

THE  TIMES

Ministers water down reforms intended to ease planning law

Ministers signalled a partial retreat yesterday over the Government's planning reforms to help to avert a damaging response from Conservative activists at the party's conference next month.

Greg Clark, the Planning Minister, suggested that there should still be a presumption in favour of developing on land that had previously been developed, so-called brownfield sites, even though this has been stripped from the new guidance.

The change in tone towards concerns raised by the National Trust and other groups comes after David Cameron intervened in the growing row about the proposals. He wrote to the trust assuring it that sustainable development meant maintaining a balance between economic, environmental and social concerns.

Mr Clark, adopting a more conciliatory tone than shown by ministers in recent weeks, said that he would consider changing the wording of the draft document to make this clearer.

Environmentalists and rural campaigners have been particularly alarmed about the absence of any direction to build on developed land, which had been the norm in previous planning guidance. They have warned that the new laws would lead to concreting over greenfield sites, which were cheaper to build on and would attract higher prices for developers.

But speaking at a London conference organised by the British Property Federation yesterday, Mr Clark said that he still wanted to encourage building on brownfield sites.

"One of the requirements [in the planning framework] is that sites of the lowest environmental value should be brought forward for development first," he said.

"This is the kind of policy that good local authorities already carry out. And town-centre-first policies should continue to apply even if a local plan is not in place. It is not the Government's intention to depart from bringing previously used brownfield land back into use."

Ministers maintain that there is an urgent need for a planning reform to boost growth as well as giving communities more say in their local area. Mr Clark indicated yesterday that he was prepared to backtrack farther by allowing local councils more time to draw up their own building plans, which would then take priority. Where councils have no plans, there will be a presumption in favour of the developer.

Mr Clark said yesterday that when "1,000 pages is cut down to a document which is 50-odd pages it is inevitably the case that not everything is expressed in the clearest way, but that doesn't signal any

malign intent or hidden agenda to subvert the process”.

He added: “This is a genuine consultation. It doesn’t imply any agenda the Government has to change the nature of planning.”

Dame Fiona Reynolds, the director-general of the National Trust, also speaking at the conference, said that she was “horrified” when she first read the draft National Planning Policy Framework. Setting out a series of demands that she said were critical to ensure genuinely sustainable development, Dame Fiona said that there should be a return to the principle that brownfield sites are developed first.

The real issue was the protection not only of designated areas such as national parks and green belt, but the wider protection currently given to undesignated areas, the “ordinary countryside that people love, that for many people is their idea of green space for getting spiritual and physical refreshment”.

But Adam Marshall, the director of policy at the British Chambers of Commerce, said that planning had long been identified as a key barrier to growth and many smaller businesses were put off even applying for planning permission by the cost, complexity and slow pace of the system.

He said: “I think opponents of the [policy] and the presumption in favour of development have it wrong when they argue that what I believe is a modest and incremental set of reforms will result in some sort of nightmare vision of urban sprawl, lost amenity or developer free-for-alls.”