

The Daily Telegraph

Hands off our land: cross-party MPs' committee tells the Government to draw up a new NPPF

The Coalition's planning reforms are biased in favour of developers and create an "inevitable" risk of more development on the greenest parts of England, a cross-party group of MPs has warned.

The proposed changes are so "unhelpfully vague" that they risk clogging up the planning system and becoming a "lawyer's charter", putting economic growth before environmental concerns.

The report, by the Local Government Committee, will put pressure on David Cameron to water down the controversial reforms, which have angered Conservative MPs and supporters.

The Prime Minister wants to stimulate growth and cut red tape by cutting 1,300 pages of planning guidance to just 52 in the new National Planning Policy Framework.

However, the reforms have been heavily criticised for including a presumption in favour of sustainable development, which campaigners say will give developers a licence to build in rural England.

The Daily Telegraph has urged ministers to think again with its [Hands Off Our Land](#) campaign.

Hilary Benn, the shadow communities secretary, said the report was a "vindication" of The Daily Telegraph's campaign and that ministers now had to make "significant changes" to the planning reforms.

The National Trust said the report puts "irresistible pressure" on the Government.

The highly critical report echoes the concerns of campaigners. It says that the reforms are "unbalanced" in favour of builders and that the presumption in favour of sustainable development is poorly defined.

The MPs say that, contrary to repeated assertions from Government ministers, that there was "no conclusive evidence that planning policy or guidance is a particular constraint on economic development".

They also warn that a recommendation that councils should plan for six years of housing supply rather than five will "inevitably" create the risk of more building on greenfield sites "which developers prefer".

The recommendations include:

- Scrapping a clause where developers are given a default "yes" to building in areas where councils have failed to draw up local plans to protect the environment.

- Reinstating a commitment to develop brownfield sites before greenfield ones to help encourage urban regeneration.
- Dropping a clause which allows development to go ahead if it is too expensive to make it sustainable.
- Replacing every sports field built on by developers.

Clive Betts, the committee's chairman, said: "The way the framework is drafted currently gives the impression that greater emphasis should be given in planning decisions to economic growth.

"This undermines the equally important environmental and social elements of the planning system. As currently drafted the 'default yes' to development also carries the risk of the planning system being used to implement unsustainable development."

Hilary Benn, the shadow Communities Secretary, said the report was "a strong condemnation" of the Government's reforms.

He said: "There will now have to be significant changes to come up with a proper definition of sustainable development and to restore the 'brownfield first' approach so that our green fields and spaces can be protected from the wrong development."

Dame Fiona Reynolds, the director-general of the National Trust which has been running a campaign backed by 230,000 members, added: "Clear changes need to be made to the draft NPPF so that it delivers a planning system that balances social and environmental needs with those of the economy.

"We are delighted to see that many of the improvements we suggested are reflected in the committee's report. We will be watching closely, and testing the final version of the NPPF against the select committee's recommendations as well as our own suggestions for changes."

Simon Marsh, RSPB Head of Planning Policy who drew up the original draft of the NPPF, said the MPs' report "delivers a healthy dose of common sense when it comes to planning reform. It is clear to anyone who cares about our natural environment that the Government's plans are too biased in favour of development."

He welcomed the recommendation to drop the default answer to development of yes: "The committee has called for this to be removed. This is exactly what we, and others, have been saying for months, but now it is clear that it's not just 'scaremongering' conservation groups kicking up a fuss about nothing."

"The ball is now firmly in the Government's court to publish a revised NPPF that meets the concerns of MPs, environmental groups and the thousands of members of the public who wrote in to make their views known."

The study will have additional resonance because Greg Clark, the Planning minister, specifically asked the committee for ideas on how to amend the draft NPPF.

Last night he said he "warmly welcomes" the report and was "grateful for the practical and measured way they have approached the exercise. The Government will consider carefully each of the suggestions that have been made, along with all responses to the consultation.

“We are determined that the National Planning Policy Framework will put power into the hands of local people, through a simpler, clearer system, which safeguards our natural and historic environment while allowing the jobs and homes to be created that our country needs.”



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MPs call for rethink on planning guidelines

By Jim Pickard, Political Correspondent

Ministers face renewed pressure to rewrite their planning guidance after a committee of MPs attacked rules that are widely seen as giving carte blanche to developers.

The national planning policy framework, drawn up to condense unwieldy planning regulations, also gives a green light to almost all “sustainable” development, a move which has prompted concerns among groups including the National Trust, the Campaign to Protect Rural England and the Local Government Association.

In a report published on Wednesday, the communities and local government committee urged ministers to rewrite the document to remove the default answer of “yes” to development. It should also be rephrased so that planning applications would be approved unless the adverse effects outweigh the benefits, the MPs said, not just if they “significantly and demonstrably outweigh” the benefits – as the current wording puts it.

The report urged ministers to reinstate guidance to councils over building on “brownfield” land, which has already been used, rather than green fields. It also called for a clearer definition of “sustainable development”, a term which can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Clive Betts, the Labour MP who chairs the committee, warned that the framework could “undermine” the environmental and social elements of the planning system. “As currently drafted the ‘default yes’ to development also carries the risk of the planning system being used to implement unsustainable development,” he said.

Ministers have been engaged in a running battle with critics over the plans, including the National

Trust, which said Britain would soon see Los Angeles-style sprawl as a result of the planning reforms.

Wednesday's report suggests that the policy document could spark large numbers of legal appeals which would slow down the planning system.

Fiona Reynolds, director-general of the National Trust, which has secured 230,000 signatures on a petition against the changes, said the report provided "irresistible pressure" on the communities department, headed by Eric Pickles, to rewrite the framework.

Ministers have shown little willingness to back down over the plan, seen by George Osborne and others as a key part of the government's efforts to revive economic growth.

Greg Clark, planning minister, "welcomed" the report for its "constructive recommendations" and said they would be considered carefully.

Figures published on Tuesday by the Homebuilders Federation showed that approvals for just 32,900 homes in England were granted in the third quarter, a 10 per cent decline on the same period last year – and half the peak before the credit crisis.

"These figures demonstrate clearly why government must stand firm on its proposals for planning," the federation said.



Rewrite 'yes to development' planning change, say MPs

MPs are calling on ministers to rewrite a key part of its controversial changes to planning rules in England, removing the default "yes" to development.

Ministers say a simplified planning system is needed to boost growth and encourage sustainable development.

But the Commons communities committee said [in a report](#) that the government had slimmed down guidance so much it was now often "unhelpfully vague".

Planning Minister Greg Clark says the MPs support the key changes proposed.

At the heart of the government's planning reforms is a "presumption in favour of sustainable development" which ministers say will boost house building and other economic growth while not harming communities, the environment or the countryside.

Ministers have cut more than 1,000 pages of regulations down to just 52 to overcome planning

delays which they claim cost the economy £3bn a year.

But [their draft plans](#) provoked angry protests from groups including the National Trust and the Campaign to Protect Rural England, who are concerned that they could lead to a return to urban sprawl and damaging development.

'Confusion'

Now the Commons communities and local government committee has warned that the changes risk becoming "unbalanced" and favouring "unsustainable development".

The MPs highlight the default "yes" in the reforms that gives the go-ahead to development unless the adverse effects "significantly and demonstrably" outweigh the benefits.

"This carries the risk of the planning system being used to implement poorly planned, unsustainable development", the report says.

"The 'default yes' to development and the phrase 'significantly and demonstrably' should be removed from the text."

The MPs welcome a government commitment to take the consultation process seriously and to reinstate a policy to build on brown field sites first.

But the committee's Labour chairman Clive Betts said changes are needed to the so-called National Planning Policy Framework.

"The way the framework is drafted currently gives the impression that greater emphasis should be given in planning decisions to economic growth," he said.

"This undermines the equally important environmental and social elements of the planning system."

The report also warns there is a danger that, far from speeding up the planning process, in the short term the changes would slow it down by introducing "confusion" where previously there was detailed guidance - and warns that "planning by appeal" could be the outcome.

The MPs said ministers had gone too far in cutting back existing planning guidance.

"Critical wording has been lost and what remains is often unhelpfully vague," the report said.

Ministers should produce "a tighter, clearer document, and should not make a fetish of how many pages it is".

The committee also recommends that once the changes are finalised all planning advice is reviewed - item by item - "lest councils spend valuable time reinventing numerous wheels".

Housing shortage

But John Stewart from the Home Builders' Federation says the planning system must change.

"For the last 20 years environmental concerns have been dominant and as a consequence we have a

housing shortage," he told the BBC.

"There are roughly a million homes over the last 20 years that should have been built which haven't been.

They say that the core principle, the presumption in favour of sustainable development in their words should be a 'golden thread' running through the planning system"

Greg Clark
Planning minister

"And looking forward we are building about 100,000 homes a year and we should be building well over 250,000, so we have a very serious housing crisis."

Campaigners against the planning overhaul have welcomed the MPs' report.

Fiona Reynolds, director general of the National Trust, said the committee's report provided "irresistible pressure" on ministers to improve their plans.

"Along with nearly 230,000 people who signed our petition against the changes, the select committee has identified the clear changes that need to be made to the draft national planning policy framework so that it delivers a planning system that balances social and environmental needs with those of the economy," she said.

But Minister Mr Clark said the MPs support the key thrust of the government's plans.

"They say that the core principle, the presumption in favour of sustainable development in their words should be a 'golden thread' running through the planning system.

"What they felt is ... there are some ambiguities and have suggested some changes. I have invited them to advise me and so of course I'm going to take their advice very seriously."

The shadow local government secretary Hilary Benn said the report was a "pretty damning criticism" of the government's proposals.

"They are going to have to redraft their plans," he said.

"Local councils have got to be given the opportunity to draw up their new development plans in the light of what the government is proposing and I strongly support what the committee has said about there being a reasonable interval to allow councils to do that so they are not left at the mercy of these new proposals."