

Grounds of agreement

The basic shape of planning and environmental policy under the new coalition government is apparent but there is a long way to go before details start to emerge, *Jonathan Tilley reports*

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition is a new kind of government for this country, so the future inevitably holds some uncertainty. Details of what the alliance will mean for planning will take some time to emerge. Given the policies of the ruling parties, it seems that this is an area that will undergo changes.

Last week's agreement document mentions some planning-related issues, but the major policies are still to come. "I suspect there will be a good deal of common ground between the David Cameron and Nick Clegg camps, but only time will tell what will make it onto an already busy legislative agenda," says Savills head of planning and regeneration Roger Hepher.

In particular, the situation remains unclear on issues such as localism, strategic planning, incentives for local authorities to encourage development, the Conservatives' "open source" planning philosophy, the community infrastructure levy (CIL), changes to the appeal system and the future of the Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC).

In the run-up to the 6 May election, planners warned of the dangers of too much reform too quickly. It remains to be seen how this will be taken on board. "The immediate implications for planning are that there must be serious doubts about the future of CIL and the IPC," says BNP Paribas Real Estate head of development John Bowles.

"However, more radical reform of the system is less likely to be at the top of the agenda and may take longer to come through. This may be beneficial in terms of the impact on the development market. If reform is to be introduced, this would be best done over a longer period in what is currently a very fragile market."

Reform of the planning system featured in both parties' manifestos, so it is likely that radical changes are on the way in due course. The likely direction will be towards localism. The Conservative green paper *Open Source Planning* set out a blueprint based on civic engagement and collaborative democracy at the local level, transferring power down from a centralised bureaucracy.

The Lib Dems share many of these views, says DPP partner Bob Robinson. "While their manifesto was perhaps generally thin on content, it is



Coalition: localism agenda featured in both Tory and Lib Dem manifestos

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clear that the underlying philosophy of both parties points to a greater emphasis on local determination as opposed to the heavily centralist approach that we have become used to since 1997," he suggests.

Some planners have already sounded warnings on the problems this may cause. Colin Buchanan director of planning Hugh Roberts believes that the shift towards Labour in the concurrent local government elections could cause friction.

"The growth aspirations of newly Labour-controlled councils might be blunted by localism if it starts to resemble nimbyism and if the policy leads to greater powers for third parties to intervene," Roberts argues. "The government would not be comfortable with a charge that it is effectively becoming anti-development when regeneration is so much a part of the future urban agenda as well as overall economic recovery."

Energy has also emerged as a significant bargaining chip. The coalition agreement outlines a solution to the marked differences between the governing parties over nuclear power. The parties have agreed that Lib Dem MPs may abstain from voting when a national planning statement paving the way for construction of new nuclear power stations is put before parliament.

There is a wider measure of agreement on renewable energy sources, which seem likely to benefit from the coalition. The agreement sets out measures including creating a green investment bank, ensuring that carbon capture and storage limits emissions from coal-fired power stations and encouraging alternative energy sources such as anaerobic digestion.

"One source of renewable energy that both parties are keen to push is wind farms," asserts McGrigors partner Suzanne Gill. "Land deemed suitable for wind farm developments could therefore become premium plots, not only for their owners but also for those able to identify investment opportunities."

The environment looks to be another key concern and the agreement includes various measures in this area. It also contains hints at future transport planning policy, another arena on which the parties generally concur. The agreement points to measures to extend the high-speed rail network, cancel a third runway at Heathrow Airport and put a block on additional runways at Gatwick and Stansted.

"We are pleased with how substantial the set of environmental policies is even at this early stage," declares Renewables UK chief executive Maria McCaffery. "According to the agreement, we could be looking at smart meters, a green investment bank and measures introduced to encourage marine energy during the life of this parliament."

The full picture of what the coalition administration will mean for planning is still forming and it may be that any action proposed for the sector will be delayed by other more pressing priorities. Opinions are mixed and the prospect for benefits in some areas is balanced by foreboding about what potential policies could mean. For the moment, the sector can only wait to see what the future holds. ■