

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# ‘It is a choice to keep the Isle of Man a special place’

**Frank Cowin and Dave Martin discuss the Manx Government’s recently opened planning review consultation and highlight the importance to all in the island of making their views known to set the future direction for planning.**

**T**ynwald approved the Programme for Government ‘Our Island – a special place to live and work’ in January 2017. When the ‘mid-year report’ on the Programme for Government was laid before Tynwald on November 21, it emerged that, when measured for the first time, currently only 41% of the island’s population has confidence in the government’s planning system.

One of the actions in the Programme for Government was to improve this situation, and the government has recently launched a planning review consultation (details at the top of our poster) which gives us all the opportunity to contribute to the discussion and improve the situation.

Planning doesn’t just affect heritage buildings – it affects the attractiveness and prosperity of the island; and for the long-term good of the island as many as people as possible need to complete the consultation.

Even if you don’t complete all parts, complete as many parts as you can, and get everybody else to do so as well.

We support DEFA’s aspiration in the consultation to improve the system so that it ‘...will encourage people to live, invest in and visit the island, making the most of our cherished assets – our beautiful landscape and coastline’; however this could go further to include ‘an attractive built environment reflecting our heritage and enhancing our beautiful natural environment’.

All would agree we do NOT want an island stuck in the past, or preserved in aspic – we

**Your Island and your Community needs YOU !**

to read and comment on the Consultative Document on Planning issued by the Manx Government

This is available online at [consult.gov.im](http://consult.gov.im) or from the Cabinet Office (tel: 685 759), the Consultation closes on 15th December.

The Consultation sets out various ideas for changes to Planning procedures. These include:-

- Making it easier for Government’s priorities to be reflected in the way planning applications are considered
- Using Compulsory Purchase to enable economic development
- Increasing the use of Permitted Development Orders so exempting many schemes from planning requirements, especially with regards to new telecommunications equipment, aerials etc.
- Simplifying change of use of buildings, especially in town centres
- Reducing the use of zoning that controls what development may be carried out in which designated areas
- Moves to encourage development of ‘Brownfield’ sites
- Introducing charging for pre-application advice
- Removing or reducing long-established democratic third-party rights during the planning process
- Enabling Government to create a policy document which would affect decision making without public consultation or approval by Tynwald
- Reducing Conservation Areas
- Querying the use of Historic Building Grants
- Restricting the use of cleared sites for interim car parking

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want a live, sustainable island.

Equally though, we need to keep ‘our differences that make the difference’.

There are significant risks with short-term policy swings; and it is extremely unlikely we’ll manage to make the island a cheaper place to live than the UK or places with sunnier climates, so we have to keep it an attractive place to live and work.

This is a great opportunity, but this is particularly important as it may well be that the authors have included a number of proposals to provoke reaction, but the danger is, if the public don’t respond that these proposals might slip through as having public approval!

Paraphrasing Edmund

Burke, ‘All it takes to lose is for the good guys to do nothing’ – if you don’t comment now, don’t blame ‘the system’ if it isn’t to your liking in the future.

We’re not going to tell you here how we think you should respond, our ‘poster’ and these notes are intended to highlight some of the good suggestions in the review and some of the more contentious issues you may wish to comment on.

As well as completing the numbered questions, there are some suggestions and assertions in the consultation’s explanatory text which don’t have numbered questions; and there are issues or subjects concerning planning which aren’t even covered at all in the consultation.

So feel free to comment on these either in the consultation’s final ‘catch-all’ question 55 or in an accompanying statement or letter.

To be seen as fair, the planning and registration systems both need to be transparent and accessible for all Manx residents, and then rigorously enforced.

The consultation suggests welcome improvements to procedure during planning committee meetings, but only a small fraction of applications currently makes it as far as the planning committee.

The consultation rightly raises concerns over the number of decisions overturned on appeal. A properly-resourced and trained planning team, able to give pre-application advice and with time to write



**Distinctive style: A view of Peel from Bridge Street**

thorough reports, should reduce this. Also, the whole planning and appeal process needs to follow agreed policy and only be over-ruled in cases of proven national need.

**W**hilst government is moving to address the backlog of building registrations, there is definite scope for more improvement than is contained in this consultation.

The consultation proposes changing planning legislation but not registered building legislation, which needs to be separated from planning and to have its own transparent and defined process.

The consultation does not seem to address the problem where planning doesn’t always take account of landscape, scale and context; and there doesn’t seem to be anything to address the visibility and impact of development,

especially in the countryside.

Nor does the consultation seem to address natural heritage, cultural heritage or archaeology.

We do though take encouragement from question 35 where there is a great need for a revision of present procedures which often necessitate the demolition of existing properties before approval for a new property.

There also needs to be greater awareness and appreciation of the importance of Manx buildings and their impact on the Manx environment among planners (and developers, architects, owners etc.).

We are a small place with a great story but can only succeed in the future by accentuating our important points of difference – which aren’t always financial!

There are distinctive styles on, and within, the island, and the policies enacted and plans approved need to build on this

**‘Don’t allow us to sink into a homogenous sea of Milton Keynes-like Chinese or Turkish granite’**

– rather than allow us to sink into a homogenous sea of Milton Keynes-like Chinese or Turkish granite. There is no mention in the questions of introducing control of demolition.

At present in most cases, demolition is still uncontrolled in the island – this can lead to loss of important and valued structures and long-term empty sites.

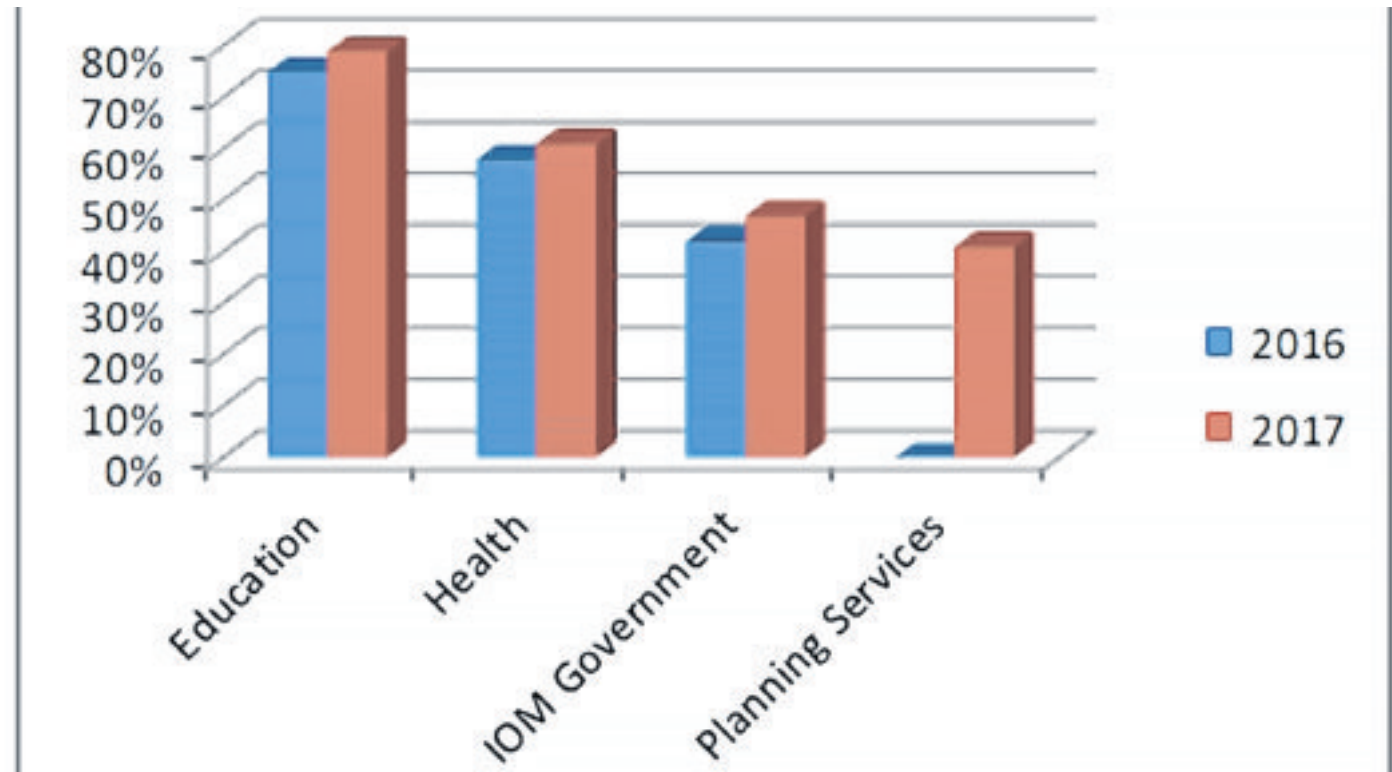
We do though agree very strongly with the need to be able ensure that, once properly planned, development goes ahead speedily, especially where it is within an existing built-up area.

The consultation's emphasis on encouraging brownfield development is necessary and to be supported; but there is scope to go further, possibly deterring countryside-gobbling greenfield development.

Consideration should be given to using incentives such as VAT breaks for work on existing properties to encourage keeping them in sustainable use.

Key to all of this is the current unease and uncertainty over the desired population for the island, and the ability to accommodate it, without endangering the things which we do cherish.

Planning and planners, like taxmen, are not always



Cabinet Office graph showing that public confidence in the planning system, measured for the first time, was only 41%

seen positively, but this is unfair – planners are key gatekeepers for our environment.

Planners can only try to implement the policies set by Tynwald, so if you think any

aspects of planning need improvement, this consultation is the chance to tell Tynwald.

As Dr Tim Graham, chief executive of the Manx Wildlife Trust, recently said: 'The

future need not be so grim and it is a choice to keep the Isle of Man a special place' – this totally encapsulates why everyone needs to make their voice heard.

This is YOUR opportunity to have your say, and the chance may not come around again for many years.

We would urge everyone to try and respond as fully as you

can. We would also urge you to share this with as many of your friends, family, community etc.

The consultation closes on December 15.



A partial win for the system: at least the Douglas Hotel's frontage was saved



The former Port Erin Marine Biological Station is in need of redevelopment



Balancing heritage and development: Ballakilmartin Farm, in Whitebridge, Onchan