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Minister promises amendments to radical planning framework

Greg Clark departs from confrontational tone of previous Tory statements, agreeing to address criticisms of reform plans

The planning minister, Greg Clark, has pledged to make changes to the government's proposals to radically overhaul England's planning system after running into opposition from [campaigners](#).

Clark highlighted specific complaints, including the outcry over ending the policy of building on brownfield sites before touching undeveloped countryside.

The minister said he would address these issues in the government's response to the [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\) consultation](#). "If people responding to the consultation think that various aspects should be more clearly expressed then we are very happy to do so."

Clark's conciliatory tone, in a speech at a British Property Foundation event in the City of London, contrasted starkly with previous ministerial statements.

Clark had described people opposing all development as "[nihilistically selfish](#)", and said the National Trust had misled its members. The chancellor, George Osborne, and the communities and local government secretary, Eric Pickles, had stated: "Planning reform is key to our economic recovery. [No one should underestimate our determination to win this battle.](#)"

Dame Fiona Reynolds, director general of the National Trust, said: "What Clark said suggests we are now in proper consultation mode. Some of what was said earlier by Osborne, Pickles and Clark did not feel like a consultation. We can now move forward in a positive spirit."

Friends of the Earth's planning campaigner, Naomi Luhde-Thompson, said: "We're pleased Clark recognises that parts of his planning proposals aren't very clear. It's what we've been telling him since they were published."

The change in tone followed an intervention by David Cameron, who [wrote to the National Trust](#) on Wednesday, stating: "I have always believed that our beautiful British landscape is a national treasure. We should cherish and protect it for everyone's benefit."

Clark's speech addressed concerns that the NPPF – which says the default answer to development proposals deemed sustainable is "yes" – would be imposed on the many

communities that did not have local plans. "We will make clear in our response to the consultation what the transitional arrangements are," he said.

On making the use of brownfield land a priority, he said the NPPF used a different phrase, "land of least environmental value". He added: "If people think there is some desire not to prioritise the re-use of derelict land then that is something I think the consultation will clearly address."

Critics, who believe the NPPF is heavily skewed in favour of economic development over social or environmental concerns, want a clear definition of the term "sustainable development". Clark said: "People have suggested that it could be clearer there so we will respond to that."

In contrast to previous statements by ministers that the current planning system was expensive, wasteful and a brake on growth, Clark said: "I think we have too little planning in this country rather than too much." He added: "The intention of presumption [in favour of development] is not to create any kind of loophole; it is not to create a regime that is very much more permissive. Quite the reverse."

However, Adam Marshall, a director at the British Chambers of Commerce, urged Clark to push ahead with reforming the "sclerotic" planning system. "The government has to stay the course and deliver. If these plans do not go ahead there will be a collateral damage effect on small and medium businesses," he said. Marshall called the NPPF proposals modest and incremental: Clark had called them "fundamental".

John Slaughter, a director of the Home Builders Federation, said: "I am concerned by the list [of changes] put forward by the National Trust, as I think if you put all those in you will end up with something more restrictive than now."

Countryside and green campaigners said early drafts of the NPPF, with which they were happy, were altered by the Treasury to emphasise economic growth. "Sensible suggestions were left out in case they put any constraint on development," said Richard Hebditch, from the Campaign for Better Transport.

Clark said: "If you go from 1,000 pages to a distillation of 50 pages or so, it may be that not everything is expressed clearly, but that does not indicate malign intent."

Liz Peace, chief executive of the British Property Federation agreed. She said: "They have done an amazing job of condensation but it is not perfect and some of the nuances are not right. The phrase 'the default answer to development proposals is yes' is not statesmanlike. It is more like a newspaper headline."

Clark declined to express regret at the aggressive language that had characterised the planning row up to now. "I think it is right to robustly correct misapprehensions. I think we are now having a constructive dialogue."