

Does the government's planning reform endanger the green belt?

THE GOVERNMENT INCLUDED a new "presumption in favour of sustainable development" when it announced its draft National Planning Policy Framework at the end of July. A furore ensued because no definition was included.

Some fear that lack of clarity will give developers a field day and lead to widespread development on green-belt land. They have demanded changes and more clarity in the proposals.

Others say fears about the erosion of the green belt are overstated and that local communities will have the power to veto developments they do not want.

What do you think?

YES

from members:

Tony Smithers
Dalkeith



I think it favours development rather than communities.

M.E. Brett
Derby



We need tight control and full consultation with residents.

M. Corker
Sheffield



It should include definitions. We need more low-cost housing but we must protect green belt land.

NO

from members:

Brian Smillie
Stirling



We have plenty of green belt land at the moment. As long as planning is carefully thought out, it won't be endangered.

John Brickell
Edinburgh



The green belt is well protected. It's time to take a fresh look at this issue.

James Deakin
Sheffield



We should refurbish old sites and responsibly build new homes.



Find out more about this topic on the Web:

- www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/hands-off-our-land/8823370/Planning-reforms-put-green-belt-at-risk-claims-legal-expert.html
- www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthnews/8660560/New-planning-laws-threaten-green-belt.html

from an expert in the field:



Ben Cowell is acting external affairs director of the National Trust, www.nationaltrust.org.uk, based in Warrington.

SOME PEOPLE WERE surprised to see the National Trust take a strong public stand against government proposals to shake up the planning system. The National Trust does not usually make a habit of opposing government policy so directly, but this was an issue on which we could not be silent. Our official role as a charity is to care for special places forever and for everyone—and not just the ones we happen to own.

The changes in the draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) set out the policies that planning departments across the country must follow in making decisions about planning applications. Our view is that the planning rules are being watered down too much to pave the way for more development.

The changes specify a general “presumption in favour of sustainable development”—but without a clear definition of what makes development “sustainable”. Declaring from the outset that the default answer to development proposals should be yes weights the system heavily in favour of economics, without giving proper consideration to the long-term consequences for the environment and communities.

The green belt was established after World War II, with the intention of limiting urban sprawl and protecting the difference between town and countryside. It has been vital in constraining the sort of growth that we see in other countries—warehouses, offices and homes built out of town centres on greenfield sites, and slowly eroding the sense of what makes the countryside special.

Already, development is happening in South Oxfordshire on virgin greenfield sites, and parts of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and green-belt land in Essex—where developers are scrutinising this land particularly closely—are under threat. Ministers claim the green belt is safe, but we are already beginning to see the many ways in which the NPPF will damage our environment and local communities, and the regulations are not even formally in place yet.

We can only imagine how great the danger to the landscape will be if it is approved in the form published over the summer. The government might well claim the green belt is safe, but we do not agree. We feel strongly that the overall effect of the proposed changes will be to apply significant pressure on existing green-belt land. ❧

from an expert in the field:



Liz Peace is chief executive of the London-based British Property Federation (www.bpf.org.uk).

THE DRAFT NATIONAL Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was suddenly front-page news over the summer. David Cameron, prime minister, stood recast as being determined to “tear the heart out of our green and pleasant land”. And all because the government attempted to turn thousands of pages of planning guidance into a clear, concise framework that could be understood and used by all.

This is not, as some have claimed, a “developers’ charter”. In fact, it will give communities greater power than ever to shape their areas. Local plans—once dictated by unelected regional quangos and planning inspectors—will now be written by elected councillors and their communities.

The NPPF simply requires local plans to meet the “objectively assessed requirements” of their area. These are real-life needs, and to disregard them would deprive people, particularly the young, of badly needed homes and jobs.

It is true that the NPPF does encourage a positive approach to development, although protection of the green belt, sites of special scientific interest, areas of outstanding national beauty and heritage assets remain unchanged. And the preference for building on previously developed sites ahead of greenfields has not, as some have claimed, been removed.

We agree that the “brownfield first” policy should be made explicit, but in seeking to prioritise the use, where practical, of “land with the least environmental or amenity value” we believe the NPPF has the right approach.

The one phrase that seems to have given commentators the severest case of heat stroke is the “presumption in favour of sustainable development”. There is little doubt the phrase needs clarification, but the NPPF does at least attempt to define what is sustainable, arguing the planning system must pursue economic, environmental and social factors “in an integrated way, looking for solutions which deliver multiple goals”.

This is no free-for-all. What is rarely mentioned is that a planning application would be judged against the NPPF, and that the NPPF makes clear that development should always seek to minimise environmental harm.

In fact, it goes further. Applications will fail if the adverse impacts of development “significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits”. ❧

What do you think?

Does the government’s planning reform endanger the green belt?

YES NO

Comments:

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BUSINESS NAME

CITY/COUNTY/POSTAL CODE

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