typologies identified in Pillar 1: from the *Protected Areas* of its historic core and important ecology; the *Renewal Areas* which cover most of its built up area; the potential *Growth Areas* over the border in South Oxfordshire.

We feel that this combination of long experience as a community group and the nature of planning issues we have addressed over the years puts us in a strong position to respond to this consultation. We do not intend to comment on the mechanics of the planning system as a whole, but to confine our thoughts to how these proposals would assist or hinder residents and communities to engage better in the planning process, in line with the aspirations set out on Page 24 of the consultation document. We aim to make a positive and useful contribution in that respect, and for that reason only respond below to those questions which have a direct bearing on this issue – shown in blue.

### **Q1. What three words do you associate most with the planning system in England?**

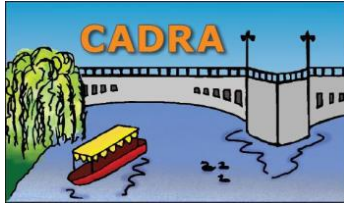
Vital; Undervalued; Under-resourced

### **Q2(a). Do you get involved with planning decisions in your local area? [Yes / No]**

Yes.

CADRA has been commenting on and influencing planning decisions for over fifty years. As well as commenting on planning applications, we respond to local plan consultations and, at the invitation of both the Borough Council and developers, participate constructively in pre-app discussions. Given the resource constraints in the planning department, we feel this makes a positive and well-received contribution. It is resourced through CADRA committee members with relevant expertise. Our comments on this consultation are based on this long experience of constructive engagement and draws from our engagement across the community.

### **Q3. Our proposals will make it much easier to access plans and contribute your views to planning decisions. How would you like to find out about plans and planning proposals in the future? [Social media / Online news / Newspaper / By post / Other – please specify]**



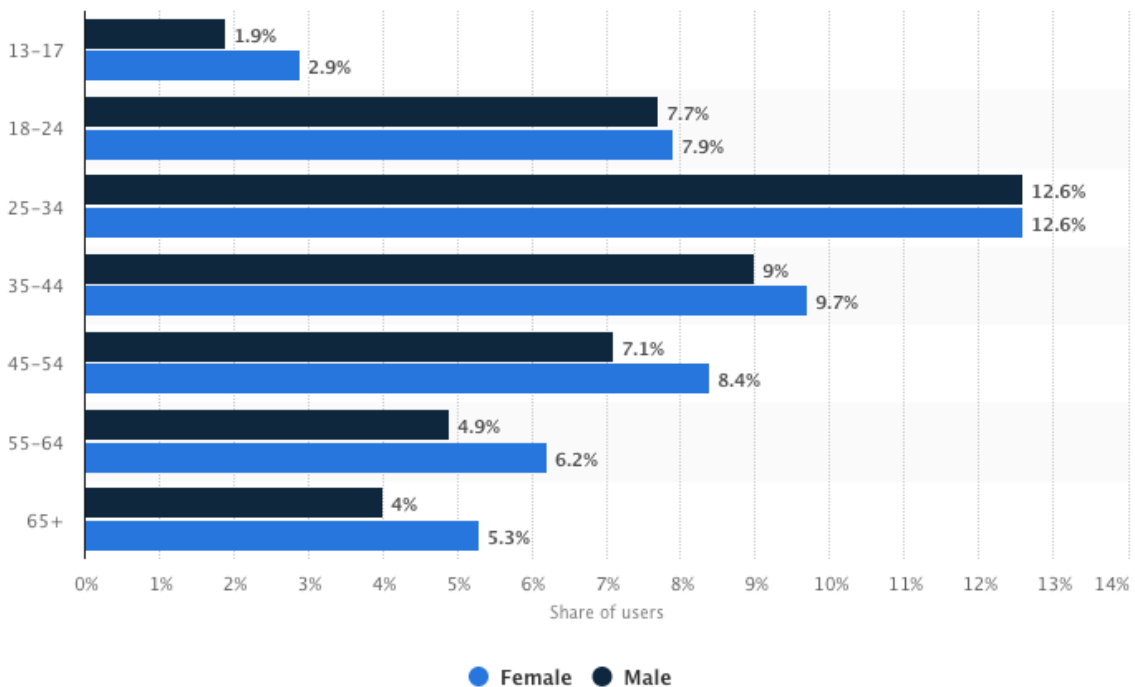
## Caversham And District Residents Association

Present arrangements would be very usefully supplemented by fuller use of social media as an alert and a reminder. We make regular use of social media but recognise its limitations. We feel strongly that social media should be an additional gateway to present arrangements, rather than replacing them. Our reasons for this view are:

1. Younger residents are more likely to be users of social media (see figures below). While concerned about planning in their area, our experience as a community group suggests that work and family pressures do not allow them the time to become as deeply immersed as such complex issues demand. But the older sections of our community, who have the time and, through retired professionals, the expertise to get involved, tend to use social media less extensively. So, over-reliance on such media risks disenfranchising some of the most actively participant sections of the community. Similarly, it would exclude all those members of the community who cannot afford smart phones and similar devices.

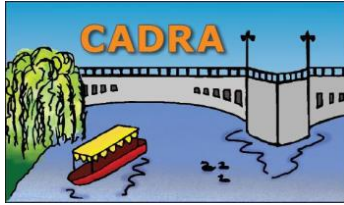
To use social media as a gateway to other sources of planning information, on the other hand, would be a very welcome way of drawing younger people into active engagement.

### Facebook users in the United Kingdom (UK) as of June 2020, by age and gender of users:



Source - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1030057/facebook-users-united-kingdom-age-gender/>

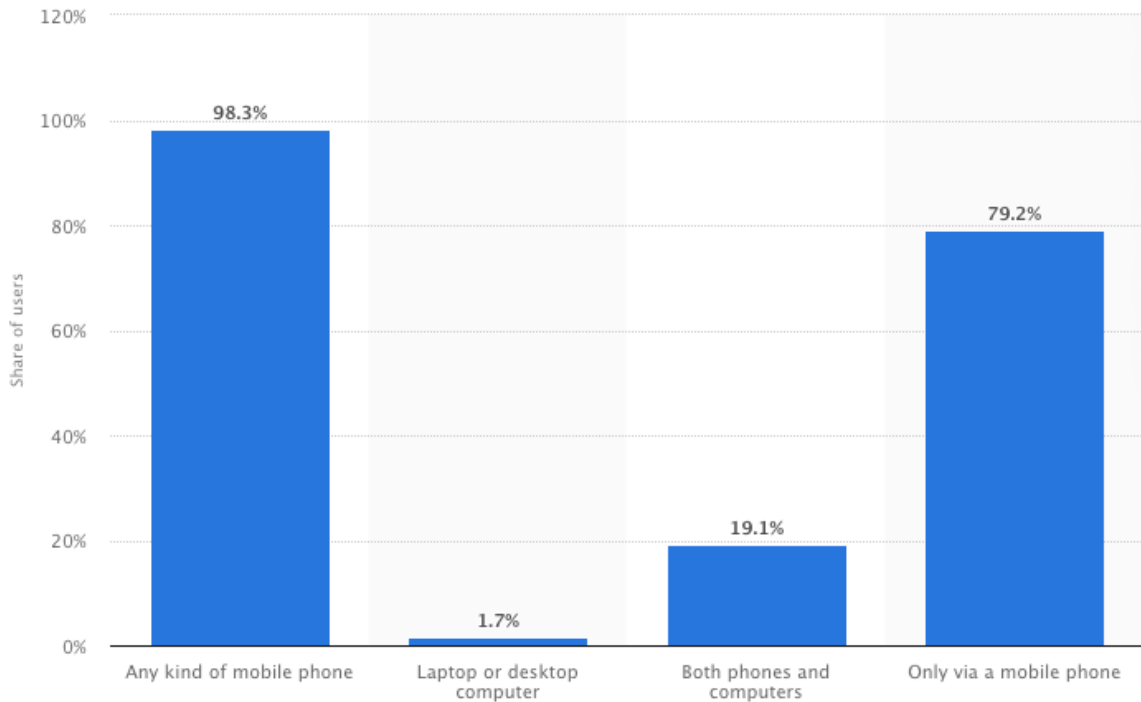
2. The complexity of material needed to take an informed view, even after the changes proposed in this consultation, do not easily fit into social media platforms. Furthermore, most users access social media via mobile phones, whose screens are too small for the detailed plans, maps and other information needed to take an informed view. They would



## Caversham And District Residents Association

undoubtedly be useful to alert people to issues in their area, but in the form of signposting to more comprehensive information on-line.

### Device usage of Facebook users worldwide as of July 2020

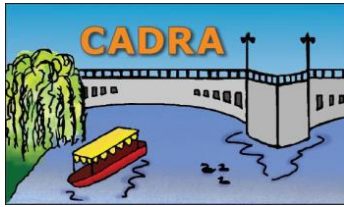


source - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/377808/distribution-of-facebook-users-by-device/>

3. It would be difficult for decision-makers to evaluate social media responses: are they based on full consideration of the issues, or simply on 'liking' and forwarding? Academic research suggests that social media posts exhibiting 'indignant disagreement' get twice the 'engagement' of calmer, more balanced contributions. It is generally much more fertile ground for campaigns of opposition to development than for considered responses or practical engagement.

***Q4. What are your top three priorities for planning in your local area? [Building homes for young people / building homes for the homeless / Protection of green spaces / The environment, biodiversity and action on climate change / Increasing the affordability of housing / The design of new homes and places / Supporting the high street / Supporting the local economy / More or better local infrastructure / Protection of existing heritage buildings or areas / Other – please specify]***

Retaining the area's character; supporting local facilities, including retail; minimising through traffic.



## Caversham And District Residents Association

***Q5. Do you agree that Local Plans should be simplified in line with our proposals? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]***

See Q11 and Q12 below

***Q6. Do you agree with our proposals for streamlining the development management content of Local Plans, and setting out general development management policies nationally? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]***

No – we strongly disagree

The nature and detail of such policies needs to be closely attuned to local needs and characteristics and should be determined locally in terms both of extent and detail and be subject to local community influence.

General national policies would not only eliminate opportunities for local engagement on development management policies at the plan-making stage. They would also severely limit the Local Planning Authority's ability to respond to residents' concerns over individual applications if their role were reduced to simply applying national policies. We cannot see how these could take account of specific local needs – for example, in the careful and detailed preservation of local architectural character. This unnecessary centralisation is a threat to the whole concept of public engagement in individual planning decisions and most definitely to the quality of the decisions taken and thus of the built result.

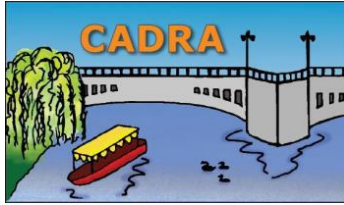
***Q7(a). Do you agree with our proposals to replace existing legal and policy tests for Local Plans with a consolidated test of "sustainable development", which would include consideration of environmental impact? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]***

In part – see Q7(b) below

***Q7(b). How could strategic, cross-boundary issues be best planned for in the absence of a formal Duty to Cooperate?***

Our experience of cross-boundary issues in our area make us feel strongly that the Duty to Cooperate (or something similar) should be retained, reinforced and widened beyond its usual remit of divvying up housing numbers. Our particular experience leads us to this view. We are sure that it is not unique and that many other areas have similar cross-boundary issues.

Our problem is that three radial roads converge here from outside Caversham, to use two bridges across the Thames into Reading. They bring heavy congestion, poor air quality and severe environmental impact to our local centre and wider residential areas. They carry traffic to and from southern Oxfordshire, but strategic planning in that area takes no account whatever of its external impact. For example, the revisions to the South Oxfordshire Local Plan envisage over 5000 new



## Caversham And District Residents Association

homes within this catchment area but ignore its impact across the boundary in Caversham. Similarly, Oxfordshire's highway planning makes no reference to this problem and steadfastly opposes one possible solution - a further Thames crossing.

We therefore urge that, in selecting Growth Areas in their forward planning work, Local Authorities should have a duty to consider impacts beyond their own boundaries. This should form part of the consolidated test of 'sustainable development' in Q7(a) and should be mandatory.

***Q8(a). Do you agree that a standard method for establishing housing requirements (that takes into account constraints) should be introduced? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]***

No. There are too many local factors to consider which could not be adequately addressed by a formula.

***Q8(b). Do you agree that affordability and the extent of existing urban areas are appropriate indicators of the quantity of development to be accommodated? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]***

No.

Contrary to classical economic theory, higher than average house prices do not automatically indicate a supply shortage and thus a need for higher housing targets: a price premium is just as likely to stem from buyers chasing an area's inherent attractions, such as natural beauty or successful schools, as from any under-provision relative to population. Automatically increasing targets in response to higher prices would jeopardise the very assets which are driving values, putting at risk, for example, the AONB which closely adjoins our area. Affordability is a key concern but needs to be pursued by more subtle means than simply increasing overall supply.

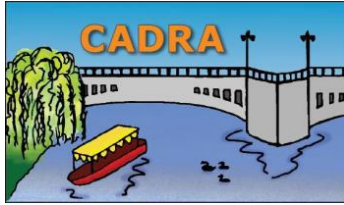
***Q9(a). Do you agree that there should be automatic outline permission for areas for substantial development (Growth areas) with faster routes for detailed consent? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]***

Yes, but conditionally.

There is certainly duplication if development sites allocated in the Local Plan still need planning applications to establish the principle of development.

However, these problems impact less on community groups like CADRA than those created when speculative applications are submitted for sites outside the Local Plan, where long and complex Inquiries focus on the minutiae of housing targets and severely stretch the resources of such groups, as well as of Councils. The substantial resources required for such appeals could more usefully be deployed in other ways.

For groups such as ours, the proposed simplification would therefore be welcome on two conditions: first, that the designation of 'Growth Areas' should be based on as thorough and



## Caversham And District Residents Association

publicly-accessible a process, led by the Local Authority, as at present, albeit speeded up; and secondly that there should be a much stronger presumption against speculative applications outside such Growth Areas, up to and including a right for Local Planning Authorities not to accept them.

*Q9(b). Do you agree with our proposals above for the consent arrangements for Renewal and Protected areas? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]*

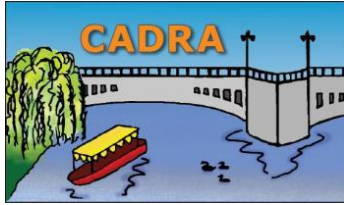
No.

Caversham is a fully developed area up to its boundaries, with few opportunities for major development, and a Conservation Area at its heart. As such, it probably typifies the Renewal and Protected Area categories. It is where our accumulated experience is most relevant to

this consultation supplemented by our active involvement in Reading's Conservation Area Advisory Committee.

A major driver of these wider reforms is a wish to accelerate new housebuilding. Within Renewal Areas like ours, there is little scope for this on a significant scale: if there were, the sites should in any event be designated as Growth Areas. So, we do not agree that there is an urgent need for radical change to the existing system as it applies to Renewal and Protected Areas.

Renewal Areas like ours are heavily developed and fine-grained. The main concerns prompted by planning applications tend to be the safeguarding of amenity for adjacent residents and the retention and improvement of the area's environmental character. Applications tend to be heterogenous and require detailed and individual attention to get the right outcome. The planning system in such areas is widely understood and valued by the community as a safeguard, rather than being seen as a tiresome brake on development. The benefits of change in terms of accelerating development are heavily outweighed by the drawbacks in terms of impact on environmental quality and popular support. In these areas, our experience is therefore that the system is well-regarded and effective; it is 'not bust' and not in need of fixing. We have no issue with the presumption in favour of development or the primacy of the Local Plan. Our concern is that the Local Plan (especially if streamlined and shortened as proposed) can never be fine-grained enough to cover detailed issues of amenity and environmental character. Even less appropriate in this regard would be any form of automatic permission for pre-specified forms of development. Our experience, for example, of the results of PD rights to convert vacant factories into residential gives us no encouragement that such generic approaches work in such areas. We support Pillar Two's proposals for design codes in areas of major new development. However, to apply this to Renewal Areas in sufficient detail to cover adequately all the design issues which could arise from the process of continuous, small-scale changes in such complex areas would be a gargantuan task. It would be much more complex than the



## Caversham And District Residents Association

existing Local Plan. It would be far more cost-effective to determine individual proposals on their merits, as and when they arise, and far more likely to produce a satisfactory outcome.

The Introduction to the consultation asserts:

*Planning decisions are discretionary rather than rules-based: nearly all decisions to grant consent are undertaken on a case-by-case basis, rather than determined by clear rules for what can and cannot be done.*

In our view, this is exactly the right approach in the diverse and complex context of Renewal Areas. The sheer impracticality of the proposed changes in Renewal Areas, and their drawbacks in terms of development quality and popular support, vastly outweigh the very marginal gains in terms of accelerating large numbers of new homes.

We therefore urge that Renewal Areas should have the same planning regime as that described for Protected Areas.

Q9(c). Do you think there is a case for allowing new settlements to be brought forward under the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects regime? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]

**Q10. Do you agree with our proposals to make decision-making faster and more certain? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

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**Q11. Do you agree with our proposals for accessible, web-based Local Plans? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

See Q12 below

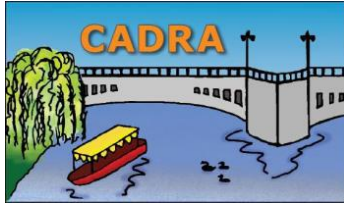
**Q12. Do you agree with our proposals for a 30 month statutory timescale for the production of Local Plans? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

We combine our responses to Q5, Q11 and Q12 and answer 'Not Sure'.

The White Paper will have sweeping implications for community involvement. While we welcome the intention for much more fundamental and wide-ranging consultation at the plan-making stage, we have two key concerns:

1. There are no firm proposals on how this laudable intention would be achieved. It seems to rely on technological solutions and greater use of social media. This might increase engagement with younger people, who tend to be heavily under-represented in planning consultations. But welcome as this would be, we reiterate our concerns at Q3 above that it could conversely discourage participation by older citizens. The two approaches are complementary and need to run in parallel.





## Caversham And District Residents Association

2. Secondly, while a streamlined local plan process over a 30-month period has many advantages, it appears to include only two opportunities for community involvement (compared to four in the recent Reading Local Plan, for example, in which we were fully engaged). If the stages for public involvement are to reduce, more detail is needed on how each one could become more intensely participatory, to avoid reducing overall opportunities for concerned citizens to engage: while streamlining would reduce the demands on community groups' finite resources, and so could be welcome, real loss of public influence over the process would not.
3. The white paper suggests that "Local Plans should be visual and map-based, standardised, based on the latest digital technology... and limited to no more than setting out site- or area-specific parameters and opportunities." There are a host of practical local issues which require some form of regulation or standardization and we believe the Local Plan is the appropriate local vehicle.

### ***Q13(a). Do you agree that Neighbourhood Plans should be retained in the reformed planning system? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]***

Yes. We have observed the process villages and seen the opportunities for substantial local engagement and real community cohesion. However, in a unitary authority like Reading it is difficult to see how Neighbourhood Planning would attract sufficient community resources, so a mix of approaches is needed.

### ***Q13(b). How can the neighbourhood planning process be developed to meet our objectives, such as in the use of digital tools and reflecting community preferences about design?***

### ***Q14. Do you agree there should be a stronger emphasis on the build out of developments? And if so, what further measures would you support? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]***

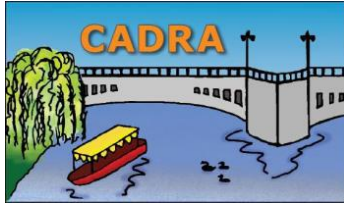
### ***Q15. What do you think about the design of new development that has happened recently in your area? [Not sure or indifferent / Beautiful and/or well-designed / Ugly and/ or poorly-designed / There hasn't been any / Other – please specify]***

Results have been very mixed. There are examples of good design but also many poor or indifferent designs. Urban design and relationships between neighbouring schemes are often poor.

### ***Q16. Sustainability is at the heart of our proposals. What is your priority for sustainability in your area? [Less reliance on cars / More green and open spaces / Energy efficiency of new buildings / More trees / Other – please specify]***

### ***Q17. Do you agree with our proposals for improving the production and use of design guides and codes? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]***





**Caversham And District  
Residents Association**

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**Q18. Do you agree that we should establish a new body to support design coding and building better places, and that each authority should have a chief officer for design and place-making? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

Yes. A chief officer for design and place-making is very necessary but must be adequately resourced.

**Q19. Do you agree with our proposal to consider how design might be given greater emphasis in the strategic objectives for Homes England? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q20. Do you agree with our proposals for implementing a fast-track for beauty? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

It is difficult to see how 'pattern books' would apply in Reading.

**Q21. When new development happens in your area, what is your priority for what comes with it? [More affordable housing / More or better infrastructure (such as transport, schools, health provision) / Design of new buildings / More shops and/or employment space / Green space / Don't know / Other – please specify]**

All these issues are important

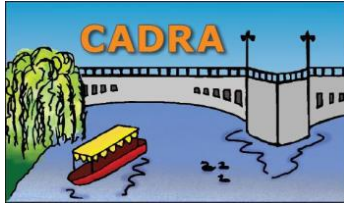
**Q22(a). Should the Government replace the Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 planning obligations with a new consolidated Infrastructure Levy, which is charged as a fixed proportion of development value above a set threshold? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q22(b). Should the Infrastructure Levy rates be set nationally at a single rate, set nationally at an area-specific rate, or set locally? [Nationally at a single rate / Nationally at an area-specific rate / Locally]**

**Q22(c). Should the Infrastructure Levy aim to capture the same amount of value overall, or more value, to support greater investment in infrastructure, affordable housing and local communities? [Same amount overall / More value / Less value / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q22(d). Should we allow local authorities to borrow against the Infrastructure Levy, to support infrastructure delivery in their area? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q23. Do you agree that the scope of the reformed Infrastructure Levy should capture changes of use through permitted development rights? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**



## Caversham And District Residents Association

**Q24(a). Do you agree that we should aim to secure at least the same amount of affordable housing under the Infrastructure Levy, and as much on-site affordable provision, as at present? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q24(b). Should affordable housing be secured as in-kind payment towards the Infrastructure Levy, or as a 'right to purchase' at discounted rates for local authorities? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q24(c). If an in-kind delivery approach is taken, should we mitigate against local authority overpayment risk? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q24(d). If an in-kind delivery approach is taken, are there additional steps that would need to be taken to support affordable housing quality? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q25. Should local authorities have fewer restrictions over how they spend the Infrastructure Levy? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q25(a). If yes, should an affordable housing 'ring-fence' be developed? [Yes / No / Not sure. Please provide supporting statement.]**

**Q26. Do you have any views on the potential impact of the proposals raised in this consultation on people with protected characteristics as defined in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010?**

We refer again to our comments on Q3: that an over-emphasis on social media in engaging the public in planning matters would discriminate against many sections of the population.

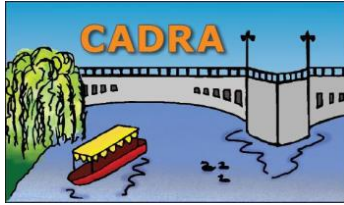
### NOTES

"We will seek to strengthen enforcement powers and sanctions so that as we move towards a rules-based system, communities can have confidence those rules will be upheld." Where can we comment on this?

"Support local planning authorities to use digital tools to support a new civic engagement process for Local Plans and decision-making, making it easier for people to understand what is being proposed and its likely impact on them through visualisations and other digital approaches. We will make it much easier for people to feed in their views into the system through social networks and via their phones." Unrealistic to provide visualisation of growth area. That only comes with design.

"Make it easier for those who want to build beautifully through the introduction of a fast-track for beauty through changes to national policy and legislation, to automatically permit proposals for high-quality developments where they reflect local character and preferences." If the community can only comment on designation of areas and the Local Plan *limited to no more than setting out site- or area-specific parameters and opportunities.* Then how are local character and preferences to be determined?

"Expect design guidance and codes – which will set the rules for the design of new development – to be prepared locally and to be based on genuine community involvement rather than meaningless consultation, so that local residents have a genuine say in the design of new development, and ensure that codes have real



## Caversham And District Residents Association

‘bite’ by making them more binding on planning decisions.” We know from many years of experience how difficult it is to engage the community on broad principles. It certainly won’t be achieved by a fleeting look at social media on a mobile phone.

“Protect our historic buildings and areas while ensuring the consent framework is fit for the 21st century”. Classic “planning speak” which doesn’t know what it means or how to deliver

“We will be more ambitious for affordable housing provided through planning gain, and we will ensure that the new Infrastructure Levy allows local planning authorities to secure more on-site housing provision” but the % is reduced!

“We will also look to extend the scope of the consolidated Infrastructure Levy and remove exemptions from it to capture changes of use through permitted development rights, so that additional homes delivered through this route bring with them support for new infrastructure.” Good. As the retired national Head of Planning said – national pdr need more conditions attached. Avoid the slums of the future.

“people will be able to use their smartphone to give their views on Local Plans and design codes as they are developed, and to see clearer, more visual information about development proposals near them – rather than current planning policies and development proposals presented in PDF documents” only if plans are hugely oversimplified to view on a small screen. These are big complex decisions which require more than a quick glance on a small screen. But yes there are far too many long pdf’s, often only there to tick a box.

- Renewal areas “suitable for development” – this would cover existing built areas where smaller scale development is appropriate. It could include the gentle densification and infill of residential areas, development in town centres, and development in rural areas that is not annotated as Growth or Protected areas, such as small sites within or on the edge of villages. There would be a statutory presumption in favour of development being granted **for the uses specified as being suitable in each area**. Local authorities could continue to consider the case for resisting inappropriate development of residential gardens;

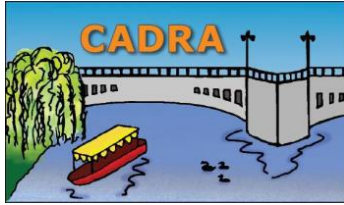
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In Growth and Renewal areas, the key and accompanying text would set out **suitable development uses**, as well as **limitations on height and/or density** as relevant. These could be specified for sub-areas within each category, determined locally but having regard to national policy, guidance and legislation (including the National Model Design Code and flexibilities in use allowed by virtue of the new Use Classes Order and permitted development). For example, it may be appropriate for some areas to be identified as suitable for higher-density residential development, or for high streets and town centres to be identified as distinct areas.

.....For Protected areas, the key and accompanying text would explain what is permissible by cross-reference to the National Planning Policy Framework.

Alternative options: Rather than dividing land into three categories, we are also interested in views on more binary models. **One option is to combine Growth and Renewal areas (as defined above) into one category and to extend permission in principle to all land within this area, based on the uses and forms of development specified for each sub-area within it.** An alternative approach would be to limit automatic permission in principle to land identified for substantial development in Local Plans (Growth areas); other areas of land would, as now, be identified for different forms of development in ways determined by the local planning authority (and taking into account policy in the National Planning Policy Framework), and subject to the existing development management process. Clear as mud!

In both the Growth and Renewal areas it would still be possible for a proposal which is different to the plan to come forward (if, for example, local circumstances had changed suddenly, or an unanticipated opportunity arose), but this would require a specific planning application. We expect this to be the exception rather than



## Caversham And District Residents Association

the rule: to improve certainty in the system, it will be important for everyone to have confidence that the plan will be the basis for decisions, and so we intend to strengthen the emphasis on a plan-led approach in legislation (alongside giving appropriate status to national planning policy for general development management matters). Good in principle but how in practice?

In areas where development is restricted (Protected areas) any development proposals would come forward as now through planning applications being made to the local authority (except where they are subject to permitted development rights or development orders), and judged against policies set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. We will consider the most effective means for neighbours and other interested parties to address any issues of concern where, under this system, the principle of development has been established leaving only detailed matters to be resolved. – So where do all the specific issues in the CA appraisal come in??

We envisage design codes will help to reduce the need for significant supplementary information, but we recognise there may still need to be site specific information to mitigate wider impacts. For these issues, there should be clear national data standards and templates developed in conjunction with statutory consultees; ??

By making it easier to develop Neighbourhood Plans we wish to encourage their continued use and indeed to help spread their use further, particularly in towns and cities. We are also interested in whether there is scope to extend and adapt the concept so that very small areas – such as individual streets – can set their own rules for the form of development which they are happy to see. Yes maybe

, it is important that local guides and codes are prepared wherever possible. These play the vital role of translating the basic characteristics of good places into what works locally, and can already be brought forward in a number of ways: by local planning authorities to supplement and add a visual dimension to their Local Plans; through the work of neighbourhood planning groups; or by applicants in bringing forward proposals for significant new areas of development. Is that significantly different to now??

P56 “Nationally, the Environment Bill currently before Parliament will legislate for mandatory net gains for biodiversity as a condition of most new development. And the Local Nature Recovery Strategies which it will also introduce will identify opportunities to secure enhancements through development schemes and contributions. We will also deliver our commitment to make all **new streets tree-lined**, by setting clear expectations through the changes to the National Planning Policy Framework which will be consulted on in the autumn, and informed by the outcome of this summer’s consultation on the England Tree Strategy.<sup>14</sup> And we are also assessing the extent to which our planning policies and processes for **managing flood risk** may need to be strengthened along with developing a national framework of green infrastructure standards.” Is this real or just a sop?

P58 We envisage that Local Plans will clearly identify the location of internationally, nationally and locally designated heritage assets, such as World Heritage Sites and conservation areas, as well locally important features such as **protected views**. – Good but a lot of work.