

## HANSARD – WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATE

### Regional Spatial Strategies

[Mr Joe Benton *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Mark Lancaster (Milton Keynes North) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in this Parliament, Mr Benton. This is a timely and important debate, as we can see by the number of hon. Members who wish to participate. I am sure that they will be pleased to hear that I intend to be brief, simply so that I give others the opportunity to speak. All I ask in turn is that they might be equally brief to ensure that we give the Minister ample opportunity to reply, because this is definitely one of those debates in which the answers are even more important than the questions.

The expansion of Milton Keynes has always been a key issue in my constituency. I remember as long ago as 2003 sitting in the kitchen of one of my local councillors, David Hopkins, and discussing how best to tackle the then Government's dictatorial approach to expansion. It was at that meeting that the slogan "I before E"-or infrastructure before expansion-was born. That phrase is now used by many others, including even the Prime Minister.

The slogan is good because it says two things. The first, which is obvious, is that we need infrastructure before expansion. Secondly, it says that we in Milton Keynes are not opposed to expansion per se. All too often the Opposition have liked to portray some in the House as nimby as a justification for their centralist housing strategies, but the people of Milton Keynes certainly are not nimby. However, I believe strongly that if any development is to be sustainable, it must have the support of local people.

The success of the I before E campaign has been such that the principle is now accepted by all political parties, but issues around expansion continue to be a major concern for Milton Keynes council and for people in the city and rural areas. Since 2004, when the then Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, stated that the south-east must build 1 million more homes, of which the Milton Keynes share would be an extra 70,000-in effect, the move would have enlarged Milton Keynes to a size equivalent to Bristol-there have been concerns that the decision was made without any cast-iron guarantee of an improvement to key infrastructure. Since then, various quangos with ever-changing names have had control over when, where and how Milton Keynes should expand, often against the advice of experts and, more importantly, against the wishes of local people, whose views have been ignored.

**Lorely Burt (Solihull) (LD):** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and understand exactly where he is coming from. Central Government diktat originally provided for a town the size of Lichfield right in the middle of our green belt, but we managed to get it down to half as much, as we ourselves had assessed was needed. We welcome the change of Government and of strategy, but there are still issues. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that some areas do need a regional strategy and that it is important that we do not throw the baby

out with the bathwater? For example, we need to think about regional provision for Gypsies. I hope that when the Minister gives his comments-

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**Mr Joe Benton (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Lady's intervention is becoming slightly lengthy.

**Lorely Burt:** I am sorry, Mr Benton. I beg your pardon.

**Mark Lancaster:** I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention. She makes a powerful point, and we shall indeed find out what the Minister has to say.

In my constituency, local people were occasionally consulted. However, all too often, it was clear that the decisions had already been made and that lip service was being paid to local people through sham public consultations. Indeed, two years ago, I came to this Chamber to try to convince the then Minister, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), that his Department's decision to impose 4,500 extra homes in rural north Buckinghamshire completely out of the blue was a mistake. It went against not only local residents' wishes, but the advice received from Milton Keynes Partnership and the Department's own advisers, all of whom felt that the decision was not in the interest of the city or its rural residents.

Thankfully, the right hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Hazel Blears), the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, listened to reason and the decision was eventually overturned. I was grateful to her for reversing it, but we should not have had to go through that process in the first place. Common sense was finally seen, but that was a clear example of how the previous Government, with their Whitehall-decreed targets and unelected quangos, tried to run roughshod over the desires of local people. That is why I am so pleased that the new coalition Government have listened, and I hope that the days of top-down targets are limited.

Despite that minor victory in this Chamber two years ago, we have still seen house-building targets that were too large for local economic needs. As I said, there is no blanket opposition in Milton Keynes to the expansion of the city, but there is a feeling that it must be done at a sustainable pace and following the I before E philosophy. For example, 1,300 new homes were completed in Milton Keynes in 2009-10, but only 600 jobs were created. The current requirement is that 1.5 jobs are created per new home built.

It was therefore with great relief that on 27 May I received a letter from the new Secretary of State outlining his plans to abolish regional spatial strategies. I am pleased to say that it is not only me who welcomes the move; it is broadly supported by Milton Keynes council and local residents. Of course, there is a minority who view any change as a threat, and I called for the debate precisely so that the Minister would have an opportunity to put meat on the bones of the Secretary of State's announcement, and to allow local authorities up and down the land to begin to plan ahead as a result of the Government's decision.

In effect, the abolition of the regional spatial strategy makes Milton Keynes council the policy maker for planning in central Milton Keynes, while Milton Keynes Partnership remains in charge of development on the eastern and western flanks of the city. However, the reality is that because the principal expansion areas are under the control of Milton Keynes Partnership, it is the Homes and Communities Agency, through Milton

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Keynes Partnership, that has dictated the amount, direction and speed of growth in Milton Keynes, not the democratically elected local council.

My first question to the Minister is: how will that relationship change? Will there be only one planning authority for Milton Keynes in the future, and will it be the council? To that end, does he intend to revoke the statutory instrument that gives Milton Keynes Partnership its development powers, and what future role does he anticipate for the partnership?

Secondly, will the scrapping of the regional spatial strategies be achieved through existing regulations or via a forthcoming Bill? Thirdly, will the Government put in place an interim mechanism that will allow local planning authorities to resist or defer planning applications for development above a certain size during the transitional period so that they are able to take stock and revisit their sustainable growth requirements?

Fourthly, and in line with that, will the Minister consider implementing a framework that ensures that the building and land assets of the Homes and Communities Agency and Milton Keynes Partnership are managed in line with the policy set by Milton Keynes council?

Fifthly, how will the Government ensure that local councils take another look at their current housing plans and modify them if that is in the best interests of local people? On the flip side of the coin, how will the incentives and rewards to local authorities for building more homes and promoting greater economic growth be implemented?

Sixthly, will the Minister explain the funding mechanism for the future infrastructure projects that will be necessary for future residential properties? At present, Milton Keynes has a local tariff that is based on a per-property financial contribution to infrastructure, but that accounts for only a relatively small percentage of the amount that is required. Where will the remaining funding come from?

Finally, Milton Keynes lies on the border of three counties-Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire-and three regions: the south-east, east midlands and eastern regions. Can the Minister outline what mechanism will be available to ensure that the various stakeholders from those authorities can and will work together to come up with a consensus position that would benefit everyone in the cross-regional area?

I welcome the Secretary of State's decision to abolish regional spatial strategies and commend him for the leadership that he has shown in this matter. The Minister will, however, appreciate that the decision actually raises several important questions, some of which I have tried to outline this afternoon. I know that I speak for local authorities up and down the country when I say that the sooner we have answers, the sooner local authorities will be able to move forward in implementing local wishes.

**2.39 pm**

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) on his excellent speech and on his wisdom in choosing today's topic for debate. May I congratulate the Minister on abolishing regional spatial

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strategies so quickly? I hope that the mechanism that formalises the abolition will be introduced as quickly as possible.

Kettering is a wonderful constituency, but it has the misfortune to lie within the Milton Keynes and south midlands sub-regional spatial strategy area. The previous Government put in place arrangements to increase the number of dwellings in the borough of Kettering by one third—from 36,000 to 49,000—by 2021. However, such a rate of growth is not supported by local people and will place a huge strain on our local infrastructure.

Below the regional spatial strategy, a core spatial strategy was constructed for the area of north Northamptonshire-Kettering, Wellingborough, east Northamptonshire and Corby—and below that was the local development framework for each of the boroughs and districts. All those arrangements were complicated, although they were eventually understandable.

The local development framework and the core spatial strategy for the borough of Kettering are already signed off, approved and in place. What can local people do about the strategies and frameworks that have already been signed off? I strongly suspect that my constituents would like the housing numbers in the documents that I have mentioned to be revisited. Yes, we understand that the housing numbers beyond 2021 that were pencilled in as part of the regional spatial strategy have now gone, and that local people and local authorities can decide what numbers are appropriate, but local people want to know what can be done about the existing strategies and frameworks that are in place up to 2021.

My personal solution is for the 13,100 extra houses that are planned for the borough of Kettering by 2021 to be made the target for 2031. The implied rate of housing growth in the borough of Kettering over that 31-year period since the beginning of the strategy in 2001 would then be some 400 new dwellings per year, which would be close to the traditional projections for housing growth. Local people can cope with such a rate of growth, and the infrastructure has largely matched it. If we can arrive at that sensible solution, I know that my constituents will be happy, and I hope that the Minister will address my specific points, which are of huge concern to my constituents.

**2.43 pm**

**Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) for initiating this debate.

The abolition of regional spatial strategies by the new coalition Government is extremely welcome and cannot come soon enough. Returning powers on where to build housing to local communities and democratically elected local councillors, rather than unelected quangos and Whitehall bureaucrats, is the right thing to do. For too long, local people have felt trampled on by central Government decision making and have felt that decisions have been done to them and imposed on them, rather than being made with their consent. For too long, local people have felt that their voice has gone unheard. It is time to change this.

In my constituency of Kingswood, there is an urgent case for the abolition of the regional spatial strategy as soon as possible. As a direct result of the previous

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Government's south-west regional spatial strategy, green belt land in my constituency is coming under threat from development through speculative applications in Oldland Common, Mangotsfield and Longwell Green. Two applications-to build on green belt land on Barry road, Oldland Common, and on Cossham street, Mangotsfield-have already been fought off at a local planning level, and I am about to launch a campaign against a new application to build on green belt land at Williams Close, Longwell Green, which has only just been submitted.

For me and my constituents in Kingswood, it has been a familiar pattern: thousands of letters have been written and thousands of signatures against these applications have been collected. I have been working alongside the fantastic Save Our Green Spaces groups in Oldland Common, Warmley and Mangotsfield, whose tireless commitment to saving their local green belt has been humbling. I am proud to represent such constituents, whose sense of pride, dedication and duty towards protecting their local community for future generations is startling. The Save Our Green Spaces group will be writing to the Minister, requesting a meeting to discuss the forthcoming legislation and, if at all possible, I should like to facilitate that request.

We have won every battle so far, but while the RSS remains unrevoked by statute, we have yet to win the war. Developers are still keen to chance their luck and build on green belt land, which is why the RSS must be abolished as soon as possible. The link between scrapping the RSS and preserving our green belt is clear. To this end, I tabled early-day motion 168, which I am delighted to say has been signed by many hon. Members.

**Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD):** My constituency is also in the south-west. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we face a unique problem? Our regional spatial strategy was never implemented, but was still a so-called emerging RSS, so although it does not need to be abolished it is clearly not emerging any more. There is a risk from a policy vacuum in the south-west, which developers are looking to exploit. We welcome Government measures on the regional spatial strategies, but the policy vacuum needs to be dealt with pretty urgently.

**Chris Skidmore:** The hon. Gentleman is correct. We are currently in limbo in the south-west. Later in my speech, I should like to mention another matter, which is creating a problem at this stage, regarding the RSS and other planning legislation that has yet to be tackled.

First and foremost, I want to be clear that my constituents are not nimbys. Local people recognise the need for extra housing, and more affordable housing, for the future. I am sure that hon. Members agree with that. In fact, there has been cross-party agreement in South Gloucestershire council on our being able to build 21,500 houses over the next 15 years and at the same time protect and preserve the Kingswood green belt. It is only due to the imposition of 32,800 homes in the local area under the south-west RSS that the green belt has come under threat from being bulldozed.

I should like to mention to the Minister an important issue that needs to be dealt with when legislation comes to pass through the House. Currently, there is an instruction to planning inspectors in paragraph 71 of planning policy statement 3 to "consider favourably"

applications

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for housing where the local authority cannot show a five-year supply of housing land. That requirement is counter-intuitive in the current challenging housing market and in the context of the Secretary of State's recent announcement on the abolishment of regional spatial strategies.

Under the PPS3 framework, local councils are being challenged by developers to make good the housing shortfall by approving applications for housing, often in unsustainable locations such as the green belt, on the grounds that the council cannot demonstrate a five-year land supply. However, even though many developers are now experiencing low market demand and have therefore reduced housing delivery, that is not stopping the sector claiming that the land supply in south Gloucestershire has significantly worsened, with that claim being used to justify granting permission for additional housing sites on the green belt at planning appeal. In my constituency, permission has already been granted for 2,700 houses in the Emersons Green East development, yet due to developers' slow progress in planning and building those homes, the development is yet to begin. Now, using the argument of the five-year land bank and housing supply, which is still dictated by the soon-to-be abolished RSS, developers are casting their eyes over the green belt to cherry-pick the best sites. This unsustainable situation fundamentally conflicts with the new Government's approach to planning for housing provision and on protecting the green belt.

**Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD):** I agree that there is quite a challenge at the moment in respect of what is to happen. A district council in my constituency is obviously drawing up plans for its development framework busily behind closed doors and is, almost certainly, reducing the impact on the green belt but not protecting it fully. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this time around we should start at parish council level, not even at district council level, building it up from there?

**Chris Skidmore:** It is so interesting that the hon. Lady makes that point, because under the coalition agreement we will be handing more powers to parish councils, certainly for local referendums, with about 80% of parishes being able to decide where to build. There will be areas of land in a parish that the local community wants to decide on. There are certainly village communities that want to ensure that local residents whose families have lived in an area for generations are able to carry on living in a village. That is important.

My point about PPS3, particularly paragraph 71, is that it fails appropriately to balance the impact on communities—for example, village communities—and disproportionately favours housing delivery above genuine sustainability considerations. It is also contrary to the Secretary of State's statement that decisions on housing supply should rest with local planning authorities. The requirement to provide a five-year land supply was based on the previous Government's policy to deliver housing supply through a target-driven framework, of which paragraph 71 represented a key mechanism. The new Secretary of State has made it clear that that approach is no longer Government policy, and I hope that he will consider removing paragraph 71, along with the supporting national guidance on identifying sufficient specific sites to deliver housing for at least five years.

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To replace the five-year land supply target, I suggest that the Government formally endorse the approach set out in the west of England multi-area agreement, which covers my area, to enable local authorities to agree with the Government annually, so that we have sequential development and more appropriate housing delivery forecasts that realistically reflect expected delivery. The Secretary of State should also consider carefully current national indicator 159 on the supply of ready-to-develop housing sites, which I suggest should be removed. The current NI 159 definition places great emphasis on the regional spatial strategy as the basis against which local authorities' housing delivery is to be assessed. That requires immediate attention in legislation because it is now clearly not in accordance with Government policy.

These issues need further consideration when the legislation comes to the House, but above all I thank the new Government for their decision to abolish the regional spatial strategy. It is a welcome decision for the people of Kingswood. It places us on the right track to restore powers to local communities, to trust local people to make decisions over their own lives, and above all to preserve and protect our treasured green belt for generations to come.

**Mr Joe Benton (in the Chair):** I call Martin Horwood.

**Martin Horwood:** I assumed that as I was not here at the beginning of the debate, I would not be called, so I think I should give way to my colleagues who are keen to make their points.

2.52 pm

**Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD):** I thank you, Mr Benton, and my hon. Friend. I congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) on raising this important matter.

Adel in my constituency is one of the many communities throughout the country that were overjoyed when the coalition Government announced that it would scrap regional spatial strategies and restore power over such matters to local councils and communities. The announcement in the Queen's Speech of the decentralisation and localism Bill resonated hugely, unlike some of those previously announced.

Yorkshire and Humber regional spatial strategy's H1 policy is headed "Provision and distribution of housing", and has determined a target leading to annual average net additions to the dwelling stock between 2004 and 2026 of 4,300. The hon. Member for Winchester (Mr Brine) has commented on the five-year supply, and in Leeds city council area that leads to 21,500 housing plots as part of its forward planning.

A development off Holt avenue in Adel has been vigorously opposed by Leeds city council and local residents. The Adel Association led a wonderful campaign showing the importance of what is an historic site. Adel has been a settlement since Saxon times, and is next to Adel's historic St John the Baptist church, which dates from 1150. It is one of the finest examples of Norman architecture in the country. David Wilson Homes has ploughed on with its attempt to obtain planning permission and, having had it refused by Leeds city council, has gone to the Planning Inspectorate. The simple reality is that the unrealistically high targets for housing demanded

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in Leeds have provided until now, and will do so until regional spatial strategies are abolished, a legal loophole for developers to exploit. In communities throughout the country, we are seeing developers deliberately making a beeline for greenfield plots when they should focus on brownfield plots instead.

The irony in Leeds is that the city centre has hundreds of empty flats, which are ideal for first-time buyers, but developers try to build on important greenfield against the wishes of local residents. The frustration of the council's planning department and local residents has turned to a feeling of empowerment now that that unnecessary and over-centralised target will go. I warmly welcome the Minister to his job. The planning appeal by David Wilson Homes has, thankfully, been postponed pending the announcement. Will the Minister tell us the timing, and will he say whether this will be given as a reason for this or any other development being forced through? Clearly, it was the intention of David Wilson Homes to use the five-year rule and the regional spatial strategy to demand the right to go ahead, even against such opposition.

That is my only question for the Minister. I know that other hon. Members want to speak. The news is great and is warmly welcomed in Adel, as well as throughout the country.

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**2.56 pm**

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Benton. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) for securing this important and timely debate on regional spatial strategies. The relevant provisions in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 that established regional spatial strategies were repealed and replaced, from 1 April 2010, by new provisions set out in part 5 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. The strategies are therefore now known as regional strategies, so perhaps from now on we should refer not to RSSs but to RSs.

When I was going around the towns and villages in my constituency during the recent general election campaign, I was surprised by how often the housing problem was raised, so the crucial development on housing numbers and the planning system is important. In 2008, the ratio of house prices to earnings in the Cotswolds was 18.8, which was the third highest in the south-west. The practical effect of that is most first-time buyers who want to stay in the area where they were brought up find it simply impossible to get on the housing ladder. It is vital that we have appropriate legislation on planning and house building.

The invidious effect of Labour's planning system can be seen in the heart of villages and towns in the Cotswolds and throughout the UK: pubs, shops and post offices become unviable and are forced to close; local industries cannot find workers; and schools have fewer and fewer people enrolling. By dictating that all major developments are built on principal urban settlements, the RS deprives smaller villages of the flexibility to allow a small number of appropriately built and designed, affordable private sector houses to keep village communities alive.

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Beyond considering only the issues in parts of the country such as the Cotswolds, I would like to highlight the wider failings of RSSs. Estimates have suggested that an average of 252,000 new households a year are expected to be formed between now and 2031, which is a total of 27.8 million. In the previous Government's 2007 housing Green Paper, they set out to develop 240,000 homes a year by 2016, but I do not believe that their RSSs or policies would ever have delivered anything like those numbers, even if they were sustainable. A check of the figures for permanent dwellings completed in England between 1997 and 2008 shows that the number was 2.3 million, or 192,000 a year. That figure compares badly with the 209,000 achieved by the previous Conservative Administration. I have also come across a staggering figure for public sector housing-*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), will listen to this. In each year of the Labour Government, they built half as many dwellings as the last Conservative Administration.

Let me make it clear that the RS approach was flawed and has failed. The new Government's commitment to repealing that approach is to be welcomed, and their localism agenda has the potential to make the changes that are needed, particularly in parts of the country such as the Cotswolds. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully to a quote from the Campaign to Protect Rural England:

"We hope that the new Government will not, however, abandon strategic planning altogether, as we believe it is essential in order to co-ordinate development, infrastructure, service delivery, landscape management and conservation of the natural, historic and cultural environment, and address cross boundary issues-

that subject has been raised by a number of colleagues in this debate-

"that might arise from several different planning strategies."

Some of the themes of larger area planning also need to be borne in mind.

I understand that it is envisaged that housing targets in the RSSs will be abolished and replaced by local development frameworks, which in most cases will probably return to option 1 figures. In the south-east, for example, the RS figure was approximately 30 million, although the option 1 figure would return that to 20 million. My own council, Cotswold district council, has already returned to a target of option 1 in its housing numbers.

As stated in "The Coalition: our programme for Government", the coalition promises to provide

"incentives for local authorities to deliver sustainable development, including for new homes and businesses".

That is terrifically welcome, but the danger with that approach is that the Government might find that insufficient houses are built in the pressurised areas of the east, south-east and south-west. I have a long memory about the subject, and I say to the Minister that even the previous Conservative Administration found that they had to take increasingly centralised powers to deal with local opposition to house building.

There is a need to establish in the local development framework some form of land bank where houses are likely to be permitted over the next 10 or 15 years. That is in line with the CPRE statement, and it is a sensible provision so that infrastructure can be targeted towards those areas of growth. Across England last year, there

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were approximately 651,000 empty homes, and incentives need to be provided to get those houses back into occupation because having such a number of empty houses in our country is a huge waste of resources.

Some points need deeper discussion, but I will deal with them as quickly as I can. We need clarification of the current situation, following the letter from the Secretary of State to council leaders on 27 May. Recently, two substantial planning applications were determined in the Cotswolds. They each sought to build around 300 homes in Moreton-in-Marsh. That is a relatively small market town of around 1,500 houses, so 600 houses would be a huge increase. When the district council made its decision, one application was permitted and one was refused. However, the letter of 27 May from the Secretary of State was cited by the planning authority in its refusal. The important sentence in that letter was:

"However, I expect Local Planning Authorities and the Planning Inspectorate to have regard to this letter as a material planning consideration in any decisions they are currently taking."

What can be described only as a window of ambiguity has now opened with regard to the prospect of appeals, both in this instance and for other councils across the country. There is particular concern for rural councils such as Cotswold, where a major appeal can cost the equivalent of a 1% council tax rise. That is in an environment in which all councils are urged to set a minimal-if any-rise in council tax, so it is difficult to budget for the costs of major appeals.

The major grounds for appeal from the developers whose application was refused will be that Cotswold did not have sufficient land supply in its RS. If that application goes to appeal, it is unclear whether the Planning Inspectorate will have been told to disregard the figures in the RS, following the letter from the Secretary of State.

Let me highlight the confusion by outlining what has happened since the general election. On 20 May, the Government published "The Coalition: our programme for Government" which stated:

"We will rapidly abolish Regional Spatial Strategies and return decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils, including giving councils new powers to stop 'garden grabbing'".

On 27 May, the Secretary of State wrote his letter, and on 28 May the inspector in the key Leeds city council case adjourned the hearing. On 2 June, Taylor Wimpey, the applicants responding, resisted the adjournment, and on 4 June, the applicants in the Grimes Dyke and Boston Spa inquiries responded by resisting the reopening of the inquiry, pointing out that it was open to either the inspector or the Secretary of State to invite written representations. One can therefore begin to see the confusion that is arising.

On 9 June, planning policy statement 3 was amended and republished. The advice on assessing housing land surveys, which is based on the RS requirements, has not been amended, which is something to which my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) alluded. On 10 June, advice from the Planning Inspectorate stated:

"The proposed abolition of RS is a Government commitment that Inspectors and other decision-makers should take into account as a material consideration."

My hon. Friend the Minister has stated:

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"The Planning Inspectorate's note does not supersede the Secretary of State's letter of 27 May".- [*Official Report*, 21 June 2010; Vol. 512, c. 26W.]

As he is no doubt aware, the suggestion that the abolition of the RS is a material consideration in determining appeals is being challenged by a number of weighty legal opinions contending that the letter would not stand up in court as it assumes that the RS will be abolished, although the matter has not yet been determined by Parliament.

Whether or not such views are correct, it should not allow the paralysis of the planning system. The Minister will also be aware that it is highly unlikely that section 79(6) of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 would allow the Secretary of State to abolish the RSs wholesale.

With no timeline in place for the proposed decentralisation and localism Bill that the Government intend to introduce, there is concern that councils throughout the country will face a number of hugely costly legal challenges by judicial review and appeals to defend. Therefore, the difficulty for decision makers is what legitimate weight they should accord the Secretary of State's letter.

Peter Village QC, a planning silk, is of the view that:

"It is well-established Government policy that the weight to be given to any such emerging policy or guidance will depend upon the stage which it has reached in the relevant process for its introduction...Accordingly, it is difficult to conceive how an intention to change the law in the future can itself be a lawful material consideration to the determination of a planning application now under the existing law without having the unlawful effect of seeking to give effect to a change in the law absent the necessary change of the primary legislation."

I also want to raise the issue of whether the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 will require a strategic environmental assessment to be carried out before a RS is abolished. If that is the case, it will delay the introduction of provisions in the proposed decentralisation and localism Bill. As my hon. Friend the Minister is aware, RSs could be subject to that requirement. Will he clarify how a new policy would work in accordance with those regulations? I hope that he will acknowledge that these concerns exist among developers and local planning authorities throughout the country, and I hope that he will be able to close that window of ambiguity. It would be extremely helpful to know

whether, in the near future, the Secretary of State plans to make any written or oral statements to Parliament so that the confusion can be cleared up.

**Several hon. Members** *rose-*

**Mr Joe Benton (in the Chair):** Order. Before I call the next speaker, let me say that I hope to commence the winding-up speeches at about 3.40 pm. I hope that hon. Members will bear that in mind so that we can get everybody in.

**3.8 pm**

**Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con):** Let me reassure hon. Members that I will be brief. Many of my colleagues have already raised points that are similar to mine and I want to allow as much time as possible for the Minister to respond. Let me add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North

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(Mark Lancaster) for securing a debate on a topic that was of great significance to people in the constituency of West Worcestershire during the general election.

I also thank the Government for moving so quickly to send letters to councils explaining that they can take the intention to abolish regional spatial strategies into account as a material consideration, as that has certainly greatly relieved local communities.

Let me explain a couple of the specific issues that have arisen in West Worcestershire so that the Minister can perhaps use the debate to give some guidance to my local councils—Malvern Hills district council and Wychavon district council. During the regional spatial strategy planning process, Worcester, which is represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), was designated a regional growth point, and the three south Worcestershire councils were allocated 25,500 homes to find room for.

The county town of Worcester is bordered on the one side by the M5 and on the other by the River Severn, so there is no room inside the city boundaries for it to expand as a growth point. The south Worcestershire joint core strategy was therefore obliged to look at Malvern Hills district council territory to find room for the 25,500 homes. The council would thus be given more than 10,000 homes under the regional spatial strategy. That caused great resistance in communities where only 1,500 people are on the waiting list for housing.

Let me describe the impact on the village of Lower Broadheath, which is the birthplace of the great composer Elgar. The village is about four miles west of Worcester, but it is, importantly, on the other side of that significant geographical barrier, the River Severn. The village, which was designated Worcester West, has only about 800 homes, but it would be obliged to have between 3,500 and 4,000 more built on the green fields that separate it from Worcester.

I have some specific questions for the Minister. First, what guidance can he give Malvern Hills district council? Bloor homes has applied for outline planning permission to build the 4,000 homes in west Worcester, which is causing severe blight and concern. Planning permission was applied for at the beginning of the year, before the proposed abolition of the regional spatial strategy, and the council is looking for guidance on whether that proposed abolition is a material consideration and on what the next stage of the plans is. Secondly, will

the abolition of the regional spatial strategy automatically abolish the characterisation of Worcester as a new growth point? Will the Minister clarify exactly how we will go forward on that?

On behalf of my constituents, I thank the Government for taking things forward this far, but I agree with many of my fellow speakers that it would be helpful to have swift further clarification of the other matters that we have raised.

3.13 pm

**Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD):** I am particularly grateful to you, Mr Benton, for giving me my first opportunity to speak in Westminster Hall.

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Residents of my constituency will welcome the end of the regional housing targets in the regional spatial strategies. That is especially true of those seeking to protect Birds Marsh woods and land along Chippenham's floodplains from development. The Minister met residents when he visited my constituency just a few months ago, and I am sorry that I did not get the chance to meet him, although the circumstances were such that that would perhaps not have been welcomed by all.

Wiltshire councillors were keen to blame the development proposals on the regional spatial strategy. Others promised that they will be stopped if the new Government abolish the strategy. Only time will tell if that promise is as true as that made by the parties that have come together to form the coalition Government to abolish the regional spatial strategies.

In place of such development proposals, I hope that we will see opportunities to provide housing—particularly affordable housing—partly through a renewed commitment to bring empty homes into use. There are also exciting proposals to secure small affordable housing schemes in our villages, as has happened very successfully in Broughton Gifford, just down the road from me. Such schemes will be essential for small communities to sustain themselves and to ensure the viability of village schools.

Wiltshire council is keen to receive advice from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government on whether planning inspectors will now disregard the regional spatial strategies, although, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood) said, that for the south-west has the status only of an emerging strategy. Not only the council has asked me about the issue; local conservation campaigners fear that if Wiltshire council does not adopt a core strategy, its draft core strategy, which sought to conform to the regional spatial strategy, may impose regional housing targets by the back door while a local policy vacuum remains.

I clearly opposed the regional housing targets, and I wrote to the right hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Hazel Blears), the then Secretary of State, as part of the consultation on the regional spatial strategy to make that opposition clear in the case of Chippenham. However, I also looked closely enough at the region's draft RSS before her Department's intervention to see that there were some welcome policies to promote the energy efficiency and resource sustainability of the proposed buildings. My final request to the Minister,

therefore, is that he and his colleagues facilitate the availability of such best practice, so that local councils can adopt it, should they so choose.

The debate over the regional spatial strategies has been a case of representative democracy in action. The democratic process has effectively communicated the strong feelings of our constituents and delivered a response from their new Government. In supporting the coalition agreement, Government Members have started to do their bit, and I am sure that the Minister is determined to complete the job in government. However, it is imperative that, between his officials, councils, planning inspectors and skilful developers, our constituents' wishes are not overridden as a result of any hiatus or vacuum in terms of the policy applicable. I would very much welcome the Minister's comments on such concerns.

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**3.17 pm**

**Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con):** I, too, am delighted to make my first contribution in Westminster Hall. I congratulate my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), on securing this important debate. I strongly endorse all the points that he made, although I will not go through them all in the interests of time. However, his point about the Government's interim measure, which other hon. Members have raised, is particularly important. I strongly welcome the letter that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government sent to councils, but there is some doubt about its legal status. I had a conversation with officials in Milton Keynes council, who say that there is legal doubt about the suggestion that the Secretary of State's letter announcing the abolition of regional spatial strategies will be treated as a material consideration at appeal in the courts. In the interim, that is a significant matter, and I would be grateful for the Minister's clarification.

My constituency contains two areas where planning submissions are under way. The concern is that those submissions will be rushed through and imposed before the full change in the law takes place. One of those areas of development is in the south-east of Milton Keynes, around Woburn Sands and the Brickhills. There is great concern locally that a semi-rural area will suddenly be infilled with hundreds or thousands of new houses.

The second area, Salden Chase, is south-west of Milton Keynes, and it will be in the strange situation of being physically part of Milton Keynes—there will be a seamless divide between the town's existing settlements and the new estate—while also being in the neighbouring local authority of Aylesbury Vale. That has met massive local opposition, not only because it would be a huge imposition of housing on the fringes of Milton Keynes, but because the new residents would look to Milton Keynes for services—a hospital and schools, for example—and because there would be a significant impact on the transport infrastructure; yet all the revenue from council tax would accrue to Aylesbury Vale. Milton Keynes would bear most of the cost and receive little of the benefit. I should appreciate some guidance from the Minister about how he envisages cross-border developments being considered once the RSS is abolished.

There is time to pause and think again in Milton Keynes. There are already permissions for some 20,000 new houses and the existing local plan continues to 2011. The argument that suddenly abolishing the RSS will mean that all house building will grind to a halt is false. It is important to pause and think through the future. Hon. Members may not be aware that Milton Keynes has pretty much reached the size planned for it when it was designated a new city in the late 1960s. We have pretty much reached the population of 250,000 that it was designed to have. The existing developments will take us to that level. The question is how we grow from there. I think that there should be a local debate about that, rather than anything being imposed, top-down, from central Government. There is a disconnect in politics. People often feel that developments that will have a significant impact on their quality of life are imposed on them, without their having any say. We need to reinvigorate local democracy by giving people a say not just about the quantity of new development, but in the shaping of the style of developments.

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We have talked primarily about housing numbers this afternoon, but I should like more detail about what we intend to do to give people the power to shape the design of communities. Will we, for example, scrap density targets and allow local decisions to be made about how many car parking places there should be and about the style of houses? We have been good at building one and two-bedroom flats in Milton Keynes recently, but there has been a dearth of family-sized accommodation with proper-sized gardens and spaces for children to play in. I want more open source planning-the buzzword-in the shaping of new estates. It is not just the number of houses that is important, but the type of housing.

**Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con):** My hon. Friend is making a strong case. Does he think, as I do, that it might be appropriate for Ministers to give guidance in regulations about allowing local authorities to develop, with housing associations, many more intermediate schemes-not just rental, but do-it-yourself shared ownership and shared equity, when the time comes-so that the 125% subsidy for social housing will not just be about a bog-standard approach but will relate to a variety and plurality of housing tenures?

**Iain Stewart:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. One of the arguments that is often made for the central imposition of new housing is a reduction, somehow, in the cost, thus making housing more affordable. That is a laudable aim, but it should not be at the expense of local areas, completely transforming them and imposing settlements that are not welcomed by the existing residents. I am very much in favour of a more flexible system of shared ownership than the present one, to allow a greater mix of the equity that people can hold; that should also be transferable, so that they could take it with them on moving, as they move up the ladder and the needs of their family change.

Milton Keynes is at a crossroads and we want the power to shape our own future to be in our hands. That would go a long way towards reinvigorating local democracy. I hope that different parties will put forward different visions of how Milton Keynes could grow, but the critical point is that it should be our decision. We welcome the idea of the power being in our hands.

**3.25 pm**

**Mr Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) on securing the debate.

It is not often in local campaigning that the term "regional spatial strategy" produces any great interest, let alone excitement, but in Winchester the mention of it gets people very excited one way or the other. In the lead up to the general election that was because people knew very well the stance taken by what I hoped would be, and turned out to be, the incoming Government.

Winchester city council put together a good local development framework, engaged in lots of local consultation to do so and produced a core strategy with a step change option for the district. However, that was done in the straitjacket of the south-east plan and the relevant numbers. Local people felt that it was a bit like being told "You can buy a car-any car you like, as long as it's a Ford." With good grace and the best of intentions,

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they took part in the consultation. Many thousands of them attended or wrote to take part in the local development framework consultation, and they felt somewhat cheated by the document when it came out. They had had their say; but in the end, 12,500 houses were still imposed on them. That created great ill-feeling, and people were very excited; the abolition of the RS, as my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) says we must call it, is incredibly welcome in my constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) said that the Government's stated emerging policy was a welcome pause for thought, and it is indeed that in Winchester. The Pickles letter, as it has become known, was the talk of the town at a meeting of the city council planning development control committee that I spoke at a couple of weeks ago. That meeting was held in connection with non-determination of an application by CALA Homes to put 2,000 homes on a greenfield site known as Barton Farm just north of Winchester that is mentioned in the south-east plan. Every speaker mentioned the Pickles letter. The officer recommendation was taken on the basis of that letter; perhaps that suggests how it is being viewed in town halls. As the local MP, I wrapped up the debate, and I am pleased that councillors upheld the officers' recommendation and threw out the application. The problem now is that a planning inquiry is set for early September, to consider CALA's application. There is massive public opposition to the building of 2,000 houses on the site. The Save Barton Farm group, which deserves every credit, has worked tirelessly for years and fought many battles only to be told that it must go back and fight them all again.

I thought that my speech would be brief-it has been-but I should like to ask the Minister some questions. Will the Planning Inspectorate show the deference to the Pickles doctrine that Winchester's PDCC obviously did? The timetable for the legislation is critical, going by what hon. Members have said, and I should welcome the Minister's view about that. What is his advice to the new leader of Winchester city council, who wrote to me recently about the local development framework, explaining that although it is, as I said, a good document, with many good things on affordable housing and sustainability policy, the council cannot progress until it knows whether it has been released from what it considers to be a planning limbo? Will LDFs continue, and if so, in what form? Will the numbers that may be considered as part of the LDF still be based on submissions made by county councils to the original south-east plan discussions?

3.29 pm

**Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con):** This is also my first contribution to a Westminster Hall debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) for the opportunity to debate regional spatial strategies and for bringing an issue that is so high on the local agenda to a high place on the Westminster agenda. I, too, shall be brief.

Although I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the abolition of the RSS, we are all aware that that is not the end of the matter. Given the progress that had been made towards the implementation of the

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RSS, some people believe that the proposals generated for it should be put into practice, given the absence of anything else. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will make it clear today that such thinking is mistaken and that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Duncan Hames) said, we see representative democracy in action.

I have had the pleasure of making representations to the Minister responsible—the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark)—and I have received a personal assurance that the RSS is dead and buried and that councils will be given new guidance shortly on how to proceed. The Government and the people have been extremely clear in wanting a bottom-up approach to housing development. The proposals made by the RSS do not hold any legitimacy for most residents in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, and I am sure that that is the case for residents in many other constituencies across the country. It is therefore vital that councils across the country offload the dead-weight of the previous planning framework and move towards swift consultation with local people, creating a new, more open and more democratic process of deciding on housing development. That is the only way that we will secure the type of housing that people want and welcome in their communities.

3.31 pm

**Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD):** I am extremely grateful to you, Mr Benton, and to colleagues for allowing me a few minutes to speak. I am enormously proud to support a Government who are abolishing the regional spatial strategies. It brings me great pride even to say those words after six years of battling against these things, so I congratulate the Minister. I also congratulate, in the case of Cheltenham, the Leckhampton Green land action group, the Save The Countryside campaign, particularly Kit Brauholtz, Alice Ross, Helen Wells, Gerry Potter and Councillors Klara Sudbury, Steve Jordan and John Webster, and thousands of others throughout Cheltenham, Gloucestershire and the whole south-west, who succeeded in sufficiently bogging down the emerging south-west regional spatial strategy to the point at which it never emerged at all.

This policy of the last Labour Government may once have been well intentioned in an attempt to control the spiralling rise in house prices, but it ended up being undemocratic and profoundly unsustainable, because it delivered targets that were based not even on an absolute number of houses for local people, but on thousands of houses per year being delivered apparently in perpetuity. Presumably, when we reached the end of these strategies in 2026, we would have had further ones that would have had to maintain that rate of supply. The credit crunch in a sense constrained irresponsible lending and helped to deflate house price inflation, but there are a few issues that I hope the Minister will have time to address.

Rightly, colleagues have pointed out the risk of the Planning Inspectorate undermining some Ministers' intentions. In fact, there is one judgment relating to-I hesitate to try to pronounce this-Bata field in East Tilbury, delivered in a letter in the name of the Secretary of State on 21 June, that also seems to undermine Ministers' intentions, although it is in the name of the **30 Jun 2010 : Column 271WH**

Secretary of State, because it cites the unacceptability of development on the green belt, except in exceptional circumstances, and then it gives the exceptional circumstances as the demonstrable shortfall in affordable housing completions and the quality of the design. Those do not sound very exceptional to me. There is a risk that, even in the Department itself, there are still people who have not quite grasped the new situation. I hope that the Minister has time to address that.

**Annette Brooke:** I am sure that my hon. Friend will have heard me say this before, but in my constituency, a further 1,700 houses were imposed at the examination in public. They were opposed by every democratically elected person, but I am convinced that, if our Government had not taken the measure that they have taken, that extremely undemocratic decision would have been forced through. That gives the message to the Minister and everyone else that we must all take on the new values of the coalition.

**Martin Horwood:** My hon. Friend is exactly right, and I pay tribute to her tireless campaigning on the regional spatial strategy on behalf of her constituents.

The final issue is the possibility that some areas of market housing will be constrained, and we have traditionally delivered some affordable and even social housing on the back of market housing, so it is very important that the Department addresses the need especially for social housing for rent. Will the Minister examine some of the issues, including the use of income from rent more flexibly by arm's length management organisations such as Cheltenham Borough Homes, to allow the building and buying of more new council housing for rent? That is one of the things that might help to address some of the possible criticisms of the abolition of regional spatial strategies-I am anticipating somewhat the words of the Labour spokesman, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey)-even though they were based on utterly unsustainable levels of economic growth, not on genuinely identified housing need at all.

3.35 pm

**John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab):** I welcome you back to the Chair, Mr Benton. May I say how much I enjoyed the debates that you chaired in the previous Parliament and how much I look forward to such debates in this one? I congratulate the Minister on achieving his place on the Front Bench. I must say that I felt a little frisson as hon. Members said, "I look to the Minister for answers on these questions," or, "I look forward to the Minister's response on this," and then realised that it was not me this time but him.

I particularly congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) on introducing the debate in a very measured and well-informed way. As he said, the answers from the Minister are more important than the questions, so I intend to give the Minister as much time as possible to answer the questions that hon. Members have asked. I have five questions for him to answer, however.

The hon. Members for Milton Keynes North and for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) both argued, rightly, that Milton Keynes is a town that has always been committed to growth and has always seen growth as

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part of its future, so the arguments that they make on behalf of their town, just like those of their predecessors-particularly the predecessor of the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South, who was a very distinguished Member of the House-carry a lot of weight.

I have been very impressed by the quality of this afternoon's debate. Most of the contributions have been measured and incisive, and there have been many of them. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) talked about the Yorkshire and Humber regional plan. The hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) talked about the importance of building in all areas of the country, particularly if we are concerned about the opportunities for first-time buyers and young families to get a start in life in their own area. The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) talked about incentives, while the hon. Member for Chippenham (Duncan Hames) talked about energy efficiency and asked questions about it. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes South is concerned about design standards, which are important.

The hon. Member for Winchester (Mr Brine) talked about the problem with the Pickles letter, which is a significant aspect of the debate. The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) talked about the importance of democracy in the planning system, which is an essential feature. Even in only an intervention, the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) managed to make a very important point on affordable housing. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood) managed to mention most of the people on his RSS constituency mailing list.

I got the job of housing and planning Minister a year ago-that was all. I inherited the regional spatial strategies and quickly found that they had very few friends, as has been underlined clearly in the debate. In most regions, the regional spatial strategies have been agreed and are in place, and they were agreed by a combination of elected local council leaders from the region, in the region. Beyond that, what was clear to me-it is still clear now-was that our regional spatial strategies and our approach to planning were too inflexible to reflect some of the differences between regions. Our approach was too top-down, but it is clear that the new Government's approach is simply a charter for nimby resistance to new homes, which should concern us all because it could have worrying consequences. My associated concern is that it is a signal of the Government stepping back at national level from any role and responsibility in securing the new homes that are needed in all parts of the country for the future.

The consequences of the changes are already clear. It is not so much about greater local powers but fewer new homes. In many areas, that will result in the blocking rather than the building of new homes. Although the contributions to the debate have been measured, the comments of some council leaders have been clear. For instance, in response to the Government's announcement about the abolition of regional spatial strategies, the Conservative leader of Adur district council said:

"It will reduce the number of new homes significantly",

which he said was to be welcomed. The National Housing Federation said that the number of new affordable homes would "fall off a cliff", while the chief executive of one of our leading house building companies described the impact of the changes as being "scary as hell".

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I am concerned that on this matter, as with other policy areas, we are seeing a gap between what the Government are saying and what they are doing. The new housing Minister says that he and the Government want Britain to be a nation of house builders. That is either top-of-the-range spin or grand self-deception. If that is the case, why was the one incentive system—the housing and planning delivery grant—swept aside as part of this year's £6 billion cuts? Why, as part of those cuts, was £230 million taken from the Homes and Communities Agency budget for building affordable homes, through housing associations, in several disadvantaged areas? Why is it that all the affordable housing investment programmes for which funding was agreed, set aside and put in place now on hold? Will the Minister—this is my first question—tell us when the money for those affordable housing programmes be released so that building can start again?

The hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) spoke of the RSSs as having been abolished, but that is not the case. As the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) said, until Parliament passes legislation to revoke RSSs, they will not be abolished—they will remain in place. I fear that the Pickles letter does little to help the situation. Indeed, it creates a legislative limbo in which councils, planners and the Planning Inspectorate are uncertain of their principal reference points. At a conference at which I was speaking this morning, a distinguished academic who knows a lot about the matter described the planning system—the result of two months of Government announcements—as a vacuum and in a state of chaos. That should surprise no one, because the new Secretary of State has been having a go at every part of the planning system like a bull in a china shop. My second question to the Minister is therefore: what is the legal planning status of the Pickles letter? When will the Government publish the legislation that will allow them to do what they wish?

**Martin Horwood:** Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will tell us the exact legal status of letters issued by Ministers in the previous Government that told planning authorities and planning inspectors in the south-west to pay attention to the emerging RSS there and said that it was a material planning consideration, even though it had not been implemented?

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman misses the point. The framework for regional spatial strategies had been legislated for by the House and that remains the case. However, questions arise about the extraordinary letter sent by the new Secretary of State.

I turn to a point that at least two Members raised this afternoon: the desire to move from a planning-led system to an incentive-based system. There is certainly a case for incentives in the system. It can be said that the housing and planning delivery grant and the extra funding for growth areas and growth points were insufficiently sharp to do the job on their own, but they were an important part of the system and I am sorry to see this year's housing and planning grant go. However, the Government's idea of a council tax match at 100% for every new home built is an 18-carat con—just consider the money!

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The idea is that that would cost £250 million in the first year. It was meant to be funded by switching the housing and planning delivery grant, but that amounted to £135 million this year and it went in the Chancellor's first swathe of cuts. There is no new money for this proposed incentive scheme. In years two, three, four, five and six-the scheme is meant to last six years-it will be top-sliced from local government grant through the formula system at a rate of about £250 million a year. A £250 million cut in the local authority grant system is the equivalent of a 1% rise in council tax. It is not only £250 million a year, however. The effect is cumulative, so the cost in the second year will be £250 million plus another £250 million. In year three it will increase again; and the total over the six years will be £5.25 billion-the equivalent of an extra £320 on the average band D property council tax.

The system will rob some councils in order to pay others. Those hon. Members whose constituencies include county council areas should remember that although county councils are not planning authorities and are not responsible for housing, they will bear the brunt of the cuts through the switch to district councils, which will get the cash. It must be obvious to anyone that if the scheme ever sees the light of day-if DCLG Ministers can persuade the Treasury to put it in place-it will lead to council tax chaos. It will blow the Chancellor's Budget promise of a council tax freeze out of the water. My fourth question to the Minister is therefore: when will the scheme be in place? My fifth question is this will there or will there not be new money for the scheme, or will it be top-sliced as in previously published plans, and taken from local government budgets?

I shall answer my sixth question myself to save the Minister the trouble. What is the new Government's policy on housing for the future, and what are they saying to those young people who want to move out of their parents' house and set up home for themselves? The answer is clear: no new homes, and a capital "NO" to new affordable homes. Since the two parties got into Government, they have been waving two fingers at those who need decent, affordable, secure homes for the future, and at those who aspire to move into and buy their own homes.

We are right at the start of this Parliament, but within three, four or five years-before its end-the consequences of the changes that we are discussing this afternoon will be serious for many young families across the country, and very clear to them when they consider how to vote at the next election.

**3.48 pm**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Robert Neill):** May I say what a pleasure it is, Mr Benton, to serve under your chairmanship again? It is for the first time in this Parliament-and, literally, the first time from this angle.

The debate has been most interesting and of a high quality. I entirely agree with the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) in that regard. That may be almost the end of our agreement, but he was right that it was well-informed and stimulating.

Looking at the physical attendance in the Chamber, one of the planning issues could almost have been the spatial imbalance here. Such an imbalance reflects the importance of planning

to all my hon. Friends'

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constituents. Planning was also an important issue in the recent general election, which is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, my ministerial colleagues and I make no apology for having moved swiftly to set out our intention to redeem our promise to the electorate that we would remove regional spatial strategies.

I am delighted to see the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne here today, because he and I have done our best to spar in a civilised fashion over the past few years. I hope that he will not take it the wrong way when I thank him for having welcomed me to the Government side of the Chamber, and when I say that I am delighted to see him on the Opposition side; I mean it in the nicest way. He is often the most reasonable of opponents, but that does not mean that he is always right as far as these matters are concerned. Whatever the intentions of the previous Government for the regional spatial strategies, he himself concedes in moderate terms—given the normal moderation of his language, these are strong terms for him—that they had become too inflexible and too top-down. Being a less temperate person, I might put it in stronger terms. The fact is they had become a positive obstacle to good planning in this country and to the delivery of housing in the right place.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood) referred to the legal challenges that delayed the south-west regional plan, and they were not unique to that area. They came about because of the top-down structure of the regional spatial strategy, which created an almost immediate antipathy in the communities that were affected. Battle lines were drawn, and a great deal of money and effort was expended on fighting strategies rather than on adopting a bottom-up approach that might have taken communities with it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) observed, such an approach is a key part of sustainable development. It is right that I congratulate him on securing this debate; he has done us a great service by doing so. He has raised important issues, and I will do my best to address them, as well as those raised by other hon. Members.

My hon. Friend has diligently raised the particular concerns of Milton Keynes both in this Parliament and the previous one, and his constituents have been well served by him in that regard. Moreover, I am delighted to welcome the reinforcement of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), who is very experienced in such matters.

Let me deal, as best I may, with the significant points that have been raised. In the interests of time, I will not go through the preamble about the particular circumstances of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North and of Milton Keynes itself because he has set them out and we are in agreement about them. It is a city that is committed to growth. It has grown fast and shown diligence in recognising the pressures and the need to accommodate such growth. Its ambitions are ones that the Government wish to see fulfilled for the benefit of its residents.

**Mark Lancaster:** As we are so short of time, may I ask the Minister, on behalf of my colleagues, to write to all hon. Members with responses to any unanswered questions?

**Robert Neill:** My hon. Friend has that assurance. I have been doing my best to make notes, which is probably terrifying for my officials because there have been too

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many medical men in my family and my handwriting has been influenced accordingly. None

the less, I will certainly do as my hon. Friend suggests, and I will also do my best to get what I can on the record now.

Let me deal with the specific points that have been raised. We have made it clear that we will proceed to the full-scale abolition of the regional spatial strategies as soon as possible. Ultimately, there will be a need for primary legislation to sweep such matters away, which will be dealt with in a localism Bill that will be introduced to the House in this Session. However, despite the caveat raised by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), we will also explore the possibility of using secondary legislation to remove the most difficult part of the regional strategies in advance of that. We are actively discussing with officials the means by which this may be done.

The next step is to issue more detailed guidance. The Pickles letter—a letter issued by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—was intended very specifically to mark out to all concerned the Government's intention to move swiftly to redeem the coalition pledge, which is part of the coalition agreement. In relation to its status, we are quite satisfied with the legal advice that has been given to us that it is a material consideration and should be regarded as such, both by local planning authorities, in considering applications, and by the inspectorate. That was why we communicated the letter both to local planning authorities and the inspectorate. I am aware that there has been some attempt to dispute that, but I will simply say that lawyers disagree. However eminent the opinion of Mr Village QC, it is at odds with the opinion of those who advise us. I hope that local authorities will not place any more weight on the view of one lawyer than that of many others and that of their communities and electors as to the appropriateness of planning applications. As a material consideration, the opinion must be put into the mix. Of course all applications must be decided on their facts, and that remains the case.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. I can assure him that I do not want to cause him any difficulties, but would he do whatever he can to encourage planning inspectors to get on and hear cases rather than adjourning them, so that the emerging position becomes clear?

**Robert Neill:** I understand my hon. Friend's point, and I take his question in the spirit in which it was intended. The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and I are in discussion with the Planning Inspectorate, and we will ensure that such a factor is taken on board. Everybody wants to move as swiftly as possible but, because the arrangements for planning regulations under the previous Government were so complex, we have something of a legal minefield to walk through to ensure that we get it right. If we make important changes, we are determined that we do not have any false starts. I hope that Members will understand our reasons for doing so.

There will be further guidance. I am sorry that I am not able to say to hon. Members that I have it here today, but when I say that my right hon. Friend will

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issue the guidance soon, I mean it. I hope that people understand that a good deal of work is being done at the moment, and that we intend to move very swiftly to set it out. I am conscious that such guidance should involve both the transitional arrangements and some of the implications that follow therefrom. We have already made it clear that the abolition of the regional strategies is emerging Government policy and, therefore, a material consideration,

and that local planning authorities should not feel intimidated from getting on with adopting those parts of their local plans that are appropriate.

Moreover, we will give local authorities the opportunity to revise partially those plans to reflect the abolition of the regional strategies and the imposed targets that went with them. Sometimes it is felt that the revision of a local plan is a long-winded process and rather daunting, but let me assure Members that a focused revision of the plan that concentrates on certain aspects, such as the housing aspects that are affected by the removal of the regional strategies, need not take that degree of time. I hope that hon. Members will take back that important message to their constituencies. The revision can be done swiftly and without great expense to the local authorities. Some local authorities are already taking that on board. Those are key steps that we are keen to take at an early stage.

**Mr Joe Benton (in the Chair):** Order. That finishes the debate. We now move on to the next debate.