

Zoning: a single page

1. What is zoning?

“Zoning is a land use planning practice which focuses on ‘dividing’ a local authority’s area into different parts where some uses are permitted, while others are forbidden by right” ([Lichfields, 2018](#))

2. Recent commentary

The [Centre for Cities](#) have proposed a flexible zoning code designed by national and devolved governments. Public consultation frontloaded into the creation of the local plan. National government to continue as “referee” setting the rules and enforcing them across “players” in local government. Unclear regarding the type and scale of legislative change needed.

[Policy Exchange](#) recommend a binary zonal land use planning system. Local authorities would control the rules in local plans for new development. That would be the only stage when local politicians and the public could comment.

3. The RTPI’s view: Plan the World we Need

[Our new campaign](#) describes how planning can accelerate progress to a zero carbon society, increase resilience to risk, and create fair, healthy and prosperous communities.

The planning system already contains tools and initiatives which provide targeted zoning powers. These include [Local Development Orders](#), [Permission In Principle](#) and [brownfield land registers](#). But now is not the time for a major overhaul of England’s planning system.

In our [Priorities for Planning Reform in England](#) we set out sensible alternatives. These include a refocusing on 21st century challenges, a clear direction for strategic planning, and technological innovation.

Proper investment in place, including public-sector planning, can deliver the Government’s objectives while avoiding major disruption.

4. Types of planning system

Discretionary planning

The basis of the UK’s planning systems

The Local Planning Authority (LPA) prepares a development plan outlining a positive vision for the future of their area, and a framework for addressing economic, social and environmental priorities including housing.

Represented by elected councillors, the LPA decides on planning applications in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise, providing flexibility

Zonal planning

Specific zones are allocated for different types of development and non-development, with planning permission automatically granted if a development meets zonal requirements. Multiple versions exist, for example in the USA, Canada and Germany.

Consistent features include a zoning map and accompanying regulation, and less flexibility

Many European countries do not use zonal plans across entire cities. Instead, targeted zoning is used to control development when planning strategic urban extensions, or in sensitive historic environments.

5. Zoning: pros and cons

Certainty

Pro: Reduces risk by guaranteeing that any development can proceed if compliant with zonal requirements

Con: Increased certainty reduces flexibility, innovation and the ability to quickly respond to changing circumstances. Reduces certainty for developments that do not fit with zonal requirements

Politics and democracy

Pro: A greater focus on the plan-making process, with the frontloading of decision-making and public consultation to create zoning maps and regulations

Con: Hard to genuinely engage with communities about changes that may not happen for many years, and lack of opportunity for communities to be involved in detailed matters like design and amenities after zone has been ‘made’.

Opportunity cost

Pro: Provides greater certainty for developments that comply with zonal requirements

Con: Remodelling the English planning system would be complex and create uncertainty during an extended transition period whilst ‘upstream’ (early) consultation on zones was undertaken. Zoning plans can become outdated and require frequent amendments.

6. RTPI tests for zoning

Must provide a clear direction on meeting net zero carbon targets

Only introduce in tandem with a vision-led strategic planning framework addressing infrastructure, housing and environmental objectives

Ensure community consultation and involvement

Use locally agreed design codes to ensure a high quality of development that works locally