

The Daily Telegraph

Hands Off Our Land: stop this planning free-for-all, National Trust warns

David Cameron must not use the “smokescreen” of a planning “free-for-all” as a substitute for a proper strategy to boost the economy, the director-general of the National Trust has warned.

Dame Fiona Reynolds argues that other countries that have embarked on radical deregulation of the planning system, such as Ireland, Greece and Spain, have been plagued by economic crises.

Ministers should not be tempted by the “lure of the quick fix” to allow unrestrained development that would have dire consequences for generations to come, she says.

Dame Fiona [issues the warning in The Daily Telegraph](#) as she prepares to hold talks with Prime Minister on controversial planning reforms that would make it easier for major developments to be approved. Campaigners fear the proposals could lead to the destruction of large parts of the countryside.

Adding to the concerns on Monday, Whitehall sources disclosed that the Government was preparing to spend £50 billion on infrastructure projects, such as more roads and power stations, as the centrepiece of the forthcoming autumn statement from the Chancellor.

In today’s article, Dame Fiona warns against desperately trying to stimulate growth with knee-jerk reactions.

“How easy it would be for the Government to publish the final version of its draft National Planning Policy Framework more or less unaltered, using the current crisis as a smokescreen,” she writes.

“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.”

The head of the National Trust says that ministers should learn from the experiences of other countries.

“Can it really be a coincidence that the nations currently in the deepest economic trouble – Greece, Italy, Ireland – all share a reputation for lax planning regimes?” she writes.

“The empty homes that blight the Irish countryside stand as icons of a hollowed-out and discredited approach to growth and development, which ignores the needs of people and places in the pursuit of short-term profit.”

She adds: “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.”

Over the past few days, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in the Coalition have failed to agree on the central proposals for a new economic growth strategy to be unveiled by Mr Osborne later this month.

It had been hoped that a major deregulation of employment law would be announced, but some of the most radical recommendations from Downing Street aides have been vetoed by Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister, and Vince Cable, the Business Secretary.

It is therefore thought that ministers will announce a liberalisation of planning laws – coupled with new schemes to encourage pension funds and other investors to back new infrastructure projects – as the main stimulus for the lacklustre economy.

Last week, the Prime Minister spoke of the need to “unblock” the planning system as Britain struggles to recover from the worst recession in a generation. Mr Cameron hopes that a relatively minor redrafting of the proposed National Planning Policy Framework to incorporate protection for the countryside will satisfy the concerns of countryside campaigners.

Mr Cameron is hoping to “win over” Dame Fiona during today’s Downing Street meeting, during which

he is expected to stress that he is committed to balancing the needs of protecting the countryside and boosting the economy.

He previously wrote to the National Trust stressing that he “loved the countryside”.

Dame Fiona said the campaign to stop the planning reforms – backed by more than 250,000 National Trust members – was “far from over”.

The draft National Planning Policy 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”.

This has led to fears among charities and campaign groups including the National Trust that planning law will be skewed in favour of the builders and developers, above social and economic benefits.

The Daily Telegraph has urged ministers to rethink the policy through its Hands Off Our Land campaign.

Dame Fiona said the current draft of the NPPF “presents the vision of a return to the bad old days of planning by appeal and soulless out-of-town developments”.

She added: “Rather than seeing planning as part of the solution to our current economic woes, ministers seem unable to view it as anything other than a problem.”

“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.”

Dame Fiona said a claim from the Treasury that planning delays cost the economy £3 billion a year was now “widely discredited”.

It emerged last week that the claim was made nearly two decades ago.