



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Wimpey director wrote Tories' new planning law

SENIOR figures in the housebuilding industry — including an executive from Taylor Wimpey — were recruited by the government to draft new planning rules that pave the way for thousands of homes on greenfield sites.

The Sunday Times has established that the industry figures appointed by Greg Clark, the planning minister, played a key role in redrawing the rules to give a presumption in favour of development. This weekend the government was accused of "loading the dice against the environment" in choosing experts who had a vested interest in promoting development on greenfield sites.

The four-strong panel was recruited by Clark to rewrite planning regulations. Three of the four had direct involvement in building development. Peter Andrew is director of land and planning at Taylor Wimpey; Gary Porter is Tory leader of a council in Lincolnshire which has set up its own housing company; and planning consultant John Rhodes has clients including Asda and Furniture Village. Only Simon Marsh, of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, was not involved in the building sector.

Key sections of the panel's draft rules are repeated word for word in the government version, including most controversially the declaration that: "At the heart of the planning system is a presumption in favour of sustainable development, which should be seen as a golden thread running through both plan making and decision taking." THE furore about government proposals to streamline the planning system brings into sharp focus an important question: do we really want economic growth? Do we want more jobs, higher wages, better homes and higher living standards? This is not as simple a question as it seems: the reality of growth can be deeply unpopular with some vocal and powerful interest groups.

While most people like the idea of economic progress, some fear the inevitable physical changes that accompany such renewal. Our planning system is haunted by these fears. Indeed, the slightly hysterical and deeply misinformed backlash against planning reforms is a classic case of anti-economic thinking.

Over the past few weeks, conservationists of all political persuasion have lined up to attack the proposals. They portray the debate as a choice between extreme alternatives: countryside or concrete. But even a cursory reading of the government's proposals makes it clear that these reforms are not a threat to the countryside.

If the reforms truly suggested building on green belt land and threatened our national parks

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— as many falsely claim — then I would have much sympathy with nimbys. But the government has given an unequivocal commitment to maintain protection for the natural environment, heritage sites and valuable green spaces. At the heart of its proposal is a new presumption that if development is sustainable and in line with local priorities, then it should go ahead.

It is designed to allow the timely and sensible redevelopment of brownfield sites and urban areas. It is not a free-for all: it merely requires that when a council says “no”, it must have a good reason. These reforms are sorely needed.

I have experienced a six-month delay in building a warehouse while permission was obtained for the removal of a tree; a shop was refused planning permission because the planner didn’t want “our type” of jobs.

My experience is not unique; most industrial leaders will have seen worthwhile, job-creating projects killed by a system where the presumption is “no”. There are more than 1,000 pages of impenetrable rules governing planning policy. It is estimated that planning delays cost the economy £3 billion a year.

In recent years the number of new homes being built has fallen to the lowest peacetime level in nearly a century. At a time when our economy is in desperate need of growth, new jobs and investment are being thwarted every day. So the choice is clear.

We can believe the campaigners who misleadingly argue that protecting the countryside means opposing all new development. That will lead us down the path of industrial ossification and economic decline.

There is a better alternative. We can embrace the opportunities new development offers society. Instead of fearing change, we should welcome the potential inherent in new construction.

Development doesn’t just create new jobs. It also creates the opportunity for whole communities to regenerate, for business hubs to emerge and for families to find homes.

Those who argue against reform of the planning system seem to want to preserve our towns and cities exactly as they are — mausoleums to the achievements of the past. We can do so much better than that.

Simon Wolfson is chief executive of Next and a Conservative peer