

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick  
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government  
Seacole Building  
2 Marsham Street  
Westminster  
London  
SW1P 4DF

October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Dear Mr Jenrick,

The Arboricultural Association welcomes the government's intention and ambition in announcing substantial reforms to the planning system, and we are pleased to be able to contribute to the consultation process.

We fully acknowledge the importance of housing and development. Houses are critical infrastructure for people and for society, but so are trees and green spaces. The social, environmental and economic benefits of trees are increasingly well understood, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has only served to highlight the importance of trees and other green infrastructure to the physical health and mental wellbeing of our communities. It is therefore essential that trees are seen as a key part of development, to be fully integrated into grey and blue infrastructure. A lot is said about the importance of planting the right tree in the right place, but we must also create the right places for the right trees.

The proposed changes to the planning system create some significant opportunities, but also considerable risks. In the race to 'build, build, build' it must be remembered that not all 'red tape' is there to be cut – much of the planning infrastructure that has evolved over the last few decades serves to protect our environment and, whilst improvement is always possible, it should not all simply be swept away. Tree counters, like newt counters, play an important role in preserving the health of our environment for current and future generations, and in the fight against the climate and biodiversity emergencies. They must not be disregarded.

In addition to completing the consultation questions, the Arboricultural Association has five key points in response to the Planning White Paper which are outlined in this covering letter.

**1. In order to ensure that Local Authorities have the right people with the right skills, there should be a statutory obligation for every Local Authority to employ in-house tree officers.**

The Planning White Paper correctly identifies the need for Local Authorities to have the right people with the right skills, and it is a positive step to see acknowledgement from government of the detrimental impact of budget cuts in recent years. This sentiment was echoed in the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) response to the England Tree Strategy consultation, in which they wrote *"austerity has reduced the number of local authority tree officers with advice now largely provided by planning officers and landscape officers."* The RTPI went on to say that *"to avoid mismanagement and inappropriate decisions being taken, dedicated funding for these posts needs to be restored. There will be a need to support planners and developers so that trees can survive and thrive, especially in a changing climate."*

Put simply, if the policy framework relating to trees – including the Planning White Paper and the England Tree Strategy – is to be successfully implemented, then appropriately qualified and properly resourced tree officers should be employed by every Local Authority in the country. In addition to restoring budgets to acceptable levels, funding might be generated in more innovative ways, such as through ensuring that trees are properly included in any revisions to the Infrastructure Levy.

## **2. Tree planting is important, but tree establishment is key – the right tree, in the right place, with the right aftercare and management.**

The recent trend for mass tree planting and ever-escalating targets masks the fact that the act of putting a tree in the ground is only one small part of a decades, or even centuries-long, process which includes nursery production, planting specifications, young tree maintenance, inspections and long term tree care. We must ensure that trees are established rather than just planted; there is little value in spending millions of pounds in planting trees which never make it to maturity. And at every stage of the lifecycle of a tree in an urban area there should be appropriate involvement from the relevant arboricultural professional.

## **3. Existing trees must be given adequate protection.**

Ambitious targets to increase tree canopy cover will never be achieved through mass tree planting alone; existing trees must be given adequate protection and retained where possible. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) affords considerable protection for ancient and veteran trees – which is to be welcomed – and this should be reflected in the Planning White Paper, which currently makes little mention of ancient or veteran trees. However, the vast majority of trees in the country are not ancient or veteran and are not protected, and it is these trees which will be particularly at risk through the proposed zoning and designated development areas in brownfield as well as greenfield sites.

Under the current planning system Local Planning Authorities have a statutory duty to consider the protection and planting of trees when granting planning permission for proposed development. The potential effect of development on trees is a material consideration that must be taken into account, and it must therefore be reiterated that it is vital for Local Planning Authorities to employ in-house tree officers, not only to ensure that trees are fully considered in the planning system but to guarantee that important trees continue to have the necessary statutory protection from works that could harm public amenity and the environment. The Tree Preservation Order (TPO) system could indeed be improved, but it is crucial that any amendments strengthen rather than weaken it. Revisions to the planning system must not allow an erosion of existing protections.

## **4. Local consultation for individual planning applications is essential and must not be replaced with local plans.**

The existing planning system can undoubtedly cause delays to development, but rather than being seen as frustrations to be overcome it must be acknowledged that many of these ‘obstacles’ are actually key tools of local democracy which allow communities the time and opportunity to influence

and take ownership of what happens in their local areas. Removing local consultation and replacing it with local plans risks reducing the involvement of the general public – and the professionals working within Local Planning Authorities.

#### **5. Increased digitisation and use of data must support, rather than replace, the existing system.**

Increased usage of data and digitisation brings risks as well as opportunities. Digitising TPO databases and making them entirely available online will only work if all trees worthy of a TPO have been protected in this way, otherwise unscrupulous developers will be able to take advantage of under-resourced tree officers by felling significant trees before they can be protected. Algorithms alone cannot be relied on, and they require the input of competent professionals working within the system as well. Affixing planning notices to lamp posts might seem old fashioned in the digital age, but this is the main way in which many people – particularly those with no access to the internet – will find out about what is proposed in their communities. We must not discriminate against parts of our community for a perceived increase in expediency.

The Arboricultural Association would like to offer its support to government in its efforts to improve the planning system, and we hope that there will be future opportunities for our industry to input into the creation of a system which affords appropriate respect and consideration for trees and the wider environment, to the benefit of society. The *Planning for the Future* white paper contains 42 photographs of outdoor areas, 36 of which feature trees; but the document actually mentions trees just six times in 84 pages. This suggests that trees are still seen by many as an adornment rather than regarded as critical infrastructure.

The Arboricultural Association would echo the recent comments of the poet Benjamin Zephaniah: *“people really need homes, but people really need trees. No trees mean no people. So, we must find ways of building homes and preserving as many trees as possible.”*

Please note that this letter has also been placed in the public domain for the benefit of our members.

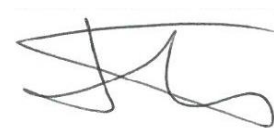
Yours sincerely,



Michelle Ryan, Chair of Trustees



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