

# The Daily Telegraph

## A short-term planning fix is a long-term blight

*Government reforms will result in soulless developments that we will have to live with.*

As politicians desperately search for escape routes out of the current economic crisis, the lure of the quick fix becomes ever more attractive than the need for sustainable long-term solutions. This threatens long-held achievements, such as the protection of our countryside. How easy it would be for the Government to publish the final version of its draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) more or less unaltered, using the current crisis as a smokescreen.

Rather than seeing planning as part of the solution to our economic woes, ministers seem unable to view it as anything other than a problem. David Cameron wrote recently of the need to “unblock” the planning system in order to facilitate approvals for new infrastructure developments. Constant talk of “planning restrictions” and “regulatory burdens” give a wholly negative impression of how the planning system works. Such words are supported by facts and figures of dubious provenance, which attempt to “prove” that the planning system is a drag anchor on the economy. In fact, the £3 billion figure cited by ministers as the cost of planning is now widely discredited.

In a letter to me, the Prime Minister declared that “our beautiful British countryside is a national treasure” that should be cherished and protected for everyone’s benefit. Stanley Baldwin, well known for his eloquent prose about rural England, could have done no better. But it must be noted that Baldwin presided over the most intense period of urban sprawl this country has ever seen. Thank goodness for the strong, effective land-use planning system that his successors introduced, stopping much of that sprawl in its tracks.

If history can be our guide, so too can we learn from other countries’ experience. Can it be a coincidence that the nations in the deepest economic trouble – Greece, Italy, Ireland – all share a reputation for lax planning regimes? The empty homes that blight the Irish countryside stand as icons of a discredited approach to growth and development, which ignores the needs of people and places in the pursuit of short-term profit.

By contrast, on a recent visit to British Columbia I saw how “smart growth” is inspiring new ways of doing things. Smart growth takes protection of the land and precious, finite natural resources as the starting point and then uses planning as the instrument to deliver sustainable national, regional and community-level ambitions. I was struck by how my Canadian hosts looked with admiration at the planning system that has existed in the UK since 1947, and its role in ensuring the continuing distinction between town and country.

Take Freiburg, in Germany, too – famous for how it is organised around the needs of its densely accommodated population, for energy, transport and jobs. Trams and bikeways take people to work,

while half of the city's energy is generated from solar panels and waste processors. Surely, this offers us a model for the future of our own towns and cities.

Our campaign against the proposed reforms in England is therefore far from over. Nearly a quarter of a million people signed the National Trust petition against the proposals set out in the draft NPPF. At our annual general meeting, more than 95 per cent of the members present agreed that the reforms threatened the countryside and that the Trust was right to take a strong public stand against the proposals.

I'm not suggesting that our planning system doesn't need to change. It needs to become more streamlined and efficient in the way it operates, and more inclusive of local wishes and opinions. The economy needs new growth, and we need to build homes and provide new jobs as a matter of urgency. But we need to build these homes – and the community and environmental infrastructure they depend on – in a new way, in places that offer a more sustainable future and in which we want to live. The NPPF as drafted does not deliver this, but presents the vision of a return to the bad old days of planning by appeal and soulless out-of-town developments.

Planning is an essential tool for making the right choices about places, and for preventing disastrous mistakes that will lock us into inefficient, ugly and expensive development patterns for ever. Irreversibly short-term free-for-alls will be regretted at our long-term leisure.

A positive vision for planning, rather than negative sideswipes, should be at the heart of the Chancellor's plans, shaping the England we want to see today and for decades to come. Tough economic times ironically give us a better chance to get things right. Now is the moment to set a new direction for planning that draws on the best of the past and creates a vision for the future that serves all our needs, for the long term. We owe it to future generations, as well as this one, to get it right.

**Dame Fiona Reynolds is director-general of the National Trust**