

The Daily Telegraph

Conservative Party Conference 2011: we'll listen on planning, pledges Oliver Letwin

One of David Cameron's most senior Cabinet ministers promised yesterday to listen to constructive criticism of the proposed planning reforms.

In a Daily Telegraph debate on the Government's draft National Planning Policy Framework, Oliver Letwin, the Cabinet Office minister, welcomed "constructive" discussions on the framework.

He also pledged to look at changes that have been proposed by campaigners, notably extra protection for sites of special scientific interest.

The draft framework distils 1,300 pages of planning guidance into as few as 52 and writes into planning rules a new "presumption in favour of sustainable development", without defining clearly what this means.

This has led to fears it could give builders carte blanche to build on large parts of rural England.

Groups such as the National Trust and the Campaign to Protect Rural England have come out against it. The Daily Telegraph has launched a Hands Off Our Land campaign. Speaking on the fringes of the Conservative conference,

Mr Letwin said: "There is a perfectly constructive discussion going on about the precise wording of the draft document and there should be a very wide-ranging discussion."

He said it was important to have an open debate about the draft framework because once it was in force every word would be pored over by lawyers.

"This does matter because every word in there is justifiable and we need to get the words right," he said. "The pretence that this is a document that pledges to 'let rip' is not actually possible to sustain when you read it."

Mr Letwin was challenged by a representative from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds which has warned that a loophole in the planning rules could threaten some of England's most important wildlife areas.

Mr Letwin said the RSPB had raised "a very important issue" and ministers would make the "appropriate changes", if necessary, to protect sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs).

The sites, which cover about 7 per cent of England, are the country's most important wildlife habitats and include some of the most beautiful and celebrated areas.

He said: "There is a very important issue raised by representatives of the RSPB which has put

forward a very serious question about some words in the document and whether they compromise the absolute prohibition on building on SSSIs. That is under discussion and that is exactly the kind of commentary we need on this document.

“It was no part of our intention to do that and we will make the appropriate changes if we need to.

“My position is extremely clear – the right kind of approach to the natural environment is one which sees it as an ally of economic progress, not as being opposed to it.”

Earlier this week, Bob Neill, the local government and planning minister, signalled that the framework would be reworked to take into account criticism.

He said: “By the end of the year we will be in a very different place”.