

Planning white paper falls short of detail needed to press ahead



White papers used to be full of detail about how the government proposed to deliver on key policies. Those were the days. Given the Treasury meddling and nonsense peddled by business interests, this week's planning white paper could have been much worse. It shows all the

signs of planning's supporters in Whitehall fighting a rearguard action and just about holding on for now.

This white paper triumphs in its lack of detail. It contains self-congratulatory pats on the back for the "achievements" of the past decade, but also thinly veiled acknowledgements that the 2004 reforms screwed up. Most of all, it is packed with questions and further opportunities for comment on key issues.

The proposed infrastructure planning commission is a perfect example. We are left none the wiser on how it will operate other than that it will be full of "experts" — although it is hard to imagine who would want a job that carries so much grief. That only leaves superannuated candidates looking for something to do in retirement.

The government talks about a "national policy framework" to meet infrastructure needs, but this comes down to a series of statements of objectives. While this is

better than nothing, it is nowhere near a national strategy. Will an independent commission be able to take these statements forward? Will its decisions survive political interventions and judicial challenges? What about the public? Open floor debates are a low-budget TV gimmick, not the emblem of a 21st century planning system.

A proper debate on the green belt has also been sidestepped. The government's pledge on town centres first is welcome, but much depends on the robustness of the replacement for the needs test. Proposals to loosen control on home improvements should relieve some of the

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workload, but again these are out for consultation.

The biggest elephant in the room is how the government can deliver unpopular schemes such as nuclear power plants, major roads and aviation expansion without those pesky members of the public getting in the way. Can any government do this without losing power?

Huw Morris, editor