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Professional Ponderings – August 2026

Planning & Development

What a Burnham Premiership Could Mean for Residential Development

Andy Burnham's arrival in Downing Street could represent a significant shift in the tone and delivery of housing and planning policy. While Burnham has long been associated with a "brownfield first" approach in Greater Manchester, his record also demonstrates a pragmatic acceptance that meeting housing needs ultimately requires strategic urban extensions and carefully planned releases of Green Belt land where sustainable growth demands it.

For residential developers, promoters and landowners across our region, a Burnham administration could therefore create a more favourable environment for edge-of-settlement development than many local planning authorities have historically been prepared to accept.

Strategic Growth Rather Than Piecemeal Expansion

A defining feature of Burnham's leadership in Greater Manchester was the eventual delivery of the Places for Everyone spatial plan, a strategy designed to accommodate substantial housing growth while coordinating infrastructure, employment and transport investment. Although initially resistant to large-scale Green Belt release, Burnham ultimately supported a plan that balanced brownfield regeneration with selective releases where they were necessary to meet long-term development needs.

Applied nationally, this approach would likely favour strategic site allocations and urban extensions rather than piecemeal speculative development. Sites with the ability to offer an opportunity to deliver comprehensive master planned communities may therefore become increasingly attractive.

The East Midlands and East of England continue to experience significant housing pressure due to their proximity to London, the Oxford-Cambridge corridor and major employment centres. It is expected that a Burnham government will be expected to maintain a strong commitment to boosting housing supply, while also seeking to direct development towards locations that can demonstrate sustainability credentials.

For many settlements across North Northamptonshire, West Northamptonshire, Central Bedfordshire, Bedford Borough, Huntingdonshire, South Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Warwickshire and Buckinghamshire, this could translate into a renewed focus on sustainable settlement expansion.

A More Flexible Approach to Green Belt and "Grey Belt"

Perhaps the most significant implication for landowners concerns Green Belt policy. The revised planning framework introduced the concept of "grey belt" land, recognising that some areas within the Green Belt make only a limited contribution to its strategic purposes and may be suitable for development where housing needs are pressing.

A Burnham-led government is expected to continue this pragmatic approach. While retaining protection for strategically important landscapes, there would be an increasing expectation that authorities review underperforming Green Belt land before concluding that housing needs cannot be met.

This is particularly relevant in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire, where Green Belt constraints around settlements often limit growth opportunities. Sites that are visually contained, influenced by existing development, or make only a limited contribution to Green Belt purposes could find themselves receiving far greater attention during local plan reviews.

Infrastructure First

Andy Burnham's political philosophy has consistently linked housing growth with infrastructure investment, public transport improvements and strong community benefits. This may translate into the most successful development opportunities being those that are capable of demonstrating a wider public benefit. Strategic land promoters will need to show how

schemes contribute not only housing numbers, but also schools, healthcare provision, open space, biodiversity enhancements and transport connectivity.

Consequently, larger edge-of-settlement sites capable of supporting comprehensive master planning may enjoy a competitive advantage over smaller, fragmented parcels.

Outlook for the Development Industry

Overall, a Burnham administration is being viewed positively by much of the residential development sector. The clearest opportunities for Landowners are likely to lie in well-located land on the edge of existing settlements. Sites that can demonstrate sustainability, infrastructure potential and alignment with local growth strategies may find themselves increasingly central to the next generation of local plans and housing allocations.

Generally, commentators anticipate a strong growth Agenda from Andy Burnham but taxation and land value capture will undoubtedly also remain on the agenda!

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