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Planning is broken – and it's time the government admitted it

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Consents have sunk to a 20-year low. We need real change

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I have written a number of articles over the past two decades about our planning system, but this is a moment when things are at an all-time low.

The number of new consents has sunk to a 20-year low. Only 1,220 sites for private homes gained planning permission in the first three months of 2026, down from 2,000 in the same period of 2022 and almost 3,000 in 2017. Approval for these sites equates to 54,000 new homes.

The Labour Party swept to power in 2024 with a promise to build 1.5m new homes over the course of their five-year parliament. Ministers promised to cut red tape to increase the number of new homes. The figures compiled by the Home Builders Federation (HBF) tell a different story.

Just 408 sites for 10 homes or more received consent – the lowest number since 2006, and down 13% on the previous year. Over the past 12 months in England, 216,141 homes received consent – representing just 58% of the annual target.

The market

The market is on its knees, and in my opinion worse than during the crash of 2008. There is no viable route into the market for first- and second-time buyers anywhere in the country. The combination of saving for a deposit, the cost of living, and high interest rates makes it virtually impossible to buy a new home unless you have the help of the bank of mum and dad.

Some 4,500 contractors have gone bust each year for the past three years, and I suspect 2026 will be no better.

Even If a developer purchased a site in the past 12 months , the 20% profit on cost has disappeared, with build costs up 10% and sales values down 10%. This combination is starting to decimate the loan books of lenders, and is likely to get worse before it gets better.

Listed housebuilders – the lifeblood of our industry – are issuing profit warnings at a rate last seen during the global financial crash, with half of businesses citing policy change as a leading factor.

The planning system

Any site with a planning consent carrying the suggested 35% affordable housing is no longer viable – and that's if you can find a housing association that wants to buy it. While there is talk of reducing this to 20%, good luck getting that past local councils whose planning committees are full of do-gooders that absolutely nothing about the market risk developers take.

All they see is greedy developers making too much money. The only person on a planning committee who knows anything about planning is the planning officer – whose recommendations are routinely ignored because the "yoghurt brigade" doesn't like the height, massing, design, size of the balconies or amount of affordable housing, regardless of whether the scheme is viable.

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The planning teams in local authorities are too small, lack experience, and are almost certainly underpaid. Even the most basic application still takes 12 to 18 months to be granted, and it can take a further six to 12 months to agree and sign a Section 106. If you're unfortunate enough to have a building over 18 m tall, it can take another 12 months to achieve Gateway 2.

Add a further two years for construction and sales, and it's a five-year gamble, with all the risk taken by the developer. Many of my original clients, which specialised in planning gain, are now out of the market as the risk no longer matches the reward – and who can blame them?

The politics

Matthew Pennycook, minister of state for housing and planning, and Angela Rayner, secretary of state for housing, communities and local government, are two career politicians with no background in the sector and no experience of architecture, planning, construction, housebuilding, or – more importantly – current market conditions. This makes absolutely no sense.

Rayner herself is now on her second stint in the role – replaced by Steve Reed in September 2025, before returning in July 2026's reshuffle. That's three housing secretaries in less than two years. This kind of churn at the top makes it almost impossible for the sector to plan around consistent policy, let alone build trust with an industry that thinks in five-year cycles.

In the UK, development and construction are responsible for millions of jobs and are vital to the economy. The government needs to stop talking and start taking action now – and the simplest way to do that is to follow these four steps.

The fix

1. Start charging developers the right amount for planning applications, on a per-unit basis or a minimum charge, and use that money to hire experienced planners and architects.

2. Abolish planning committees and leave the decision to the planning officer. Just look at the make-up of most committees – there is rarely anyone with any property expertise. The only thing they see is votes to keep their seat in their own little pocket of power.

3. If 35% affordable makes a scheme unviable, reduce it to a minimum of 20%. If there's no demand from housing associations even at that level, reduce it to zero.

4. Bring back Help to Buy, but in a format based on the values in a developer's appraisal, matched against a mortgage valuation based on real comparable existing value – not inflated new build pricing.

As soon as we reverse this politics-first, planning-second approach, we stand a chance.