

The Daily Telegraph

Building bridges

The Government is right to take notice of concerns over planning reforms in the countryside.

It is to David Cameron's credit that he has decided to intervene personally in the growing furore over planning reform. He has written to the National Trust, speaking of his determination to protect the "national treasure" of Britain's landscape. This olive branch opens the way for a constructive discussion to begin between ministers and those who oppose the proposed regulations, in particular the "presumption in favour of sustainable development". For the first time, the Prime Minister sought to clarify what the word "sustainable" means in this context. He said that it would have not only economic dimensions but also environmental and social ones. That is helpful as far as it goes, but the new guidelines need to be far more specific.

However, the Prime Minister continues to cleave to the questionable assertion that the new planning regime is required if young people are to access the housing market. He said that the difficulty they had in getting on the property ladder was "unacceptable." Yet, as Oliver Letwin, the Cabinet Office minister, admitted yesterday, planning regulations are not the primary obstacle to house-building. Lack of demand is the problem. You can see his point. There are 740,000 empty houses in this country, a quarter of them in London and the Home Counties. In addition, the National Trust estimates that the national landbank of development sites with planning permission stands at 330,000 plots. That hardly sounds like a supply problem.

The Coalition clearly needs to come up with more plausible arguments. A quicker and simpler planning system is in everyone's interests – but not if it rides roughshod over the views of local people. At least the two sides in this dispute are now ready to sit down and talk. The Government would do well to listen.