Strategic land market update
Key takeaways

July 2026

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Introduction

On Thursday 2 July, we collaborated with Tetra Tech to co-host a strategic land seminar in Ashfords' Bristol office.

The session explored a range of issues affecting the strategic land sector, including planning policy, infrastructure and water considerations, the evolving political landscape and the latest legal developments impacting delivery.

Speakers were Christian Evans, Chris Rogers and Matthew Cheeseman from Tetra Tech, Charles Bushe from DevComms and David Richardson from Ashfords, with John Litton KC of Landmark Chambers giving the keynote speech.

Here are some of our key takeaways.

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Planning in the South West – a health check and emerging trends

Christian Evans, Tetra Tech

Spatial geography

- The South West is entering a major period of planning and governance changes, creating uncertainty but also opportunity.
- Devolution, Local Government reorganisation, and the introduction of Spatial Development Strategies will fundamentally reshape how housing growth, infrastructure, and strategic land allocations are planned.
- Housing need is not going to go away simply because boundaries change. Promoters and developers should position sites now rather than wait for reorganisation to settle.

Local performance trends

- We are moving into a period of plan-making pressure, with transitions plans and new style plans all competing for capacity.
- The current planning environment provides increased opportunities for planning applications and appeals, particularly where councils cannot demonstrate adequate housing delivery or land supply.

Tooling up

- Success depends on acting early, being strategic and using evidence aggressively.
- Those who act early with well-evidenced applications and site promotions are most likely to benefit from the current opportunity window.

The shape of water

Matthew Cheeseman and Chris Rogers, Tetra Tech

- Water is becoming a critical planning constraint – but also a development opportunity.
- Water availability, wastewater capacity, flood risk and water quality are now core planning risks that need to be considered much earlier in the development process.
- Water neutrality, nutrient neutrality and sewer network capacity issues are increasingly affecting development delivery.
- Developers who proactively address water challenges can unlock sites more easily than those who treat water as a later-stage issue.
- The existing water infrastructure and policy framework are struggling to keep pace.
- Early engagement and innovative water solutions will be essential for future development.
- Successful developments will increasingly be those that treat water as a strategic design consideration rather than a compliance exercise.
- Water is rapidly becoming one of the biggest risks to development delivery in the UK, but developers who engage early, embrace water-efficient design and work collaboratively with stakeholders will be best placed to bring sites forward successfully.

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Rise of the challenger parties

Charles Bushe, DevComms

- UK local politics has fundamentally shifted from a two-party system to a fragmented, multi-party environment.
- Political risk and stakeholder engagement can no longer focus solely on Labour and Conservative Councillors.
- Many newly elected councillors come from outside established political pathways and may have less experience of planning and local government.
- Given the more fragmented political environment, there may be an opportunity to engage early and tailor messages to the priorities of the emerging political groups.

Legal roundup

David Richardson, Ashfords

- The Government is pushing hard to speed up planning decisions, but the real impact remains uncertain.
- The Planning and Infrastructure Act introduces several measures aimed at reducing delays and removing 'grit' from the planning system that holds up development coming forward, including extended planning permission time limits where permissions are subject to legal challenge and mandatory training for planning committee members.
- However, much of the legislation is still a framework requiring further regulations and guidance before its full effect can be judged.
- One of the most significant proposed changes is the National Scheme of Delegation which should increase officer-led decision making. Planning committees are likely to have less influence, with more decisions delegated to officers.
- New funding mechanisms and environmental reforms could change development economics. Two major changes could affect viability and delivery:
    - Higher planning fees and potential surcharges to improve local authority cost recovery, albeit they may be welcome if partnered with service improvements.
    - Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs) and the Nature Restoration Levy (NRL), allowing developers to pay into strategic mitigation schemes instead of delivering site-specific environmental solutions.

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