

The threat of developers bypassing residents' plans was among the issues that emerged at this year's Northern Growth Summit,

Warning over neighbourhood

Housebuilders will be tempted to ignore the neighbourhood planning process by the prospect of using other national planning policies to win permission on appeal for unallocated sites, Leeds City Council's chief planning officer said at a conference last week.

Phil Crabtree told delegates at the Northern Growth Summit, organised by *Planning's* sister title *Regeneration & Renewal*, that neighbourhood planning activity in Leeds was high, with ten neighbourhood areas already designated and five more in the pipeline. However, in a video interview with *Planning*, he said the development industry "had been singularly absent so far" from the process.

He said he hoped that housebuilders would eventually work through the neighbourhood planning process, but that they might be tempted to go direct to appeal by the demanding housing provision requirements that the National Planning Policy Framework imposes on councils.

The danger for Leeds City Council lay in the need for it to either have a five-year supply of housing land plus a buffer of either five per cent or 20 per cent, and the difficulty of achieving that "in this sort of market" with need of the scale that exists in the city, Crabtree said. "There will always be a temptation for the more aggressive landowners and developers to go straight to appeal and therefore bypass the more democratic parts of the process," he said.

Leeds City Council's draft core strategy, which it hopes will go to examination in the spring, plans for 70,000 dwellings between now and 2028. Crabtree described this as "the biggest ask of any local authority in the country".

Crabtree was speaking in the place-shaping workshop stream, sponsored by consultancy Savills. Earlier at the event, Pat Ritchie, the chief executive of the Homes & Communities Agency, England's housing and regeneration



Northern growth update: delegates could listen to a variety of experts and network with fellow professionals at the summit




Ritchie: growth focus poses challenges

agency, had warned delegates that the shift in government focus from regeneration to growth would "pose some challenges for a number of areas in the north". She said the agency would have to take tough decisions when choosing whether to fund projects in areas of economic decline. But she said the agency continued to recognise that run-down towns "must not be left behind".

Elsewhere at the event, a senior civil servant acknowledged that some enterprise zones may need more help to achieve their aim of boosting economic growth. Ben Stoneman, policy team leader for enterprise zones at the Department for Communities and Local Government, said there were examples of enterprise zone

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 **In Pictures** Photos from the summit

PlanningResource.co.uk/go/northern_growth

says Richard Garlick

regime



Crabtree: risk of appeal shortcircuit



Stoneman: enterprise zone report

success, but that he was seeing “more and more” sites “that may need a few more pieces of the jigsaw turned in their direction”.

The summit was chaired by Professor Michael Parkinson of Liverpool John Moores University.

Regeneration & Renewal is supporting the Institute of Economic Development's annual conference on 27 November in Westminster. For details, visit www.economicdevelopmentconference.com



RICHARD GARLICK
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Plans for key sites were too far advanced for the land to be included, says Jerry Unsworth

Why we cut the size of a proposed neighbourhood planning area

How do you decide the boundary of a “neighbourhood” for neighbourhood planning purposes? How do you strike the right balance between fostering localism and ensuring neighbourhood planning is timely and has an appropriate sphere of influence? And how do you manage the expectations of stakeholders so they don't see neighbourhood planning as a panacea for grievances – especially when the government is pressing local planning authorities to embrace growth and speed up decision-making?

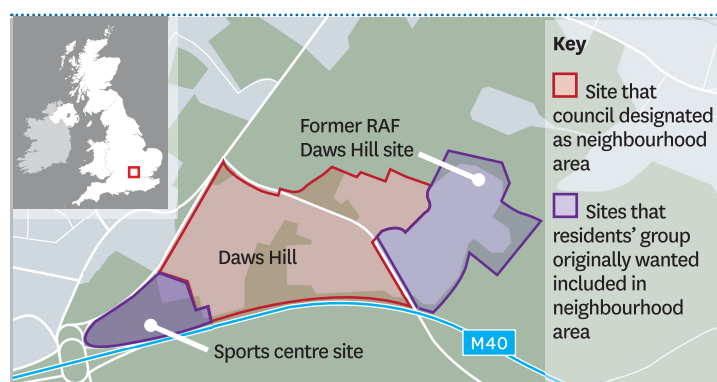
These are all questions the Localism Act raises, but, seemingly, does not answer. In Buckinghamshire, Wycombe District Council has been steering a tricky neighbourhood planning application for Daws Hill, a suburban part of High Wycombe, through these uncharted waters.

In September, this culminated with the council designating a neighbourhood forum and area in response to applications by the Daws Hill Residents' Association. But there was extensive and, at times, tense debate leading up to this decision.

The council had to decide the most appropriate area for the neighbourhood to plan for. What made this particularly tricky was that the residents' group wanted to include two sites that adjoin the existing residential suburb but on which plans of district-wide significance had reached an advanced stage.

The first site currently houses the district's ageing sports centre. An application has been submitted for development including a new sports centre and a commercial scheme on this land. The second site is a former RAF base sold last year to housebuilder Taylor Wimpey. This land is currently the site making the largest contribution to our five-year housing supply. The developer is entering the final design stage before

DAWS HILL NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN AREA



submitting an application.

With green belt and other protected land tight around the town, making best use of sites like this is central to the “brownfield first” policy in our adopted core strategy.

While wanting to support neighbourhood-level planning, the council had to balance the group's desire to prepare a neighbourhood plan for the “live” sites with its duties as planning authority, including negotiating “positively and proactively with applicants” now.

With a neighbourhood plan probably taking a year to complete its stages and with no certain outcome until after an examination and a referendum, the council decided it couldn't wait. We were concerned that work – and financial outlay – on the plan would be overtaken by planning decisions, with greater frustration for all concerned.

As a result, our cabinet modified the neighbourhood plan area to exclude the two strategic sites. In parallel, it also approved a district council development brief for the ex-RAF site, amended to reflect input from local residents. This built on community engagement work.

This has not gone down well with the residents' group, whose expectations were understandably raised by the localism agenda. In the lead up to the council decision, both the

residents' group and the council took legal advice as the paucity of government guidance left much to interpretation. The indications are that the residents' association is contemplating a judicial review of the council's decision.

This may be the first time that a council has decided to reduce – rather than accept – a proposed neighbourhood area. But the decision was backed by Suzanne Ornsby QC, who advised us that the discretion given to councils to consider whether or not neighbourhood areas are appropriate “is a wide one”. She added that the council had taken all relevant factors into account and that the decision was “not irrational”.

The government has provided the powers and left us to decide how to use them locally. But I wonder how much thought was given to situations like the one we have faced?

Editor's note: We invited the residents' association to contribute a piece setting out its views on the neighbourhood planning process, but the offer was declined.



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