

The Daily Telegraph

Planning reforms: Greg Clark admits changes 'could have been clearer'

Greg Clark has admitted that there are flaws in the Government's controversial proposals to reform the planning system.

In the first public debate since Prime Minister David Cameron intervened in the row earlier this week, the planning minister said that some of the proposals on brownfield land, housing targets and "sustainable development" could have been clearer.

The comments provide clues to how ministers are likely to amend the controversial National draft Planning Policy Framework, which has attracted fierce criticism from countryside campaigners, after a consultation closes in the middle of next month.

Mr Clark told a seminar at a London law firm organised by the British Property Federation that it was difficult to express the Government's intentions at the same time as reducing bureaucracy.

He said: "When you distil more than 1,000 pages to around 50 ... Inevitably it is the case not every thing is expressed in the clearest way possible but that does not signal malign intent or an intention to subvert the process."

Protesters have accused the Government of trying to rip up the planning system by removing protections for the countryside in favour of development.

Mr Clark strongly denied this suggestion and said that the Government was willing to listen to critics. He said: "This is a genuine consultation. It does not imply any agenda of the Government to change the nature of planning."

Afterwards, Mr Clark told The Daily Telegraph: "Any consultation wants to make sure that everything are expressed more clearly. My view is that these safeguards are there and are clear to all, but if people think they are not we will respond to them."

Mr Clark is pushing through plans to replace 1,300 pages of planning regulations in England with just 52 pages in the new NPPF.

The framework writes into the rules a new "presumption in favour of sustainable development", without defining clearly what it means, leading campaigners to fear that large areas of England will be concreted over.

Mr Clark added: "The intention of the presumption in favour of sustainable development is not to provide a loophole where alien developments will be imposed on the community rather the NPPF wants to replicate the kind of policies a reasonable local authority would put in place."

Campaigners, led by the National Trust, have suggested the Government has tried to change the planning system so that it is biased in favour of promoting growth, rather than the environment.

The Daily Telegraph is also running a campaign called Hands Off Our Land urging the Government to reconsider its plans.

There was a breakthrough this week when Mr Cameron personally assured the Trust in a letter to its director general Dame Fiona Reynolds that the environmental benefits of developments would be assessed before new projects were given permission.

Mr Clark hinted at some of the clarifications that he was planning as part of the Government's response to the consultation, which ends on Oct 17.

He suggested that a presumption to build on previously developed areas or "brownfield" sites, which is in current rules, would be written back into the guidance.

He said: "It was never my intention, and it certainly was not the Government's intention, to depart from the obviously desirable situation in which derelict land should be brought back into use. That is always the intention."

"If not mentioning brownfield at all leads people to conclude there is a different intention, then without pre-empting the consultation, that is something that I am hearing being said."

Mr Clark also said he had been misunderstood over targets for local authorities to provide 20 per cent more land for building.

He said that this does not necessarily mean that more houses will be built, but simply that more options for development are made available. The intention was "not to have more homes built than the locality needs", he said.

Mr Clark added: "Not every site that is earmarked for development turns out in practice to be developable. Problems arise. So you always need to have something of a buffer to make sure that the number you plan for is developable."

He also admitted the "presumption in favour of sustainable development" was open to interpretation and needed further work.

He said: "I think the presumption in favour of sustainable development requires sustainability to be there, to be guaranteed but we will listen (to the consultation)."

Campaigners welcomed the softening in tone in the minister's comments. Shaun Spiers, chief executive of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, said: "Mr Clark was acknowledging that there are clearly huge parts that can be improved. It helps the tone of the debate and it has good to feel that the minister is listening."

Dame Fiona Reynolds, director general of the National Trust, told the meeting that she had been "horrified by the draft" because the document focused on promoting the economy over environmental concerns.

She added: "It's good to hear Greg Clark's confirmation of the goal of balance and his warm words about genuine consultation. I now look forward to seeing amendments to the draft NPPF which deliver balance - this is what's now needed."