

# The Daily Telegraph

## If planning reform is rushed, it will ruin the face of Britain

The Government must heed criticism of the chaotic changes embodied in the National Planning Policy Framework.

Over the past 60 years, we have built many homes, opened businesses and shops, and undertaken a significant amount of development. At the same time, we have looked after the places that are special to us – the moors and tors, the mountains and lakes, the rivers and coasts that make these islands a collection of unique and beautiful landscapes, as well as a special place to live.

How did we do this? As we rebuilt from the ashes of war, a system was pieced together that allowed for new towns and new homes to be built and for national parks and green belt land to be protected. Year by year, the system developed into one that people know, and one that works. It is not perfect, and it should be improved: decisions should be made more quickly, so that people and communities are not left with uncertain futures. But profound change is only worth it if it will make a profound difference and produce a better country. So why is the Government putting all of this in jeopardy by hurriedly drafting a new planning policy in such a chaotic way?

George Osborne and Eric Pickles seem to think that it is the planning system which is holding back economic recovery, by not producing the homes that we desperately need. In fact, they should be looking at some vested interests. Under the current system, councils have granted planning permission for 300,000 new homes that haven't yet been built. Why not? And why isn't George Osborne on the phone to these developers every day to get them building?

The Government hoped that its new National Planning Policy Framework would help get growth going again, but it is instead leading to confusion. The rushed nature of the reforms has created uncertainty for communities, for the courts and for the building industry. This could slow down the recovery while everyone works out what the new system actually means: indeed, since the general election, plans for 200,000 homes have been abandoned.

The planning system is, fundamentally, about the places that we live in – so it has to have the support of the public. To describe critics of the new proposals – including such well-known revolutionaries and radicals as the National Trust – as “semi-hysterical”, “Left-wing” and “guilty of nihilistic selfishness” is not to listen and respond, but to dismiss while bulldozing onwards. It is the very opposite of the balance and discussion that the public demands.

To put it simply, the Government has gone about this the wrong way. It is out of touch. It is going to need to make big changes. It should begin by reinstating the “brownfield first” policy that Labour used so successfully. It is wrong to let undeveloped land – including greenfield sites – be used while old buildings and industrial sites in towns and cities are left derelict. Second, it should reinstate the “town centre first” policy. These should be at the heart of economic recovery and of our communities, not economic deserts.

Third, the Government should look again at the definition of sustainable development. Nobody

wants development at any price, so both aspects are important: we need a planning system that encourages development, but that development has to be sustainable for the future. Fourth, the Government must support affordable housing. As drafted, the framework implies that existing requirements can be traded off if it makes a scheme more viable. This is wrong. The likelihood of affordable housing is also at risk from the way in which the Government wishes to implement the community infrastructure levy, which will reward communities for supporting other kinds of development. Affordable housing should not be a sideshow: it is fundamental to tackling the growing housing crisis, and ensuring the prosperity of our young people.

Fifth, because of the speed with which the Government wants to introduce its new policy, there is a danger that local councils' development frameworks will be considered out of date, so providing communities with little protection, because of the Government's proposed presumption in favour of sustainable development. This could lead to a planning system that is increasingly combative rather than consensual, with applications being decided by the courts as appeals mount up. The Government should therefore accept Labour's proposed transitional arrangements in order to ensure certainty for communities and developers alike.

Finally, Parliament should be able to vote on these proposals, which were published in the summer recess, with virtually no opportunity until this week to question ministers in Parliament. This is not minor tinkering with the system. It is a major change to the way things have been done for 60 years – so MPs should be able to express the views of the thousands of their constituents who have contacted them, and to have the final say on whether to accept or reject the proposals.

Ultimately, planning should be about helping us to find the right balance for the places we live in and the landscapes we walk upon. One with decent, well-designed homes in the right places, backed by local people, supported by prosperous shops and businesses, but with a countryside that remains a green and pleasant land. We all support a streamlined and effective planning system, but it needs to make all of us feel that we can shape the communities and landscape we live in, so that we can find that balance of homes, jobs, growth and green space that we desire. If the Government does not listen to the debate that is raging over these proposals, it will fail that test.