



# Villagers' rights demolished after builders hand Tories £4m

Conservative party donors have killed off a planning proposal to allow locals to halt large-scale development projects in their area

Developers who donated millions of pounds to the Tories successfully lobbied the government to remove a “Nimby” clause from its planning policy that would have “paralysed” housebuilding plans.

In its controversial National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the government has dropped a key “localism” clause that appeared in Open Source Planning, the Tories’ green paper on reforming the planning system that was published in February last year, three months before the election.

The clause, much to the dismay of developers, would have allowed residents to appeal against large building projects in their areas.

Another proposal, that builders should consider compensating residents affected by developments, which the industry opposed, appeared in Open Source Planning but does not feature in the NPPF.

When Open Source Planning was published, Michael Slade, chief executive of the developer Helical Bar and a significant Conservative party donor, described it as a “threat to future development, in particular to housebuilding, which could even be paralysed”.

The British Property Federation, which represents more than 130 property companies, and the Home Builders Federation, which represents Britain’s main housebuilders, joined the protests. All now support the NPPF.

Slade chairs the Conservative Property Forum, a party organisation that charges “key players” in the property world £2,500 a year to meet ministers. The forum was addressed on the Open Source Planning proposals by Grant Shapps, now housing minister, at a breakfast meeting in February last year. Although it was a private meeting and no one has revealed what happened, the key clauses have since been dropped.

The forum also acts as a fundraiser for the party and Slade said last week that during the election year it raised “£500,000 plus” for the Conservatives. He made a personal

donation of £50,000 during the second week of the election campaign.

The Tory party has long benefited from property company donations. In 2009 alone, contributions from the sector doubled to more than £2m. In the past three years, donations have exceeded £4m.

David and Simon Reuben, the billionaires who own Millbank Tower in Westminster, have given almost £500,000 over the past decade while Terence Cole, a London-based developer, has donated almost £300,000. IM Properties, one of the UK's largest privately owned property companies, has given about £1m in the past two years.

The property tycoon Robert Tchenguiz and his family have contributed more than £150,000 since 2006, while London & Regional, run by Ian and Richard Livingstone, has donated £50,000. The Candy brothers, Nick and Christian, the luxury flat developers, donated £60,500 in 2009.

David Rowland, the property and finance mogul, gave £2m before the election. A Tory party spokesman has insisted: "The Conservative Property Forum is a discussion forum for people with an interest in property. It in no way influences policy."

By contrast, however, Slade insists: "We [the Conservative Property Forum] have the chance to engage with ministers to help them formulate policy. Absolutely nothing wrong with that."

Not all donors are members of the group, nor do they all take part in lobbying.

Open Source Planning was written by the MP John Howell and intended as a template for planning reform under a Tory government. It says: "We will make the system symmetrical by allowing appeals against local planning decisions from local residents, as well as from developers." This became known as "third party right of appeal".

The document also suggested that developers should consider entering into "voluntary agreements to compensate nearby householders for the impact of the development on their amenity, in return for their support". Neither proposal appears in the NPPF.

Slade has accused opponents of the NPPF, including the National Trust, of "hysteria" and supports what will be a presumption in favour of builders, with councils having to prove their case for refusing plans.

"We've given the local authority the power ... the quid pro quo is bloody well behave — act responsibly," Slade said.

In December last year, the government recruited four people to sit on a "practitioners' panel" to help to draw up the NPPF. As The Sunday Times revealed last month, three of the four panel members had a direct involvement with the building industry. Simon Marsh, of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the only panellist without such a link, said he could not recall any discussions about "third party right of appeal",

suggesting that a decision had already been taken to drop it.

Paul Miner, senior planning campaigner at the Campaign to Protect Rural England, said: “Clearly developers have been putting the government under a lot of pressure and the government now needs to make sure when it comes up with a final planning policy that it’s one that’s fair.

“If the public sees the planning system as being unfairly skewed against them, there will be much more resistance and much less development taking place.

“We were given a very clear indication in Open Source Planning that the new government was serious about devolving power to local communities and making sure we have a fairer planning system that was taking away the skew in favour of the developer. And what we’re seeing so far is a very different reality.”

The Department for Communities and Local Government said that any suggestion that government policy had been swayed by party donors or that property developers had too much influence was “utterly refuted”, adding that a wide range of people had been consulted over the NPPF.

### ‘Save our countryside’

Actors, celebrity chefs, historians and writers today urge ministers to reconsider planning proposals before they “irreversibly damage the countryside”, writes Kate Mansey.

In an open letter published in The Sunday Times, Bill Bryson, the author and president of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Tony Robinson, the actor, Sir Andrew Motion, the former poet laureate and Antony Beevor, the historian, express “deep concerns” about the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). They are joined by Kate Adie, the journalist, Monty Don, the TV gardener, Rick Stein, the chef, and Sister Wendy Beckett, the art historian.

The letter says the proposals will make it easier for developers to build on greenfield sites rather than using brownfield land first.

“The NPPF marks a significant relaxation of protection for the majority of our countryside — so called ‘ordinary countryside’,” they write. “It also moves away from a ‘brownfield first’ approach to development which has been in place since 1995 ... we urge ministers to listen to the deep concerns being expressed by people across the country and make substantial changes that will protect and enhance our extraordinary countryside.” Shaun Spiers, chief executive of the CPRE, said: “This letter is timed to concentrate the minds of delegates arriving for the Conservative party conference in Manchester.”