

TheyWorkForYou

- [UK](#)
 - - [MPs](#)
 - [Lords](#)
 - [Debates](#)
 - [Written Answers](#)
 - [Bill Committees](#)
 - [Upcoming](#)



[Mr Andrew Turner in the Chair] — Backbench Business — National Planning Policy Framework

– in Westminster Hall at 12:00 am on [5th March 2015](#).

[Alert me about debates like this](#)

[All Westminster Hall debates on 5 Mar 2015](#)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(*Mel Stride*.)

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c363WH)



Geoffrey Clifton-Brown Chair, Committee of Selection 1:30 pm, 5th March 2015

I am delighted to be able to lead this debate. I thank you, [Mr Turner](#), and the [Backbench Business Committee](#) for giving me and the House the opportunity to discuss the national planning policy framework. I am especially grateful to my hon. Friend the [Minister](#) for being here. I believe that he was in his [constituency](#) this morning, and I am sure that he did not want to be dragged back here this afternoon. I believe, from today's [Order Paper](#), that a written statement will be made later today, and I would be grateful if my hon. Friend could refer to it in his winding-up speech if it has any relevance to this debate.

Planning is an important issue that the House has discussed a number of times. The Government have just published their response to the [Communities and Local Government Committee](#)'s good report on the operation of the national planning policy framework, so it is timely that we are able to discuss it today.

I welcomed the introduction of the national planning policy framework when the former Minister, my right hon. Friend [Greg Clark](#), introduced it in 2012. For far too long, our planning system was incredibly complicated and consisted of more than 1,000 pages of policy. The [NPPF](#) simplified that guidance into an easy-to-read, readily available, concise document. I also welcomed the Government's publication of guidance, which streamlined 7,000 pages into a sensible online guide. All those steps to simplify the planning process were a welcome innovation.

I accept that the Government have to find a difficult balance. Most people recognise that we need more housing. There is a national need for additional housing, so every community will have to play its part. That is mainly because we are an ageing society with more single households and an increasing population. The [CBI](#) has said that Britain needs to build 240,000 houses to keep up with the population growth. It is welcome news that the Government are on track to build 700,000 new homes in this Parliament. However, although we recognise the need for more housing, we must ensure that houses are built in the most appropriate places and, as far as possible, in accordance with the wishes of local people and with good design.

The Government have rightly been driving a localism agenda over the past four and a half years. Unfortunately, in many areas of the country, including my constituency, localism is almost non-existent in the planning system. The purpose of this debate is not to criticise the existence of the NPPF, but to highlight to my hon. Friend the

Minister where the NPPF is not working in the way it was intended. I will talk about local plans, which are critical to the NPPF, and the problems associated with councils whose plans have not yet been adopted. I will discuss the merits of neighbourhood plans, speculative planning applications, appeals, the protection of areas of outstanding natural beauty and other concerns about heritage and infrastructure requirements. I will try to be brief, because other hon. Members want to contribute.

Let me start with local plans, which are at the heart of the NPPF. The NPPF is a plan-led process, and local plans, where they are in place, are a useful planning tool. They provide a clear indication of how much development there will be, when it will happen, what else needs to occur alongside the new developments and other points that are of concern to local people when new housing is built. However, there is a gaping hole in the NPPF for planning authorities whose local plan has not yet been adopted, such as Cotswold and Stroud district councils, which are both covered by my constituency. It is frankly frustrating, but those councils are not on their own, because two fifths of local planning authorities are in the same position. It is worrying that a significant proportion of the planning authorities that are trying to operate within a plan-led system are without a plan. It is simple logic that for a plan-led system to work, a plan must be in place. Without a central document holding together all the different fragments of the planning process, the system will fall apart, as it has in my constituency and, I am sure, in other parts of the country.

I have had discussions with various organisations, including the [Royal Institution](#) of Chartered Surveyors and the Campaign to Protect Rural England, and it seems that, in general, high-growth urban areas tend to have plans in place, while sparse, rural areas with limited resources tend not to. Those areas are the most vulnerable to speculative planning applications, and they are also some of the most beautiful places in these isles. Perhaps I am biased, but the Cotswolds is a jewel in the UK's crown. The levels of tourism that my constituents see suggest that people flock to it to see idyllic Britain, rather than a large construction site. I genuinely believe that there is a risk that inappropriate development will ruin such rural areas, and that the impact will be felt locally and nationally for generations to come.

Without a local plan in place, planning authorities are at the mercy of developers. My constituency has seen a significant number of speculative planning applications, which are often sizeable. There is currently a proposal for a development of 2,350 dwellings in Chesterton, on the edge of Cirencester. That is a large number of additional houses for any small to medium-sized town to take.

One of the biggest problems for authorities whose local plan has not been adopted is the sheer lack of clarity about the housing situation in the area. It means that everybody is working from either out-of-date or incomplete information, whether it is an old core strategy, or a local or regional plan. It allows an area to be subject to speculative applications, because developers know that they have a good chance of success at appeal. In the Cotswolds, we increasingly find that councils are not refusing applications that do not conform because they fear that the application will be allowed at appeal, which can lead to a huge financial loss for the council.

Each appeal can cost councils upwards of £50,000, which is a significant amount of money for a small rural council with limited resources. I will address the lack of resources shortly.

If there is no local plan, it is up to each individual planning inspector to decide how many dwellings are needed over a five-year period. That figure can change significantly between inspectors, who have subjective views. That is caused in part by a lack of up-to-date information about local housing need. Decisions about an issue as complicated and controversial as planning, particularly in the Cotswolds, should not be based on the subjective views of different inspectors. There needs to be a clearly defined housing need assessment methodology, so that all planning authorities and applicants can work with the same system.

The ratcheting up of housing need is illustrated by the number of appeals in the Cotswolds that were upheld by different inspectors over an 18-month period. An appeal in Tetbury determined that the council had not met its five-year housing supply, and stated that, as a result of persistent under-delivery of housing in the Cotswolds, an additional 20% should be added, which brought the figure to 2,426 dwellings required over the next five years, or 485 annually. However, it was contradicted by an appeal in Kemble, which stated that it was not necessary to apply the 20% buffer. In a more recent decision on an appeal in Fairford, a different inspector claimed that the annual requirement needed to be between 500 and 580. The same report said that it could go up to as much as 650. It is simply ridiculous for planning inspectors to be unclear about what the housing need is in an area. We need a clear and robust methodology for assessing housing need, so that the number of dwellings necessary is clear and is not up to the subjective view of each planning inspector.

The Communities and Local Government Committee's report says, and I totally agree, that all sites that have been granted planning permission should count toward the five-year land supply. Allowing planning permission for speculative applications on appeal and requiring the local authority to find a five-year land supply, let alone an additional 20% buffer, means that the amount of land set aside for development is excessive.

However, my constituents are concerned not just by the number of houses, but by the location of the new houses. They have to be put in the right place, particularly considering designations such as areas of outstanding natural beauty. It seems that those who are most logically placed to receive recommendations on where new developments should be sited are the current residents. They know their communities inside out and know where a new development would be best sited.

An example in my constituency is in the parish of Kingswood, which is under the authority of Stroud district council and was identified in the Communities and Local Government Committee report. It is currently facing an application at [Chestnut Park](#), which is at one of the highest points of the village, with fantastic views over the AONB, which would be diminished by a housing development. The parish council has diligently produced a comprehensive village design statement, which identifies alternative sites for development. However, due to the fact that Stroud district council does not have an adopted local plan, it is

unlikely that that speculative planning application will be refused for fear of an appeal. I say to the Minister that this is a classic example of local people doing all the right things, but not having their voice listened to.

Kingswood is one of the villages in my constituency that would like to produce a neighbourhood plan. Neighbourhood plans are a fantastic innovation and I welcome them—indeed, when the Minister's predecessor, my hon. Friend [Nick Boles](#), was the Planning Minister, he kindly visited the Cotswolds and spoke about the benefits of neighbourhood plans. Following that, I wrote to all my parish and town councils encouraging them to develop and adopt neighbourhood plans. The problem is that without an adopted local plan in place, neighbourhood plans have to be considered but can be overruled in the local planning process. That is a severe erosion of localism in the planning process, and I believe that it is why so few neighbourhood plans are emerging in my constituency. It renders all the incredibly hard and in-depth work required to produce a neighbourhood plan redundant if it can simply be ignored. Will the Minister issue guidelines that provide greater weight to emerging neighbourhood plans or village design statements, even in the absence of local plans?

I mentioned the limited resources that rural councils often have to deal with planning problems. It seems to me—and during discussions with others, they have agreed—that when local authorities come to reducing their expenditure, planning departments are often on the receiving end. As we all know, planning is complicated and requires much expertise. It is difficult for a small planning department to undertake its statutory development control function simultaneously with its forward planning function, and it is the forward planning function that usually suffers. What can the Government do to ensure that planning authorities have the resources that they need to produce local plans in a timely fashion?

I have a suggestion for the House and for the Minister, who I hope will consider it: the Government could create a mandatory scheme whereby each planning authority that does not have an adopted local plan is provided with a specific planning inspector who can mentor that council through the various stages of its development plan. That should hugely help authorities to present to the inspector a timely local plan, which is more likely to be judged sound. Critically, that would avoid further delay caused by the plan having to go back to the drawing board locally. The mentor inspector would always be different from the inspector who would eventually consider the plan, to ensure impartiality and avoid judicial reviews.

That process would work by an authority being allocated an inspector, and thereafter, a timetable for agreed actions to complete a plan being set by the mentor inspector and the authority. That inspector would then be obliged to report back to the [Secretary of State](#) if they felt that the timetable was seriously slipping. It would then be for the [Secretary of State](#) to take any action that he saw as necessary to ensure that good progress was made with the local plan. I would be grateful if the Minister considered that. It would be a carrot-and-stick approach, but after all, all authorities have had at least four years' notice that they need to have plans adopted, yet some are still a long way from that objective.

Another resource issue faced by local planning authorities is that they need a number of professionally skilled people, such as landscape architects, town planners, heritage experts and so on, all of whom have specialist knowledge. I was pleased when the Cotswold, Forest of Dean and [West Oxfordshire](#) district councils and Cheltenham borough council struck a deal recently to pool their back-office functions, saving an estimated £5.5 million a year. Although not yet agreed, I believe that the arrangement will mean that between them, they can employ people with the necessary skills, so that they will not have to spend a lot of extra money on outside consultants when drawing up local plans.

Related to that point is the duty to co-operate, which is rightly stipulated in the NPPF. [The Cotswolds](#) is a district that shares its borders with 10 different local authorities, some highly rural, such as [North Wiltshire](#), and some urban, such as Swindon borough council, therefore making planning matters even more complicated. I would be grateful if the Minister touched on how we can ensure that the duty to co-operate is more clearly defined.

I want to mention two additional factors, beginning with infrastructure requirements. I have already mentioned an application—or rather, an aspiration at this stage—for 2,350 houses proposed at Chesterton on the edge of Cirencester. However, the infrastructure there, particularly the roads and the sewerage network, is already at breaking point and simply cannot cope with such a large new development. We have already experienced dreadful water and sewerage problems during the flooding in 2007, 2012 and 2013. Building 2,350 new homes, without adequate additional infrastructure, would simply exacerbate that problem further. Indeed, [Thames Water](#), at a recent meeting and in a follow-up letter from the chief executive, has explicitly stated to me that a new sewer would need to bypass the existing Cirencester sewerage network catchment if the development were to go ahead.

I would like to take this opportunity to put on record my strong belief that water and sewerage undertakers should always be statutory consultees in the planning process, alongside the [Environment Agency](#) and bodies that have that status. Water undertakers are critical for new developments, so they should be involved at the core of the process. Some might say that that would slow the process down, but I believe that the opposite would be the case; rather, it would concentrate minds on what infrastructure was actually needed.

There is the same problem throughout the rest of the Cotswolds, and I am sure, throughout the country. For example, in [Moreton-in-Marsh](#), a town that has faced an increase of more than 30% in its housing stock since 2011, infrastructure improvements are desperately needed. The main road bridge into the town already cannot cope with two heavy goods vehicles crossing it at the same time from opposite directions; it certainly will not be able to deal with the additional traffic from new housing. The NPPF states that infrastructure provisions must be central to planning applications, but there is not enough evidence of that.

The problem will be compounded by the introduction of the new community infrastructure levy on 5 [April 2015](#). That will limit the amount of pooling of section

106 agreements to pay for community infrastructure. No more than five section 106 agreements will be allowed to pay for the same project. That could prevent important services from being provided to towns and villages, such as new schools, doctors' surgeries, libraries and so on, which are required as a result of new development. I know that the community infrastructure levy is intended to pay for those types of projects, but yet again, I understand that it will apply only when the local authority has an adopted local plan—another example of how not having a plan in place is really handcuffing local communities.

Will the Minister consider strengthening guidance to ensure that applications receive only permission if guarantees are put in place that the necessary infrastructure will also be delivered during the course of the development? If that does not happen, the indigenous population will suffer because of the new development, and that will create even more disquiet when further development is proposed.

Finally, I want to touch on protections for AONBs and conservation areas, which I appreciate the Government recognise as important, but which, I believe, are not being given sufficient weight by appeal inspectors. Roughly 80% of my constituency is located within the [Cotswolds AONB](#), which is hugely important not just to me and my constituents but to the country as a whole. I have already referred to the Cotswolds as a jewel in the UK's crown, and I would be grateful to receive reassurances from the Minister that due protection will be granted to AONBs.

I suggest that the Minister should ensure that NPPF guidance states that equal weight should be given to social and environmental issues as is currently given to economic development issues. That would have a positive impact in ensuring that the most important landscapes, which many enjoy, are not damaged beyond repair.

I will conclude now, because I know that others want to contribute. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about assistance for councils that have not adopted local plans, and about my suggestion of a

mentoring-type scheme. I would also be grateful to hear from him about infrastructure concerns, the protection of AONBs and the other important matters that I have raised.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c363WH)



[Bob Neill Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe \(Substitute Member\), Vice-Chair, Conservative Party 1:51 pm, 5th March 2015](#)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, [Mr Turner](#). I refer to my relevant entries in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend [Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#), who is a good friend. He spoke with great knowledge and expertise.

I am glad to see the [Minister](#) here. I start by saying well done to him and his colleagues for the good work done overall on the national planning policy framework. It is worth remembering how complex and unwieldy the system had become before the [NPPF](#) was introduced. No one I speak to, whether they be officers, members of local authorities, developers or members of communities, really misses the plethora of regional strategies, supplementary planning guidance, planning policy statements and guidance and all that went with that. That change was profoundly important.

The sense I get from talking to people across the sector is that they want a period of stability while the NPPF beds in. Sensible changes and refinements can be made, but that is rather different from wholesale upheaval. I suspect that those who want to bring forward housing and business premises, and the infrastructure that goes with them—my hon. Friend the Member for [The Cotswolds](#) was right to refer to the need for infrastructure to be linked in fully with development—will want a period of policy stability, during which they can invest. There were a few myths when the NPPF first came in, but by and large they have been proven to be just that. My hon. Friend made a fair point about the need for consistency in the inspectorate, but the Minister, his predecessors and others have worked hard to try to achieve that, and I am optimistic that quality control is improving significantly.

It is sometimes forgotten that although the NPPF was radical in many ways, it built on what we had before. As my hon. Friend said, it is a plan-led system, and we have reinforced that, with the plan central and fundamental to the construct. There has always been a presumption in favour of development in our planning policy, and the presumption in favour of sustainable development is a central part of the NPPF. Perhaps those of us who had a hand in its construction did that deliberately, but we built on what was already there in the 1948 legislation, which said that there was a presumption in favour of development unless rational considerations indicated otherwise. The [Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004](#) added a reference to sustainable development. We took that idea, built on it, and put it much more centre-stage in a simplified, slimmed-down document, so communities who have legitimate sustainability-related grounds on which to resist development should have no fear.

I want to raise a few issues that come up when I talk to people. The point about the importance of having a plan has been made, and I am sure that the Minister will update us with the latest figures on adoption of plans by local authorities. There is concern. In some cases that may be because local authorities have not invested, and in other cases that may be because they did not have capacity or—let us be frank—the political will to take the tough decisions involved.

The whole point of localism is that if power is handed down to local authorities, they must be prepared to take the responsibility that goes with it, which means reaching decisions on tough matters such as what development goes where in their area. Perhaps we at Westminster can ensure that the plan development

process is as simple as possible. It is easier than it was, but many on both sides of the fence in industry think that further simplification might be possible. If that could be done while sustaining the adoption rate of plans, that would be helpful.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c368WH)



Geoffrey Clifton-Brown Chair, Committee of Selection

I fully understand that local authorities should face consequences if they do not have a local plan. The problem is that local people suffer when the planning system does not work, but on the whole they blame not the local authority, but the Government for the system. That is why the Government need to adopt a carrot-and-stick approach to ensure that all authorities have a local plan adopted as soon as possible.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c369WH)



Bob Neill Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Substitute Member), Vice-Chair, Conservative Party

That is absolutely right. As someone who served on a local authority for 16 years, I know my hon. Friend is also right that often there is confusion about where responsibility lies. The Government have a legitimate role here, which is why I said that while we should have stability in the policy, it is possible to make tweaks and refinements that reflect our experience as we go along. I have an example: there seems to be broad agreement among people involved in this area that local plans should be more concise; they ought to give the strategic view. More prescriptive matters could be more sensibly handled in the neighbourhood plans now being brought forward.

I am glad to see that the [Minister](#) and his Department have made more resource available to assist in the development of neighbourhood plans, which should be given more emphasis. I do not expect him to reply to this now, but it might be worth his considering the fact that eminent practitioners have asked me, “Why, for a local plan, do we need much more than a proposals map, the five-year land supply statement and a short document setting out the strategic priorities for the area?” If we could slim the plans down to something like that, that would be a good means of speeding up the process.

The mentoring idea mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for [The Cotswolds](#) is well worth consideration. Of course, that may cause resourcing issues in the [Planning Inspectorate](#), but the Department has been keen to make more advice available to local authorities to speed up the adoption of plans. A similar issue sometimes arises when there is an inability to complete the local plan owing to dispute between neighbouring authorities on how to apply the duty to co-operate. That is particularly the case where one local authority has a tight boundary that reflects an urban area and virtually all the growth and expansion is taking place in neighbouring authorities’ areas. How can that be reconciled? One suggestion is to have a specialist team in the Planning Inspectorate that arbitrates in such disputes. That would fit quite neatly with the mentoring suggestion my hon. Friend made in relation to other matters. That is a practical measure we could take, which would not be terribly costly.

It is also worth considering whether we should have further carrot as well as further stick. A local authority can get the new homes bonus, which is significant, whether it approves the planning application in the first

instance or not. It might concentrate minds if the bonus was not automatically paid, or paid at the same level, if permission was granted on appeal. That might not be popular with my friends in the local government world, and I do not think that that should be done until up-to-date plans are in place, but that might be an appropriate spur to rational and evidence-based decision making in cases where a local authority has refused permission despite having an up-to-date local plan that is consistent with the development proposal.

On the other hand, more positively, is there more that we can do to encourage local authorities to band together and pool the resources of their planning departments? I think that the answer has to be yes. Many of the district councils in this country have quite small-scale planning operations, and they often struggle when confronted with the scale of the resources that a major developer may be able to bring to bear. We should follow on from the joint working that we are doing in other areas of local government—my hon. Friend cited a good example involving his local authority and its neighbours—and consider more pooling of planning departments. Just as we talked about a means of resolving the disputes surrounding the duty to co-operate, perhaps we could also encourage more joint core strategies. We have seen some of those in Norfolk; Norwich and the surrounding hinterlands have signed off joint core strategies. There must be more scope for that. Perhaps we could give greater weight to authorities that have adopted such a sensible and collaborative approach.

Obviously, the housing supply remains a key issue. I am delighted with the commitment of the Government and my party to increasing the rate of building. We certainly need to be building at the rate of 200,000 homes per annum, and I am delighted that the [Prime Minister](#) has announced that we intend to bring forward the commencement of that work to 2017, and that the total figure will include 200,000 affordable homes.

At the moment, we talk about a five-year land supply, which is somewhat out of kilter with the land acquisition arrangements that the industry often makes; they fund their acquisitions over a longer period. Is there merit in considering a requirement for a broad 10-year housing supply that feeds the more specific five-year supply, without the need for annual updates? There might be scope for that. It happens to some degree, but the annual updating sometimes causes difficulty. Can we do more forward projection? That would be a refinement, rather than anything that required radical change in methodology. The robustness of the methodology is absolutely critical.

One area has disappointed many people. It is not easy to achieve, but we had hoped—I certainly hoped this when I was a Minister—that more use would be made of tax increment financing. Things have been a little slow in that regard. I appreciate that the Treasury has to be involved in such negotiations, and we have to look at the broader macro-economic position. If we are properly to join up infrastructure with housing, infrastructure and other development on the planning side, it is also important for the financing streams for that infrastructure to be properly in place, so that the delivery of the infrastructure can start in parallel with the development that creates the demand for it, rather than starting afterwards. That is not simply roads and transport infrastructure, but social infrastructure to meet the need for more schools, hospitals and other such facilities.

During the next Parliament, especially if my party is in government, I hope that we will see a restatement of the commitment to rolling out TIFs more widely. I am glad that the development of a municipal bond market may be helpful, but it is not a substitute for the development of TIFs, which are much more specific to development proposals. We should congratulate the [Mayor of London](#) on using, in effect, a [TIF](#) model with great success to fund the Northern line extension. That is clear enough proof that it can work.

I will say one final thing before I sit down, because I know that other hon. Members want to speak. We have made a good start, in my judgment, with the [NPPF](#). The

Minister has done excellent work to put in place practical measures to deliver housing and other planning supply measures. Hon. Members have heard me say this before, but one thing remains unfinished business: pretty much all the experts to whom I speak say that they do not want major change to the planning regime

and the NPPF, but say that if there is an opportunity for a piece of legislation in the next Parliament, what they require is a comprehensive reform of land compensation and compulsory purchase law. That area lags well behind the curve in our planning reforms. It is the one area in which reform has not yet taken root, and that may be a significant block in a number of places. I hope that that will remain centre stage in the new Parliament, because it would be a logical and practical next step from the planning reforms that we have already made.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c370WH)



[Geoffrey Clifton-Brown Chair, Committee of Selection](#)

I could not agree more strongly. If we could reform the planning and compensation regime, I am sure that our major infrastructure projects—the biggest ones, such as [High Speed 2](#), the extension of Heathrow and so on—could be completed in a much shorter time scale to the benefit of the nation.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c372WH)



[Bob Neill Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe \(Substitute Member\), Vice-Chair, Conservative Party](#)

I am absolutely sure that that is right. There might also be more scope for the use of mediation in relation to projects such as [HS2](#), instead of our rather cumbersome hybrid Bill process. Those are sensible things, which could work in parallel. On that note, having reached further agreement with my hon. Friend, I commend the [Minister](#) on the work that he has done, and leave him with those thoughts on possible further progress, building on what I believe is a good start.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c372WH)



[Alan Beith Chair, Justice Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee \(Commons\), Chair, National Policy Statements Sub-Committee 2:05 pm, 5th March 2015](#)

I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise some planning issues in this debate, and to follow my hon. Friends the Members for [The Cotswolds](#) ([Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#)) and for [Bromley and Chislehurst](#) ([Robert Neill](#)). There are echoes of the matters that they raised in the cases that I will refer to. I will also talk about planning problems faced by the Northumberland authority. I shall refer to the village of Warkworth in my [constituency](#), but the problems that it faces have been faced, and probably will be faced, by other villages in the vicinity of Alnwick, and to some extent by the town of Alnwick itself. Those problems arise because we have the national planning policy framework, with its presumption in favour of development, but no core strategy. I was interested to hear that in that respect, the problems that we have in Northumberland have some parallels with my hon. Friends' experiences. The result is that the authority makes decisions in the awareness that the [Planning Inspectorate](#) will implement the national planning policy framework without much regard for the local considerations that the authority is trying to build into the core strategy.

I will illustrate the situation with cases relating to planning applications made by the [Duke of Northumberland](#)'s estates in the village of Warkworth. A couple of years ago, the Northumberland Estates made an application for 74 houses. That was subsequently reduced and split into two applications, one for 27 affordable homes, and one for 37 homes. The council planning committee passed the plan for 27 affordable homes but rejected the plan for 37 homes. That plan was taken to the Planning Inspectorate, which granted the application on appeal. The 37-home site is now up for sale, with planning permission, at a price that is rumoured to be around £6.2 million. The financial effects of the inspector's decision are not insignificant, especially for the Northumberland Estates.

Since then, another three applications have been made for a total of 67 houses in Warkworth, which is a relatively small village. Local residents have been extremely concerned, not least about the fact that there has been no single comprehensive decision and no satisfactory consideration of the cumulative impact of the various schemes. Crucial to the planning inspector's rejection of the county's refusal of the application was the fact that there was no core strategy in place for the county.

I took up those issues with the [Secretary of State](#) for Communities and Local Government and he responded to me on several points. He said that, in his understanding,

“Northumberland's core strategy is nearing its final stages of development”, but pointed out:

“In the interim, the council must rely on the most recent plans for the area.”

We discussed what weight had to be attached to those plans. It is fair enough that the local authority should consider the plans that are already in place, but that did not seem to hold for the inspector when he considered the matter. The old Alnwick district plan by the former district council did not seem to be part of his consideration. That is unsatisfactory for those who want the application to be judged according to proper principles.

I also explored with the [Secretary of State](#) the question of multiple applications from the same landowner. The planning system is agnostic or neutral about the ownership of land. I understand why, philosophically, but it becomes very challenging for people locally when they see the same developer coming back again and again with more and more applications. That makes the cumulative point an important one.

In his letter to me, the Secretary of State wrote:

“The [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (paragraph 32) points to the cumulative impact of development on transport as a relevant consideration for planning authorities.”

That is fine, but it is only transport; cumulative impact covers the whole range of relevant considerations, from whether the size of a combined development is suited to a village to what the impact will be on other services, and the extent to which those other services can support the development. Cumulative impact is relevant to all those things. He went on to encourage local neighbourhood plans as a way in which local people could make their voices heard. We have already heard about some of the difficulties in achieving that when we still do not have a core strategy in place.

Local people felt that the system was significantly weighted against them, and that the presumption in favour of development—I suppose they thought it was all well and good, but even so—did not allow for proper consideration of local people's concerns and reservations in such circumstances. Some villages in my constituency recognise that they need more housing if they are to survive, maintain local amenities and retain local young families in the area. Some villages, however, feel that they are having to take too large a proportion of the housing sites that are needed in the area.

The planning system must be capable of maintaining local confidence, and it must not be a system in which powerful developers cannot be challenged for fear that decisions are very unlikely to be overturned on appeal. That is the situation in which councillors find themselves. Councillors are constantly being advised that there is no point in objecting to an application, even when the circumstances that I have described are relevant, because their objection will be overturned in the appeals process. That view is strengthened or made significantly more serious by the general state of Northumberland's planning department.

One feature of Northumberland's planning department that has been criticised is that a significant number of applications are rejected contrary to officers' advice—that is one of the large number of things about Northumberland's planning process that is criticised in the report produced for the county council by Deloitte. I would like an indication from the [Minister](#), by letter if not today, of how much significance he attaches to Deloitte's very long list of recommendations. Deloitte suggests that, if all the recommendations were implemented, it would become more difficult for local communities to persuade a council to overturn an unsuitable application, because it would effectively count against performance targets. There is good reason for scrutiny of the kind provided by the Deloitte report on Northumberland's planning department, which was made up from the planning departments of the six district councils that were abolished against our will when the previous Government turned Northumberland into a unitary authority, plus the county planning department.

The Deloitte report begins:

“Performance in the [Planning Service](#) has been consistently poor since the merger of the six district and borough planning services following...reorganisation in...2009.”

The report refers to performance being

“consistently below target and targets set are below national averages.”

That is not a happy position for any department to be in, but given that it is in the process of moving to a better structure and process, how much weight do Ministers and the Department attach to implementing all the Deloitte proposals in detail? I ask that question because one of the things that county officials and county leaders are saying is, “If we don't do all these things, our planning powers will be taken away from us.” They clearly feel under significant threat.

Having an unsatisfactory and underperforming planning department cannot continue, and Northumberland had to do something about it, but it would be helpful to have clearer guidance on what might be done. That reads into the already difficult process of ensuring that villages such as Warkworth—there will be others—can have their voice heard and have confidence that the proposals will be judged on merit, and not according to the need to meet approvals targets, or the national planning policy framework's presumption in favour of development.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c372WH)



[Martin Vickers Conservative, Cleethorpes 2:14 pm, 5th March 2015](#)

As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, [Mr Turner](#). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for The

Cotswolds ([Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#)) on securing this timely debate. Planning, of course, always raises controversy, and my [constituency](#), like the Cotswolds and elsewhere, is no exception.

The ministerial foreword to the [NPPF](#) by the then [Minister](#) with responsibility for planning, my right hon. Friend [Greg Clark](#), states:

“The purpose of planning is to help achieve sustainable development. Sustainable means ensuring that better lives for ourselves don’t mean worse lives for future generations.”

The foreword goes on to talk about the demands for growth. We all want to achieve growth, but it has to be done in such a way as to satisfy existing residents.

My constituency is particularly badly affected at the moment, because the roughly three quarters of the constituency that comes under the auspices of [North East Lincolnshire](#) council has no up-to-date local plan. That was debated in this Chamber about a year ago, when the previous Minister with responsibility for planning, my hon. Friend [Nick Boles](#), described the fact that my local authority had taken some six years to produce a local plan in colourful terms:

“World wars have been fought and won in the same amount of time.”—[[Hansard, 29 April 2014; Vol. 579, c. 205WH.](#)]

That attracted a headline in the local paper, and I am sure the Minister will make an equally good response that draws headlines.

The Government have achieved a great deal through localism, and neighbourhood plans spring to mind. It is a question of balance and whether we are giving our communities sufficient say. Most would say not, but they only say that when a particular proposal is detrimental to them, their village or the part of town in which they live. For the rest of the time, they are happy to turn a blind eye and say that it is for the next parish, ward or whatever it happens to be, but major applications can completely change an area’s character. Over a fairly short period, a semi-rural suburb can become part of an urban area. It is only right that local people should have much more say on such developments.

In recent years, the role of councillors has diminished in some respects, particularly under the previous Government. Members will recall that there were targets for planning decisions taken by officers, so the role of elected representatives and the involvement of local people was therefore much reduced. Local people felt that they had no voice whatever. We all know that consultation is fine, but what people really want is an actual say. They expect their local councillor to have a say on planning applications, and by “say” they mean a vote. Will he put his arm up for or against a particular application? I recognise how difficult it is. I spent 26 years as a councillor, and planning issues were almost always the most difficult to address, which to some extent is because people only become aware of, and get involved in, a decision when it is too late and too far down the road to stop.

[The Minister](#) was on the [Front Bench](#) a couple of months ago when I moved a ten-minute rule Bill to allow objectors to have the right of appeal to the [Planning Inspectorate](#) in certain circumstances. I recognise that that right has to be limited and that the whole system would completely grind to a halt if objectors could appeal against every conservatory and extension, but in certain circumstances—one being the lack of a local plan—there should be the right of objection to major developments. I note that my hon. Friend [Anne Marie Morris](#) subsequently secured a debate on that subject in this Chamber, and the Minister responded. My hon. Friend put forward a case similar to my own—that there should be rights of objection—but in his response, the Minister spoke glowingly about consultation and so on, saying that the Government’s aim was to ensure that everyone had a clear local plan and so on.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for [The Cotswolds](#) pointed out, it is when there is no local plan that people feel particularly angry and lacking in any sort of involvement or influence in the system. We all know of such circumstances, not just where a local plan is lacking. Many developments have gone ahead in areas particularly susceptible to flooding, for example, where the advice from local people, drainage boards

and the like was, “Under no circumstances must you develop there.” Planners have come along and said, “That’s fine; we’ve consulted with the [Environment Agency](#) and all these experts,” but the experts on the ground, such as the local farmer who has seen that field flood decade after decade, have been ignored. If local people were much more involved—if the farmer and the drainage board had the right of appeal in certain circumstances—the system would be greatly improved.

I recognise the moves made by the Government on localism. Neighbourhood plans are welcome. Waltham parish council in my constituency is consulting on its local plan at present, and is doing a fine job, but again, although such consultations are important, they involve a relatively small number of people. We must explore ways to involve more people in shaping their own neighbourhoods, not just by going to a few meetings, making presentations and so on, but by giving them real power to shape the area that they live in. Realistically, that can be achieved only by votes and rights of appeal.

I notice that paragraph 17 of the framework says that

“planning should be genuinely plan-led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings”.

I am sure that we would all say “Hear, hear” to that, but the system, although improved, is still creaking. People still feel left out and not involved. I appeal to the Minister to give serious consideration to limited rights of appeal.

- [Link to this speech](#) [In context](#) [Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c374WH)



[**Laurence Robertson Chair, Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2:23 pm, 5th March 2015**](#)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, [Mr Turner](#). I congratulate my neighbour and hon. Friend [Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#) on securing this important debate. The national planning policy framework is one of the most provocative issues in my [constituency](#), so I have held a number of debates on the issue here and in the main Chamber, tabled many questions and met the [Minister](#), the previous Minister and the one before that.

I thank the Minister not just for being here but for having an open-door policy that allows all hon. Members to meet him regularly. I am afraid that whenever he gets a request from me for 10 minutes, he sighs and thinks, “Oh no—not him again,” but it reflects concerns that I have. I echo what has been said: I think that we have moved the planning system on in a welcome direction. It is not always appreciated, as several hon. Members have said, that this Government did not introduce the presumption in favour of development or the [Planning Inspectorate](#), which my research suggests started to be developed in 1909.

Having said all that, there is a misconception among the public, as previous speakers have said, about what is actually going on. It is caused partly by some of the uncertainties about the five-year land supply calculation, for example, to which I will return in a minute, and partly by some councils’ misunderstanding of the policies. Also, the inspectorate has been inconsistent and applied some strange policies that do not seem to represent Government policies. As a result, people in my area are concerned about what is going on.

My local council, Tewkesbury—although my constituency covers other areas as well—is involved with Cheltenham borough council and Gloucester city council in coming up with a joint core strategy, which has still not been agreed or finished. As my hon. Friend [Martin Vickers](#) said, the second world war would have

been started, fought and finished in the time that they have been trying to pull together that joint core strategy. There is no excuse for that; they should be further on.

I am concerned about some of the things that are happening and some of the speculative applications being made, particularly in villages. The village in which I live has just been allocated 24 houses, which I think is a sensible application that the borough council was right to accept, but there are pressures for more and more houses, not only in that village but a lot of other villages, which is upsetting people greatly. They do not mind organic growth or taking a fair share of housing, but they do not want planning to be run by appeal. They do not want the inspectorate effectively to reduce localism by saying, “You will have 50 houses there,” or 100 houses.

The reasons given by the Planning Inspectorate often involve the five-year land supply. In a recent report on an appeal that it allowed at [Stoke Orchard](#), a small village in my constituency, the inspector openly discussed the confusion about how to calculate five-year land supplies. He said, “Well, the council’s saying there’s 3.6, but the applicant is saying 2.9.” There is no certain way to assess it. I have discussed this with the Minister before, but I ask him to come up with a policy or calculation that can be used, so that councils know what they must do.

I am not altogether certain that it is the right way to assess applications, anyway, although some certainty is needed. For example, an appeal for 500 homes at a village called Longford in my constituency—a few years ago, under the previous Government—was allowed, with the stipulation that it had to be built within five years, which is the normal planning application rule. It was allowed on the basis that there was not a five-year land supply, but the houses were not built within that five years, so the applicant had to go back to the council for an extension of the permission. Does that not demonstrate that there was not as much demand for housing as the inspector suggested? If there had been, the developer would have built those houses. That is how developers make money; they do not make it in any other way than by building houses. If there had been demand—if they thought they could have sold the houses in those five years—they would have built them, but they did not. I am concerned about the five-year land supply application policy—not only the principle, but the way in which it is being applied.

If there is a five-year land supply in a village, and if it needs meeting—those are two big ifs—it is not likely to be met by 50 houses here and 30 houses there, but what those 50 and 30 houses often do is to make those villages unsustainable. They do not have the infrastructure, the shops or the roads to support them, and it causes an awful lot of problems for people who live in those areas.

I mentioned interpretation by inspectors. In an appeal allowed at a village called Alderton in my constituency about a year or 18 months ago, the inspector discussed the lack of the five-year land supply, and actually said that the council might have to compromise areas of outstanding natural beauty when finding places for the houses. In my understanding, that is completely contrary to Government policy—if it is not, it certainly should be—and yet the inspector is allowed to make that kind of comment.

That particular land was not an AONB or green-belt land, but that comment was made and subsequently it will be referred to in future appeals and assessments by inspectors. So, as well as clarifying the five-year land supply issue, the Government need to look at the reports being produced by inspectors to ensure that they reflect the Government’s policies.

I know that one or two other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will not go on too long. I just wanted to make those two points in particular. I will make one further point, which perhaps stretches the bounds of the debate a little but relates to planning.

A while ago—in fact, it has probably always been the case—parish councillors were required to register their interests. However, I knew of a number of parish councillors who resigned from their positions because they had to register the interests of their spouses or partners. Parish councils do not make decisions on

planning; they can express an opinion, as anybody can. The people who can make decisions on planning are planning officers—not just councillors, but planning officers—and yet, as I understand it, there is no requirement for them to register their outside interests or indeed their family's outside interests. I will not mention names now, but I have concerns about certain cases and there should be some consistency in this sector, because planning officers directly make decisions on planning. They may not be decisions about 500 houses on a field, but planning officers make certain decisions, and yet there is no transparency about them.

There should also be a requirement—I do not think there is one currently—that whenever planning officers meet developers those meetings should be carefully minuted. Again, that is so that we can have transparency and so that people can have confidence in the planning system, because at the moment, despite the Government's best efforts and best intentions, I do not think there is that confidence in the system for a number of reasons, which I have covered.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the debate.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c376WH)



Fiona Bruce Conservative, Congleton 2:32 pm, 5th March 2015

Thank you, [Mr Turner](#), for calling me to speak.

We need a planning system that puts local communities first. Local people, not developers, are the most important voice in how our towns and villages grow and develop. Government Ministers understand that now more than ever before, as I know from the many meetings that I have had with the [Minister](#) who is here today—I thank him for his patience in that regard. Indeed, I also thank his predecessor and his predecessor's predecessor, because the issues that have been challenging my [constituency](#) regarding unsuitable planning applications have persisted for years.

Although I believe that Ministers now understand the concerns and pressures in my constituency, sadly the [Planning Inspectorate](#) does not. Too many decisions have been made that have had a negative impact on my constituents. I will give just two examples.

First, in Sandbach now we have consents for hundreds of houses on the wrong side of the town. That will mean that hundreds of families have to commute and travel through the town to get to, for example, the [M6](#), which is on the other side of the town, and Crewe station, which is not that far away from the town. The impact on the local road network alone will be major. Secondly, in Congleton, the staff of more than one school are saying to me that because of the hundreds of properties that are being built or will be built, there is now a severe challenge for school places. Yet the appropriate forethought and foresight has not been put into the impact that the developments, once they are consented to, will have on local school places.

Those are just two of many examples I could give, so I concur with many of the concerns that my hon. Friend [Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#) expressed in his excellent speech and the suggestions that he made. As the Minister is aware, I and many residents in the Congleton constituency have spent an inordinate amount of energy, time and expense opposing innumerable inappropriate planning applications. That time, energy and expense could have been better applied to far greater benefit for our local communities.

My hon. Friend is right—without a local plan in place, local people are at the mercy of developers. I would add that they are also at the mercy of the Planning Inspectorate, because developers know only too well what good chances they have on appeal. That is why on 26 January I supported a new [clause](#) that my right hon. Friend [Nick Herbert](#) tabled to the Infrastructure Bill, the aim of which was to give local communities

greater control over planning by abolishing the Planning Inspectorate. After all, Ministers are Ministers and planning inspectors are officials. [The Minister](#) on that occasion—the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend [Mr Hayes](#)—said in response that the Government would issue new planning guidance to address the problems. He said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and [South Downs](#):

“New guidance will be issued that is stronger and more effective, that defends the interests of local authorities and that prevents the problems he has set out.”—[[Hansard, 26 January 2015; Vol. 591, c. 644.](#)]

I hope that new guidance would prevent the kind of problems that I have just referred to. I also hope that the Minister who is here today will take the opportunity to clarify what progress has been made on the new guidance and when it will be issued. Perhaps that is something that the written ministerial statement that will be issued later today will refer to.

I said that I believe the Government now better understand that we need a planning system that puts local people first, and I want to express my thanks to Ministers and the [Secretary of State](#) for issuing an article 25 notice just two weeks ago regarding two applications for developments of well over 200 houses at a site on Padgbury lane in Congleton. I believe that fear of the costs of an appeal to the Planning Inspectorate led local council officers to recommend approval of completely inappropriate applications. I also believe that it was the article 25 notice, for which I again thank Ministers, that strengthened councillors’ hands to go against that recommendation and refuse those applications.

The sword of Damocles of the expense of an appeal should not have resulted in a completely inappropriate recommendation by planning officers. Those applications are in the wrong place and should not be allowed to go forward, but of course developers do not go away. What is happening now is exactly what hon. Members have referred to today. There are multiple applications for that site at Padgbury lane, which is why I have now had to write to the [Secretary of State](#) to ask him to recover two further appeals relating to the same site. I hope that the Secretary of State and the [Housing Minister](#), who is here today, will take a similarly robust view when considering that request.

I also have to make a similar request for the call-in of an application for more than 100 houses in the village of Goostrey. The Minister and I have had correspondence about Goostrey before. It is adjacent to [Jodrell Bank](#), which is now leading on the international [Square Kilometre Array](#) project and co-ordinating countries across the globe. [The UK](#) is taking a leading role in the project, and the [UK Government](#) have invested tens of millions of pounds in it. It is absolutely critical that the functioning of the radio telescope at Jodrell Bank is not affected by inappropriate housing developments nearby. Incidentally, that was why Manchester university, which oversees the work, moved its work from the centre of Manchester to Cheshire; it was to ensure that the telescope would not be interfered with by such developments. This is a national issue, and I hope that Ministers will receive my request for a call-in of the application for more than 100 houses in the small village of Goostrey and ensure that that application is roundly rejected.

It is of great concern to residents that, as I have said, they continuously have to put huge amounts of time, energy and resources, and worry, into having to deal with inappropriate applications. We need a system that properly respects the views of local people, not one that pays lip service to localism. We need a plan-led system, and I am delighted that Ministers are now encouraging neighbourhood plans; in east Cheshire alone, 14 are being brought forward. I am also delighted that those plans are increasingly being taken account of. However, I support the view of my hon. Friend the Member for [The Cotswolds](#): their impact needs to be strengthened, particularly where the principal council has still not got its local plan in place. We need to ensure that we have such strengthened support for neighbourhood plans.

The mentor-led system that my hon. Friend talked about is an excellent suggestion. After I took leaders of [Cheshire East](#) council to meet Ministers some years ago to ask for assistance with the development of the local plan, those Ministers allocated a retired planning inspector to work with the council and help it develop

its plan. Sadly, the plan that was formalised as a result of that joint working was not accepted and is now in suspension. If we are to have a mentor-led system, it must be robust and must work.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c379WH)



[Martin Horwood Liberal Democrat, Cheltenham 2:40 pm, 5th March 2015](#)

It is a pleasure to follow [Fiona Bruce](#) and other hon. Members who have spoken, including my neighbours, the hon. Members for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) and for [The Cotswolds \(Geoffrey Clifton-Brown\)](#). I congratulate the hon. Member for The Cotswolds on securing a debate of sufficient length to allow us all to make a decent contribution on this difficult subject.

In passing, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend [Sir Alan Beith](#), since I may not get another opportunity before he stands down at the [general election](#). He has made an outstanding contribution to Parliament on behalf of his constituents and our party over an extraordinary period—more than 40 years—and Parliament will be the poorer without him.

Planning ought to have been a reasonably harmonious issue for the coalition, because although the [Conservatives](#) and the [Liberal Democrats](#) may have had lots of other disagreements, and although we had to compromise in areas, we had similar instincts regarding it. We were all opposed to the old top-down, heavy-handed regional spatial strategies imposed on us by the previous [Labour Government](#). There were good ideas from the Conservative side, such as neighbourhood plans, which many Liberal Democrats wished we had thought of first, and ideas from the Liberal Democrat side, including the local green space designation, which I helped develop and which has been enthusiastically picked up by the council in the [constituency](#) of the hon. Member for The Cotswolds, as well as by my council and many others.

As other hon. Members said, the national planning policy framework has certainly improved the accessibility of the planning rules, by reducing them to a manageable size. Among its core principles are many promising statements, including that planning should

“be genuinely plan-led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings” and should recognise

“the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside”, that it should be about

“conserving and enhancing the natural environment and reducing pollution”, and should

“encourage the effective use of land by reusing land that has been previously developed”—in other words, brownfield land.

The then [Minister, Greg Clark](#), rightly got a lot of credit for the improvements he made to the national planning policy framework during the drafting process. I found him not at all Angry of [Tunbridge Wells](#), but an accommodating, co-operative Minister in that respect. However, I am afraid that, like other hon. Members, I am disappointed that we seem to have ended up with a rather different experience in practice, locally, all over the country. Despite all the great principles, the [NPPF](#) does not seem to have translated into really thorough localism respecting the wishes of local people, and in many cases it has not protected the environment.

I will focus on the experience of the local green space designation. That policy is in the NPPF and the Department has now provided helpful guidance on it, to help local councils adopt it. However, adoption is still patchy. In fact, I think that Cotswold district council and Cheltenham borough council are the only two councils in Gloucestershire to have adopted the practice and encouraged local communities to come forward with green spaces that communities, parish councils and so on might want to protect.

Cheltenham borough council has enthusiastically adopted that policy. A range of applications was reviewed by Gloucestershire rural community council, to which I pay tribute for doing an outstanding job sifting the applications and testing the criteria in the NPPF that applied to the local green spaces. We have some interesting applications, including in Marsh lane in [St Paul](#)'s, one of the least well-off parts of my constituency; Newcourt green, on the Cirencester road in [Charlton Kings](#); Cheriton park in Hatherley and the open space at Chargrove nearby; George Readings park, and parks at Henley road and Triscombe road, in Hester's way; the Victoria cricket ground in Fairview; and a proposed community orchard in Albemarle road in the north of my constituency. Many of these are in areas that are not the archetypal Cheltenham of picture postcards of regency villas; in some cases they are areas where people have to work pretty hard to make a living and are not archetypally leafy suburbs. I am really pleased that all areas of town are using this designation to protect green spaces, including those that are particularly important in the most urbanised areas. The coalition should be proud of introducing that policy.

However, most of these areas are not imminently threatened by development: communities are rightly taking a precautionary approach. The most controversial area where there is an imminent threat of development is in Leckhampton, which local people have been fighting to defend for at least 20 years. My father was the co-founder of the Leckhampton green land action group, which was fighting for it many years ago. Applications for development there have been repeatedly rejected by inspectors. The area was excluded from the most recent Cheltenham local plan on all sorts of environmental grounds, including its recreational use, landscape, wildlife, and archaeological interest, among other reasons. It is demonstrably special to local people. It is not an extensive tract of land: it only surrounds a couple of lanes in the south of Cheltenham. However, people are really fed up—the hon. Member for Congleton described a similar experience—with endlessly fighting and winning appeals and fighting off applications, only to have developers come back with ever more applications, regardless of the judgments made.

The local green space designation should be used to say, “Actually, this area is special to local people. It has value for recreation; for amenity; for people's mental and physical health; and for absorbing [CO2](#) and particulate pollution. It is free and accessible for people who may be mobility-impaired and for those, whether young or old, who could not necessarily climb the Cotswold escarpment”—into the constituency of the hon. Member for The Cotswolds—“and is special enough to merit that protection so that local people do not have to fight off the developers for decade after decade.” That is the direction in which the Cheltenham local plan is developing—and indeed the neighbourhood plan being developed by Leckhampton and [Warden Hill](#) parish council.

However, there is another problem: the duty to co-operate, which in Gloucestershire is expressed through the Gloucester, Cheltenham and Tewkesbury councils' joint core strategy. I am afraid I do not share the enthusiasm of [Robert Neill](#) for joint core strategies at the moment, because our experience of them is bad—let alone support his idea of a 10-year housing supply rule. That is an horrific idea and would effectively be a developer's charter.

The duty to co-operate and the emergence of a joint core strategy has caused real problems in Cheltenham. The numbers for the whole three-council area are far too high: they go well beyond local housing need. Effectively, the other councils have refused to accommodate reasonable requests. To say that tempers have flared is putting it mildly. I am afraid that it was a Tewkesbury Conservative councillor who said:

“Cheltenham had really fought long and hard, very greedily, because Leckhampton was the price they wanted to keep.”

He added that Cheltenham was “very precious” about the land at Leckhampton. That kind of language being bantered backwards and forwards is not helpful. Cheltenham was damned if it did and damned if it didn’t. If it stuck to its guns and refused to participate in the joint core strategy and lost its case regarding that overarching planning document, there might have been a developers’ free-for-all and any area that was not already green belt would probably have been even more vulnerable. However, if it agreed to the joint core strategy it had to put housing all round the edge of Cheltenham, not only in Leckhampton, but in an area of Cheltenham—[Swindon Village](#), which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury—where even more housing is proposed. We have an examination in public due in May, yet there are already a whole series of planning applications intended to pre-empt the process—the neighbourhood plan, the local plan and the joint core strategy. Local people are again having to rally support to fend off yet more speculative applications by developers.

The joint core strategy should really have gone through exactly the same process that Cotswold district council and Cheltenham borough council have gone through by seeing whether the areas should qualify for local green space designation, but we got into a really Kafkaesque situation. Before the joint core strategy, local people were told, “We could not designate the area as local green space because that has to be part of the planning process.” There could not be a designation before the joint core strategy was developed. During the development of the joint core strategy, local people were told that it was not appropriate for the local green space to be put into the joint core strategy. They were told that it was more appropriate for that to be set out in the Cheltenham local plan. That was not a requirement—I confirmed this with Ministers and the [Planning Inspectorate](#)—but the choice of those developing the joint core strategy.

After the joint core strategy had been drafted—it has now been submitted to the [Secretary of State](#)—people were told that the whole area still could not be designated as local green space because any subsequent designation in the local plan or the neighbourhood plan had to be compatible with the joint core strategy, which had never considered the local green space. So it was completely impossible for the local community ever to get that designation into the joint core strategy.

At the examination in public, I will be arguing that the joint core strategy—in that respect, at least—is not compliant with national policy. Those developing the joint core strategy have made it completely impossible for the local community, which was working on this issue at local plan and neighbourhood plan level and has decades of experience of development being rejected, to go through a reasonable process of trying to get the area protected.

What are we left with? One option is guerrilla action. I contemplated promising Bovis, Miller and the other developers that if they went ahead and produced an attractive marketing name for the area, I might set up a website called something like [iwouldnotbuyahouseroundhereifiwasyou.com](#), where I would put the flood risk map, which is one of the factors in the area, online under that marketing name and encourage people not to buy houses there. Flood risk is another issue. A recent flood risk map produced by the [Environment Agency](#) clearly identifies land at flood risk near Swindon Village, in Leckhampton and in areas downhill of Leckhampton, such as Warden Hill and Hatherley, where the flood risk is associated with being downhill from that green space. We know that green space absorbs floodwater and holds water in the land more effectively than any urban area.

A more attractive option than that kind of guerrilla action is to ask the Minister whether he will strongly request that the Planning Inspectorate respects the core planning principles in the national planning policy framework. Parliament intended them to be respected, and the Planning Inspectorate should give due weight to emerging neighbourhood plans—I completely agree with the comments that the hon. Member for The Cotswolds made on that—and to emerging attempts to designate areas as local green space in local plans, as in Cheltenham.

[The Minister](#) should make it clear that the kind of chicanery by which the Gloucestershire joint core strategy team managed to rule out local green space designation at Leckhampton before, during and after its process

is out of order and should not be regarded as compliant with national policy. I am not sure whether he will go that far, but it is one detailed way in which we as a Parliament will have to give a bit more direction and say, “We intended localism to be a serious consideration when we drafted the NPPF, adopted it and voted for it in Parliament. We expect the Planning Inspectorate and local planning authorities to respect all parts of the national planning policy framework, not just the presumption in favour of development.”

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c381WH)



[Zac Goldsmith Conservative, Richmond Park 2:54 pm, 5th March 2015](#)

I will be quick. I congratulate my hon. Friend [Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#) on initiating this hugely important debate on an issue that matters a great deal to communities across the country. I agree very much with his points. I will restrict my comments to two points, because much of what I wanted to say has already been said.

My first point relates to the debate on the Infrastructure Bill, in which my right hon. Friend [Nick Herbert](#) reminded Ministers that the Conservative party manifesto promised that to

“give communities greater control over planning, we will...abolish the power of planning inspectors to rewrite local plans”. —[[Hansard, 26 January 2015; Vol. 591, c. 644.](#)]

He cited other comments in the manifesto, but that was a key one.

No matter what our views on the record over the past four or so years, we all have to accept that on a number of levels, the promise of localism has not been delivered to anything like the extent that communities imagined might be the case at the last election. I remember talking a great deal in hustings and public meetings about localism. The promises I made were a reflection of the promises being made by the party I belonged to, but in many cases I have had to apologise to those people, because we have not gone as far as we said we would.

Local decisions are routinely overturned by the [Planning Inspectorate](#), even in minor cases. Indeed, the default position for many councils is an assumption that they will be successfully challenged and will have to cough up. That distorts the decision-making process at local authority level and has caused resentment in communities. I know that it has caused resentment in mine, so I was pleased when the [Minister](#) of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend [Mr Hayes](#), responded so positively. I know my hon. Friend [Fiona Bruce](#) quoted this in her contribution, but it is worth repeating. He said:

“Let me be absolutely clear: if the existing regime is not satisfactory, as he describes, we will have a regime that is. New guidance will be issued that is stronger and more effective, that defends the interests of local authorities”. —[[Hansard, 26 January 2015; Vol. 591, c. 644.](#)]

I sincerely hope that that happens.

When can we expect to see the beginnings of that new guidance? Is it likely to be this side of the election? I very much hope so. For the record, I add my support to the calls of my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and [South Downs](#) for the establishment of a new community right of appeal against adverse planning decisions that run contrary to emerging neighbourhood or local plans. I hope the Minister will also respond to that.

Much of what I have said has been said by other Members present, so I will move on to my second point. I will focus on a recent planning change that has not been properly thought through and is having a serious impact on some communities, particularly my own. Changes to the planning regulations enable owners of office space to convert it almost automatically to residential use. I understand that that was an attempt to tackle a serious national housing shortage, but it is not the appropriate answer.

The effect in Richmond borough—I represent half of it and half of Kingston—has been the loss of a staggering 20% of our office space in the year since the changes were made. One in five office spaces have become residential in just one year. It is not empty premises that are being converted; small businesses are being moved on by landlords for obvious commercial reasons. I do not blame those landlords for that, because the upside of making those changes is tremendous, but we are being left in a position where small and medium-sized enterprises—the biggest providers of jobs in our economy—are unable to find affordable places from which to operate. There are other knock-on effects, too. When businesses are lost, so is daytime trade. A lot of our traders in small shops are already feeling the pressure and tell me so regularly.

I have the honour and pleasure of representing a network of vibrant, dynamic communities, and the changes genuinely threaten their future. We do not any more than anyone else want our areas—in my case, Barnes, Kew and Ham—to become dormitory zones, but that is the direction of travel as a consequence of this ill-thought-through change. Clearly, many commercial premises lend themselves to conversion to residential use, but it is crazy to make that the default position in law. Those decisions should rest with local elected representatives who know their communities inside out and are capable of making informed decisions.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c385WH)



[Martin Horwood Liberal Democrat, Cheltenham](#)

Exactly the same phenomenon is happening in Cheltenham. We recently lost two corporate headquarters, both of which have been converted into exclusive retirement flats that are not really available to local people. It seems to me that, if we are not careful, there is a risk that attractive communities such as ours are in danger of becoming dormitories.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c386WH)

[Sir David Amess in the Chair]

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c386WH)



[Zac Goldsmith Conservative, Richmond Park](#)

I very much take the hon. Gentleman's point. He made a thoughtful speech earlier, all of which I support and agree with. That is exactly the point. If his community is attractive, mine is even more so, so the threat is double. We are seeing change happening on an alarming scale. A viable community is a mixed community, with traders, offices and people, and busy during the day, during the evening and at weekends. There is a risk of communities such as mine morphing into dormitory zones as a consequence of these policies.

The current arrangements are clearly flawed. I have written to the [Secretary of State](#) but am yet to receive an answer. Nevertheless, I strongly urge the Government to rethink the arrangements that I have just described.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c386WH)



[Mark Field Conservative, Cities of London and Westminster 3:00 pm, 5th March 2015](#)

May I first take the opportunity to thank you, Sir David, for allowing me to contribute briefly to the debate? I say that not least because I have only just arrived, having had [constituency](#) engagements. I congratulate my hon. Friend [Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#) on securing this debate through the [Backbench Business Committee](#).

I want to draw attention to two issues that affect both halves of my inner-London constituency. As the [Minister](#) knows, the vacant building credit was announced in November in a written ministerial statement, as part of a general package of national planning policy changes intended to support small-scale residential developers. [The Minister](#) himself has said that the policy changes

“are aimed at providing a clear incentive for brownfield regeneration, whilst supporting the Government’s policies of protecting the [Green Belt](#) and increasing housing supply.”

Although that might be the case in many parts of the country—I am sorry that I did not have the chance to listen to the contributions from leafy Cheltenham, the Cotswolds or the lush acres of southern Cheshire—the impact on densely populated areas, such as my constituency, has been greatly underestimated.

Currently, affordable housing contributions are calculated according to the total number of residential units proposed in a redevelopment. The effect of the scheme now proposed is that affordable housing contributions can be sought only from a developer of a vacant building on any uplift in aggregate floor space as a result of the development. Basing affordable housing contributions only on the uplift in floor space, rather than on the total number of new residential units proposed, will, I fear, almost inevitably lead to a lower financial contribution from developers to the funding of affordable housing. Although the stated aim of the new scheme of helping small-scale residential developers is undoubtedly laudable, the institutional developers that typically take on large-scale projects in locations such as the City of London or the [City of Westminster](#) can hardly be said to be that sort of enterprise.

I fear that the effect of the reduced contributions will be to reduce the resource available for affordable housing. By way of example, the City of London corporation is already in line to lose some £3.5 million from a single development that was destined for affordable housing. Clearly, that cannot be seen as a desirable outcome. In his response, can the Minister offer any words of comfort that the Department will look again at the effect of the policy changes on densely populated areas such as my inner-city central London constituency?

The other matter that I want to touch on briefly is offices to homes. The permitted development rights to convert offices into homes have been a high-profile issue, particularly in built-up, central-city areas. I understand that there is a need to boost the supply of affordable housing, particularly in our towns and cities—that is widely accepted across the board. Indeed, it is in precisely such areas, with large volumes of empty or outdated office space, that the measure would seem to be eminently sensible. However, the state of play is clearly very different in a number of the UK’s leading business districts, where applying the permitted development rights would bring some damaging and unintended economic consequences while doing very little to free up residential property within the financial reach of many inhabitants.

When the temporary introduction of permitted development rights was under consideration between 2011 and 2013, compelling evidence was assembled and put forward to show the substantial and significant harm that would be threatened if planning protection for office space in the square mile of the City of London were to be removed. It would come in the form of not only the direct loss of space to housing, but the wider effects that the scattergun introduction of residential units might have on the commercial attractiveness and day-to-day operation of the City as a business centre. When introducing the regulations in 2013, the Government took a lot of that on board and unequivocally accepted that case by exempting the City of London, along with the central business zone of central London, which includes much of my constituency in the southern half of Westminster. The exemption also applies to the office space in certain other parts of urban Britain.

The potential harm from a residential free-for-all in the heart of the business capital has not diminished since 2013. Indeed, the continued growth in London's house prices has rendered it even more potent. Recent figures already show a worrying decline in the availability of office space in the centre of the capital, yet the Government published a consultation last summer proposing to introduce the permitted development rights in permanent form, without the geographical exemptions that currently apply. Will the Minister confirm whether the new regulations will be introduced before the end of this Parliament? Will he undertake that the conversion rights will not be extended to the business district of my constituency without a full assessment of the likely impact on its competitive position? [The City of London](#) corporation and the City of Westminster, to name but two local central London planning authorities, would welcome a further discussion before any irrevocable decisions are made on this matter.

Thank you for allowing me to say a few words, Sir David.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c386WH)



[Roberta Blackman-Woods Shadow Minister \(Communities and Local Government\) 3:06 pm, 5th March 2015](#)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir David. Quite unusually, on Tuesday afternoon, members of the Labour party went through planning issues in this very Chamber. It is interesting that we have returned to business as usual; we seem to have these Thursday afternoon planning debates regularly, at which Government Back Benchers raise planning issues from their constituencies.

I pay tribute to [Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#) for securing this important debate and making a truly excellent speech. I agreed with almost every word. He did an excellent job of pointing out that we should be developing new homes and our communities in line with the wishes of local residents, and that if we have a plan-led system, we should be doing a lot more to ensure that local plans are in place. Indeed, he demonstrated very clearly what happens when a plan is not in place and local communities feel at the mercy of developers because of the presumption in favour of sustainable development. He also made an excellent point about the need to look at resources for planning departments. In a minute or two, I will address many other issues that were well dealt with in the [Communities and Local Government Committee](#)'s report.

[Robert Neill](#) made important points about local authorities grabbing the opportunity to develop a local plan and seeing it as a positive thing, as well as about the need to simplify plan making. I totally agree with him on that. I was pleased that he raised the issue of reforming the compulsory purchase order system, which the [Chancellor](#) indicated he was keen to do some time ago. Will the [Minister](#) say whether he thinks that that is likely to happen in the next few weeks?

[Sir Alan Beith](#) gave an excellent example of what happens to villages or other neighbourhoods when a local plan is not in place. I really agreed about the need to have more transparency, particularly in our land options system, so that local communities know who owns land, who is selling it and at what price. That would be helpful.

[Martin Vickers](#) said we needed good-quality plans that really involve local people. If plan making is done properly, local people should have a say over what the local plan contains. Unfortunately, our experience is that that does not happen as often as it should. There is often a degree of consultation, but not participation, in plan making, and that needs to be reviewed.

I have seen [Fiona Bruce](#) raise [constituency](#) planning issues in this room a number of times. She made a good point about the need to have appropriate infrastructure in place to support additional housing. She said it can be difficult to get community consent if that infrastructure is not there. [Martin Horwood](#) raised an important issue about green spaces. He also raised the problem of getting a designation, which some of us were probably not aware of. I am sure the Minister was listening and will seek to rectify that problem as soon as possible.

As always, [Zac Goldsmith](#) made an excellent case for more localism. He also did a good job of exposing what is wrong with the Government's changes to permitted development rights and use classes—a point taken up by [Mark Field](#), who pointed out the particular challenges emerging in London because of what has happened to section 106. We have therefore heard about lots of issues relevant to the national planning policy framework.

As I indicated earlier, the [Select Committee](#) on Communities and Local Government did us a great service in carrying out its detailed review of the [NPPF](#), which it published at the end of last year. Essentially, it concludes that it will take a number of years for the NPPF to bed in fully, but that there are significant concerns about its operation, which need to be addressed. It argues that we need the system to be adjusted, rather than subjected to a complete overhaul or withdrawn, and I very much concur. I have made it clear since the NPPF became operational in 2013 that the [Opposition](#) are in favour of it; we want to see some tweaks to it, but we would not wish to change it substantially.

The Select Committee set out a number of issues that could be looked at, and it is worth running through them fairly quickly—some were raised by hon. Members, and some were not. [The Committee](#) said that the loss of ancient woodland should be “wholly exceptional”, and it wants that put in the NPPF. It also said that local plans should be simpler and more accessible; hon. Members mentioned that. In addition, it believes that developers' expectations should be set out in the local plan, and that local plans should be reviewed regularly.

The Committee said that all land with planning permission should count towards the five-year land supply; that might help to address some of the issues hon. Members have raised. It also said that where neighbourhood plans support development in the green belt, and where that is supported by local authorities, it should not subsequently be overturned by NPPF considerations, provided that it is part of a local plan. I cannot imagine that that set of circumstances will arise very often, but where they do, that point of view should clearly be taken on board.

The Committee said there should be a more dynamic plan for high streets and town centres. That should sit outwith the local plan, so that high streets are not set in aspic, with it being difficult to make changes; there are frequently changes to retail and changes of use on the high street. The Committee said there is a need to issue new guidance on the timely delivery of infrastructure; that would help the hon. Member for Congleton deal with some of the issues she raised. It also believed that the [Planning Inspectorate](#) should issue a document on the points learned from considering local plans, which would be extremely helpful for councils that have still not adopted a local plan. Furthermore, it said there should be a standard approach in guidance to assessing viability, and that we should have an agreed methodology for assessing housing need.

The Committee made an interesting suggestion, which would help a lot of hon. Members who have raised issues today, when it said there should be provision for the partial adoption of local plans. If significant parts of a local plan are not contested, they could be adopted, leaving more time further down the line to consider other issues. The Committee also said the Government should consult on placing a statutory requirement on councils to have an adopted local plan in place, and the Opposition have committed to that. Again, that would help Members with a number of the issues raised today.

The Committee suggested that the Government consider what incentives might be necessary to support the duty to co-operate, so that it works more effectively. It said that there should be further clarification of the relationship between neighbourhood plans and local plans. [The Opposition](#) have been clear that we want to integrate neighbourhood plans into the plan-making system, so that we start with neighbourhood plans and work up to the local plan, ensuring that neighbourhood plans have the full weight of the local plan system behind them. I would be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that.

The Select Committee thought we should review the sequential test to see whether it gives enough protection to town centres. It said that there should be data on land availability, and that it should be updated. It noted that there should not be changes to section 106 agreements in the way we heard outlined earlier. In particular, we should not have a system where only five section 106 agreements can contribute to a piece of infrastructure. I know nobody who supports that policy, which leads to difficulties funding infrastructure in practice, as the Minister is no doubt aware.

The Committee said additional steps should be taken to promote neighbourhood planning. It thought we should revoke permitted development changes, particularly as regards A1, A2 and [C3](#). It said local authorities should see planning as a front-line service and not target it for cuts. [The Minister](#) will know that huge issues are emerging in the planning system to do with whether local authorities have the capacity to deal with planning applications or, indeed, as the hon. Member for [The Cotswolds](#) said, the resources for ongoing forward plan making. The Committee said the Government should see what they can do to strengthen neighbourhood plans, particularly with regard to engaging developers in the process. As we know from a number of the plans that have been or are being developed, it is difficult to get developer input, but that is vital.

The Committee was therefore very thorough in its review, and it highlighted a number of issues, which we can discuss. However, the Government response to its detailed report was somewhat disappointing, to put it mildly, because it did not really accept any of the recommendations. For the most part, it seemed that one of two answers was given to each recommendation. One type of answer was, “We do not need to do this, because the system is working very well at the moment, thank you,” or “We are doing this already, and we do not need to take on board what the Select Committee says.” I paraphrase, rather than giving the Government’s responses to every recommendation, as those are in the document. Alternatively, the response was “We do not agree.” There were a few warm words about putting a bit more support into neighbourhood planning, and linking that to plan making; but outside that, there was nothing of great significance with respect to making local plans statutory and setting a time scale.

There are five things that the Minister should do in taking on board the issues raised today, and to deal in a more serious way with the issues raised in the report. There should be a statutory requirement to produce a local plan with an accompanying time scale, so that communities are not, for lack of one, left at the mercy of developers and inappropriate development. There should be a review of the resources available to local planning authorities, so that they can deal adequately with planning issues and plan making. There should be a common methodology for assessing housing need, to make comparisons possible between areas. There should be a strong link between neighbourhood and local plans. Even if the Minister does not accept our approach, he should accept the need to clarify the relationship between the two. Lastly, there should be much stronger measures to support brownfield development, including considering what resources can be diverted into reclamation, to give local builders and developers an incentive to build on brownfield rather than greenfield land.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c388WH)



Brandon Lewis Minister of State (Communities and Local Government) 3:22 pm, 5th March 2015

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. As many other hon. Members have done, I congratulate my hon. Friend [Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#) on securing the debate. He outlined key issues in our planning reforms and the national planning policy framework. I intend to deal with specific issues that have been raised, as well as talking more generally, and I hope to cover pretty much every point that has been raised. After all, I have plenty of time, and I thank hon. Members for allowing me that freedom.

I am pleased that the underlying message from pretty much every hon. Member who spoke this afternoon is that, putting everything else aside, we all agree that there is a need for more housing. I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for [The Cotswolds](#) that if we are to deliver more housing, and to be able to continue delivering it in the numbers we want, it is important that those houses are the right ones, designed to a high quality, and built in the right place at the right time.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend and other hon. Members recognise our success in simplifying the planning system. I was a member of the Committee that considered the [Localism Act 2011](#), on which my hon. Friend [Robert Neill](#) was the [Minister](#), along with the current [Minister for Universities, Science and Cities](#), my right hon. Friend [Greg Clark](#). My hon. Friend outlined superbly the importance of the change that has happened whereby some 7,000-plus pages on planning, including the guidance notes, has been reduced to just 50 pages now. That guidance is recommended to all hon. Members wondering what bedtime reading to choose this evening. We achieved that important simplification.

I always find it interesting—that is the best way I can put it, to be as polite as possible—to hear [Opposition](#) Members giving their thoughts about the planning system and pointing out where it does not work. I say that with a wry smile because, having been a councillor for 11 years and a council leader for about half that time, I well remember talking to colleagues across local government—as I do now as a [Local Government Minister](#)—about their frustration at years of top-down control. We talked about the people sent from [Whitehall](#) in a suit telling them what to build, regardless of whether it was appropriate for them. What happened in that period—apart from the financial crash that so heavily hit the building industry and people’s ability to borrow to buy a home—was that a stranglehold was put on planning. That is partly what led to rates of building, when Labour left power, similar to those of 1923. We have had to rebuild from a rate of 80,000-odd homes a year being built under Labour to the present rate of about 150,000. By 2017, as my hon. Friends have mentioned, we will hit 200,000. I lambast Labour for its lack of ambition in saying that it will do that by 2020. We will hit that kind of figure, on our current trajectory, in 2017.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c391WH)



Roberta Blackman-Woods Shadow Minister (Communities and Local Government)

Will the [Minister give way](#)?

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)

- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c392WH)



Brandon Lewis Minister of State (Communities and Local Government)

I want to finish this point. I find it slightly ironic when I hear the hon. Lady talking about how we must link neighbourhood and local planning. In essence that is correct, and I believe in it. However, it comes from a party that was responsible for the top-down system I mentioned, in which there was little local involvement. It is a party whose [shadow Secretary of State](#) wrote to district council leaders last summer to outline some of the things he wanted to do; those who read on to the second page will have realised that he was talking about taking power away from district councils, in particular, and moving back to a more regionally based system. If they did not like it, they would just lose their planning power, effectively.

Of course, the leader of the Labour party has made clear his ideas about what will happen when there is an urban area that wants to build, but it neighbours a rural area without the capacity to take on that development.

The duty to co-operate does not mean that it can take on that capacity; the development will be forced on the rural area. I struggle to see how any area will accept that as true localism. It simply is not. It is going back to a top-down system of control, under which Labour failed to deliver homes year after year for 13 years.

I have sympathy with what [Roberta Blackman-Woods](#) said about ancient woodland. I talked to the [Woodland Trust](#) last week about the importance of environmental development. When I talk about good-quality development, I want it to be clear that we want trees and nature to be part of the environment. I was pleased to hear recently that [Barratt Homes](#) has worked out a deal for a secondment from the [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#), to work with Barratt and make sure that it develops a good environment along with its homes. It is important to move away from the practice of many years of building big housing estates—nice as some are, with lovely homes in them—where there is one area of green in the middle, which, after six months, has a sign saying “No ball games, no children, no looking, no touching.” I say that tongue in cheek, but the reality on some estates is kind of like that. People never get to know their neighbours, because there is no community interaction. An important way to encourage such things is the development of communities where retail space is mixed with residential and commercial space, and with good, usable community space. I am keen for that to happen, as I said earlier this week, in the Ebbsfleet garden city, in Northstowe and in Bicester, which I visited last week to see the development. It is a great way to move forward, and neighbourhood planning can play a part in that.

Hon. Members will appreciate that as a [Minister](#) I have a quasi-judicial role in the planning system, so I cannot comment on specific proposals—a couple have been mentioned today—or individual plans. However, I will cover the issues touched on today in more general terms. We all agree, across the parties, on the importance of getting plans in place. They set the framework in which local decisions should and must be made. The Government have returned power in plan making to the local level wherever possible. As I have said and my hon. Friends have mentioned, we revoked the last Administration’s unpopular and undemocratic regional strategies. We have enabled communities to bring forward neighbourhood plans, the most important and exciting development in planning that has happened in this country in decades.

We have reformed local plan making so that inspectors may propose modifications to a plan only if invited to do so by the council. I must be clear about that, given some of the comments that have been made today. Furthermore, the [NPPF](#) strongly incentivises plan making, encouraging all councils to engage their communities and put plans in place as soon as possible, and to ensure that those plans are kept up to date. Some of my hon. Friends have given examples of frustrations that they have encountered in putting plans in place. It has been a pleasure to hear my hon. Friends talk about some of the issues in their areas. [Cheshire East](#) was mentioned, which I visited in a previous capacity, to attend a public meeting on planning. It was a

wonderful experience, as it always is when I visit the [constituency](#) of my hon. Friend [Fiona Bruce](#) with her. However, I have to say that Cheshire East is an example of somewhere local people are quite right to be frustrated and irritated at the behaviour of their council and its failure to deliver a local plan.

My hon. Friend touched on the fact that Cheshire East council had the support of a retired inspector whom we sent in to work with it. I wish that the council had listened to the advice so that the plan was in a better place. I understand the frustration of residents, bearing in mind that they can look only next door to another local authority that, in the same time frame, has delivered its plan sound and finished. There is no excuse for Cheshire East's failure thus far.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c392WH)



[Geoffrey Clifton-Brown Chair, Committee of Selection](#)

I am delighted to hear what the [Minister](#) is saying about neighbourhood plans. In Cheshire, as in the Cotswolds, a number of communities would love to produce neighbourhood plans, but they are deterred from doing so by the thought that when the local plan is complete their wishes could be overruled, and all that energy and expense that they went to in producing a neighbourhood plan will be wasted. Will he give any encouragement to such communities? I have been encouraging all of them to produce plans, because an adopted neighbourhood plan is a material consideration and can be overruled only for very good reasons.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c394WH)



[Brandon Lewis Minister of State \(Communities and Local Government\)](#)

In short, yes. I will come on to that, but I can very much give my hon. Friend that assurance. Even decisions made in recent months back up the importance of neighbourhood plans and the weight that they carry in the planning system and in law, even if they are moving ahead of a local plan. I will come on to that in some detail.

My hon. Friends the Members for Congleton and for Cleethorpes ([Martin Vickers](#)) made points that highlighted the fact that councillors need to remember that they are there to make decisions; officers are in place to advise and to implement. Councillors need to ensure that they are fully aware of what is being said. I have met a number of councillors and leaders involved in planning over the past year or so who have talked about their local plan or a decision, but when I have met them with their officers it has been clear that they have not read the legislation, the regulations or the report from the inspector. They have simply taken the word of their officers, who have interpreted things in their own way. I stress to councillors who are looking at the transcript of the debate, or listening to us today, that they should take the time to ensure that they understand what is going on and that they give direction to their officers. Councillors are the ones who are elected to make decisions.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c394WH)



[Alan Beith Chair, Justice Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee \(Commons\), Chair, National Policy Statements Sub-Committee](#)

The [Minister](#) is quite right to say that the documents must be read, but if the council is being criticised, as Northumberland has been, for having too many appeals because it acted against the advice of officers, councillors increasingly feel that they ought to keep quiet and not have much to do with things.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c394WH)



[Brandon Lewis Minister of State \(Communities and Local Government\)](#)

Councillors have to make decisions based on planning grounds, but there are good examples—again, [Cheshire East](#) is a good one, but I will talk about others—of areas where there is a feeling that we need to do more to publicise that.

Not that long ago, in Cheshire East, the planning inspectors turned down an appeal against the refusal of a development despite there being no five-year land supply and no local plan. Although the area in question is not green belt, it was turned down on the basis of the importance of the green wedge. Planning inspectors made a decision based on the environment of that area. Members should have some confidence in the fact that the [NPPF](#) is clear about environmental constraints—I will come on to specific examples.

An up-to-date local plan prepared through extensive consultation is the best way to ensure that the right development happens in the right place. Such a plan provides business and communities with greater clarity on how an area will develop. Plan making has significantly improved under this Government. [Only 17%](#) of authorities had a local plan in 2010, but 62% now have one, while 80% have at least published their plan and so are at an advanced stage. My Department continues to offer support to councils on plan making through the [Planning Inspectorate](#) and the Planning Advisory Service. I note the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for [The Cotswolds](#) about having a specific planning inspector to mentor a council. I will consider that further, because he made a strong argument.

To be clear, given that progress, we have no immediate plan to introduce statutory timetables to get local plans in place. Such timetables would lead us into the realms of unintended consequences, with local officers perhaps wanting simply to tick the local plan box, rather than taking the time to get the right local plan for their area. This week, however, I have written to 39 local authorities whose plans are now five years old or more, and I have urged them to continue to make progress on their plan reviews.

Plan making can be challenging, because it involves difficult decisions about how an area will develop in the future and about meeting development needs while protecting sensitive environments and valued green spaces. I have taken on board the points that my hon. Friend [Martin Horwood](#) made on that matter and will get back to him on them, if he will bear with me. That is why it is important that local plans should be supported by a credible and robust evidence base and that a wide range of people should be involved in plan preparation. Plans should be proportionate and accessible, and the framework already strongly supports such objectives.

We do not ask local authorities to build more homes than they need, and we do not tell them how many homes they should build. Our planning guidance recommends the use of a standard methodology to help authorities assess local housing needs, using secondary data sources where possible. However, local

authorities, which are best placed to understand their local needs, are given the ability to decide what approach is appropriate for them, with that understanding of their area.

Policy is absolutely clear that need does not automatically equal supply. I, too, want to be clear about that. Identifying housing need is the first step in the process. Local authorities must then determine whether they have sufficient land to meet that need. In doing so, they are expected to take into account the policies in the framework. In effect, stage 1 is the need, unencumbered by policy, and stage 2 is about policy and environmental constraints, as clearly outlined in the NPPF. Again, I stress that councillors should make themselves aware of all of the NPPF, not only the odd paragraph that their officers might sometimes drive them towards. For example, national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty have a high status of protection in recognition of their landscape and scenic beauty. The Government attach the highest importance to the protection of green belt. Our new guidance in October last year re-emphasised that importance, adding that the presence of constraints might limit the ability of planning authorities to meet their needs.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c394WH)



[Laurence Robertson Chair, Northern Ireland Affairs Committee](#)

The [Minister](#) is making an extremely important point. Some local authorities, however—this is happening in our joint core strategy area—will redesignate the green belt when submitting their local plan or the [JCS](#), so that it is not green belt any more. If that is not a contravention of Government policy, I do not know what is. Can nothing be done about that?

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c396WH)



[Brandon Lewis Minister of State \(Communities and Local Government\)](#)

My hon. Friend makes an important point. A key consideration is that it should not be up to us in Westminster to decide what is important to the local area; it is up to the local council. We have put the protections in place—we have made it clear that development on green belt should be exceptional and the last resort, and even then should be carried out only with great care and consideration. If local authorities make a green belt area a developable piece of land, they should do so only as part of a full review and a local plan process. Indeed, there are examples of inspectors turning down such work if there is not a strong evidence base to show why the local authority wants it. So green belt should be redesignated only in exceptional circumstances and as a last resort. Furthermore, the [NPPF](#) notes green belt as one of the environmental constraints on development in the framework and local planning process.

A core principle of the framework is that planning authorities should recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of their countryside. The characteristics of different landscape and the importance of ensuring that development is suitable for the local context should be recognised. As my hon. Friends have mentioned this afternoon, much countryside is loved and cherished by local communities. I acknowledge such concerns, and I will write to the [Planning Inspectorate](#) setting out publicly how the existing policy should operate, to ensure that it is fully understood not only by the inspectorate, but—to go back to my earlier point—by councils and councillors as well.

I want to be clear that weight can be applied to emerging plans, particularly when they are at an advanced stage. However, it would be wrong to give draft or emerging plans the same status and weight as finished plans that have been examined. Otherwise, what will be the incentive to finish the local plan and get it examined before the community? Decisions based on untested draft plans could have lasting and potentially damaging impacts on communities and the environment.

Our policy strikes a careful balance between affording draft plans some weight and ensuring that local authorities continue to move forward and bring plans to examination and completion. However, given the concerns expressed today, I will write to the Planning Inspectorate to ensure that that position and the different weighting given to plans as they develop are fully understood.

I fully agree that planning departments should have the resources they need to plan effectively, a point made by Members including the hon. Member for City of Durham. Councils must give planning the priority it needs, as effective planning is vital for supporting sustainable growth in the right locations. A local authority should see its planning department as its economic regeneration department. Local authorities are now benefiting from the fact that we increased planning application fees by 15% in [November 2012](#), which has provided an additional £32 million per annum for planning services—we often forget that. That comes on top of the fact that under this Government, local authorities have increased their reserves to some £21 billion, a record level.

Good councils and councillors will realise that planning is the heartbeat of economic regeneration on two levels. First, if they want to see growth in jobs, business and homes, they will need a good local plan that looks not just at residential planning but at commercial and retail planning—neighbourhood plans can also look at those types of planning—and works as part of a process that is well planned and well thought through. That is good for communities, as it means a growth in the number of homes, and also provides facilities for job growth. It is also good for the finances of local authorities, because of the new retained business rates scheme and the new homes bonus scheme, both of which reward councils financially. Planning should be at the heart of a local authority, and there is an onus on authorities to think more about how they ensure that they have those resources. Where possible, they should work together to share resources and specialists—that is particularly important for the small district councils we see in some parts of the country—as they have done on the shared management of other types of services.

I will now touch on neighbourhood planning in a little detail; it has been mentioned a few times today, and I said that I would do so in answer to the [intervention](#) by my hon. Friend the Member for [The Cotswolds](#). Neighbourhood planning is one of the most exciting innovations of this Government's localism agenda. It was established to devolve power from central Government not just to local councils but directly to communities and the individuals living in them—a real devolution of power. For the first time, community groups can produce development plans that carry real weight in the planning system. That allows them to play a much more powerful role in shaping the future of the areas in which they live and work.

A neighbourhood plan can include policies on where new homes should go, what they should look like, what green spaces to protect and how high streets should be saved. Just today, I visited [Milton Keynes](#), where there is a business neighbourhood plan. It is an exciting, adventurous and ambitious proposal that will go to a referendum on 7 May. I am not saying that will be the biggest ballot that people will be voting in that day in Milton Keynes, but I think it will probably have the biggest turnout of any referendum on a neighbourhood plan. Neighbourhood plans have been so well received that we are seeing turnouts in the referendums of about 33%. That is quite an achievement—many local councils would like that kind of turnout in elections—and highlights how people have really taken to neighbourhood planning. More than 6 million people are now covered by a neighbourhood planning process.

My hon. Friend commented that in his [constituency](#), neither Cotswold district council nor Stroud district council has an adopted local plan. I recognise that it may be more challenging to produce a neighbourhood plan where there is no up-to-date local plan in place. Other Members have made that point. I will be clear: in

those circumstances, a made neighbourhood plan can provide some certainty in areas where there is otherwise an absence of up-to-date policy. We have witnessed that in Arun, Chichester and [Mid Sussex](#), where neighbourhood plans have come into force where there is no up-to-date local plan and the new local plan is still emerging.

Local authorities should be working with all communities that are developing neighbourhood plans to ensure that there is effective linking up between local and neighbourhood plans. Good councils are doing exactly that, with help from Government funding. Where a neighbourhood plan has been made, the local planning authority should take it into account when preparing the local plan strategy and policies, to avoid duplicating non-strategic policies set out in the neighbourhood plan.

More than 1,400 communities in England have already grasped the new power and begun preparing their own neighbourhood plan, including eight in my hon. Friend's constituency. As I said, that means that the plans are covering 6.1 million people across the country, which is 11% of the population. I want to get to the other 89%, so that plans are rolled out and we share best practice. That is why I was delighted that this week I was able to host the first of our neighbourhood planning summits, to bring together people who have delivered a neighbourhood plan and seen its benefits, how rewarding it is and the power it gives. It is not just that the neighbourhood can then benefit from 25% of the community infrastructure levy to spend locally; neighbourhood planning gives communities power over planning in a way that we have never seen localised before.

Neighbourhood planning referendums have been successful partly because people are beginning to understand just how rewarding the plans can be and how powerful they are for developing their local area. As a result, the referendums are getting not only a 33% average turnout—although as I have said, the referendum at Milton Keynes on the day of the [general election](#) may see that figure go up a little bit—but an amazing average yes vote of 88%. I know that many Members would like that kind of recognition at the ballot box. Six referendums are taking place today.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c396WH)



[Geoffrey Clifton-Brown Chair, Committee of Selection](#)

The longer my hon. Friend's speech goes on, the better I like it. In addition to his writing to the [Planning Inspectorate](#), may I urge him to write to the leaders of all planning authorities about the importance of neighbourhood plans? I have a suspicion that some, including some fairly close to home, are not overly supportive of the plans. I would like to see my local authorities fully supporting neighbourhood plans.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c398WH)



[Brandon Lewis Minister of State \(Communities and Local Government\)](#)

I am happy to do that. As ever, my hon. Friend makes a good point, and, if Members will indulge me for a moment, I will give a good example why. It concerns making sure that we spread best practice—something that we in this country could sometimes do better, particularly in local government. Sometimes we are too shy of talking about what we do and how well it is working. Some areas are doing some really ambitious and adventurous things with neighbourhood planning.

Neighbourhood planning is proving that we are not a country of nimbys, because it is delivering housing. The system of trusting local people to make good local decisions has just delivered an almost record level of housing planning application approvals. Some 240,000 applications were approved over the last 12-month period. That is testament to local people making good, well thought-out and well reasoned decisions for their local area.

When I spoke at the inaugural neighbourhood planning summit on Monday, celebrating the success of neighbourhood planning, I outlined and explained the following case. Last summer, I spoke to some parish councillors about the importance of neighbourhood planning and how to do it. Those parish councillors got very irate; they explained to me that as I was a Westminster politician, I did not understand that they had done all that locally and that, actually, neighbourhood planning had no weight in law. Someone, somewhere had told them that—in one case, it was a council officer. I had to explain to those people that what they had was a village plan. In one case, it was a nice 21-page document with half a page on housing, half of which was a photograph of a nice house in the village. That is not a neighbourhood plan. I also had to explain that neighbourhood plans have weight in law.

Neighbourhood planning is not the easiest thing a community will ever do, but it is rewarding. There has to be a robust process because it has weight in law. Communities that are making neighbourhood plans are seeing benefits—not only the 25% of the community infrastructure levy that they get, or the fact that they have power and involvement in decision making about planning. It is bringing people together and getting them involved in their communities in a way that, in many areas, they have never been involved before. All of us, including councillors across the country, know that a planning issue brings a community together in one way or another more quickly than anything else. We cannot put a price on the social value of getting people to come together in their community. It is one of the most powerful things to have come from neighbourhood planning.

On Monday, I was pleased to outline the Government's ongoing commitment to supporting, simplifying and improving neighbourhood planning, which includes a new £22.5 million support programme. Neighbourhood planning is here to stay. Under a Conservative Government, it will not go away but will continue to develop. We will continue to build on it, and I want to make it as simple and robust as possible. I want to encourage local communities across the country to get involved. It is easy for them to find out more about it. Plenty of areas that have done it are keen to share their good experience.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c398WH)



[Geoffrey Clifton-Brown Chair, Committee of Selection](#)

I am sure that my hon. Friend the [Minister](#) is aware of this, but I want to refer to something that my neighbour, [Martin Horwood](#), mentioned. The very good Gloucestershire rural community council will give excellent advice to any parish or town council about how to formulate a neighbourhood plan. That sort of collective working in a county as big as Gloucestershire is a thoroughly good thing.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c399WH)



[Brandon Lewis Minister of State \(Communities and Local Government\)](#)

My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Government have been working to roll out a series of workshops around the country to enable people to come together to hear about the benefit and value of neighbourhood planning from people who have done it. There was one not long ago in Norwich, in my county of Norfolk. Broadland district council has done some fantastic work in supporting the local community. I see examples of it everywhere. At the summit on Monday, Broadland district council offered to talk to other areas—even those outside Broadland—about the benefits of neighbourhood planning, and about how to do it and how to move it forward in a straightforward way.

The issue of speculative development has been raised a couple of times today. Members touched on the community right of appeal, which we went into in some detail in our debate a few weeks ago, so I would encourage Members to look at that transcript. Where local authorities do not have an up-to-date local plan or policies, the presumption in favour of sustainable development applies. However, that does not mean development at any cost. Speculative development is not acceptable if it is not sustainable development. Decision makers are required to consider all aspects of sustainable development, including the economic, social and environmental aspects, and inspectors do that.

I will give some examples of recent appeals that demonstrate that inspectors sometimes find that development is unacceptable even in the absence of an up-to-date local plan. That relates to my point about making councillors more aware of the decisions that are actually being made. It is important to remember that the proportion of decisions that are made on appeal by a planning inspector against a council's decision has not changed in a long time—it is still about 1%—which shows that, in that sense, the system works.

We will not necessarily prevent developers from doing what they do, which is to try to get something developed, if they think it is profitable for them. However, if there is an up-to-date local plan in place, and especially if there is an up-to-date neighbourhood plan in place, and a developer wants to do something outside those plans, unless it has the support and agreement of the community that should be the hardest thing they ever try to do. It should be pretty much impossible to achieve.

For example, in [Aylesbury Vale](#), appeals against applications for several thousand homes were recommended for refusal only last month, and the recommendations were upheld by the [Secretary of State](#). Despite the lack of a five-year housing land supply, an inspector considered that the proposals would have had an adverse impact on the character and appearance of the landscape, and were not supported adequately by sustainable transport provision. In Chichester, an inspector concluded that a proposed development of 110 homes would be “mediocre” and “unimaginative”, and therefore contrary to the requirements of the framework. Those are just a couple of examples.

I will ensure that we do more to publicise recent cases more widely to reassure councils that unsustainable development can be resisted. I will also ask the Planning

Advisory Service to work with local authorities to ensure that our message is clearly understood. The framework does not stand for development at any cost. It promotes positive planning and sustainable, good-quality development.

I am also aware of the many concerns of local authorities that consider that they have to waste considerable time and resources in defending challenges to their housing supply. We will therefore issue new guidance to clarify the operation of the five-year housing land supply, which will give local authorities greater confidence in resisting challenges to their evidence, if they have prepared it appropriately.

I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friends that the provision of timely and robust infrastructure is vital to delivering sustainable development. National policy and guidance already set out clear expectations for securing infrastructure provision in the planning process. Local authorities already have a range of legislative tools to deliver that in a timely and transparent manner. Furthermore, the cumulative impact of

development and the need for infrastructure to support development are material considerations in deciding whether individual applications should be approved. I hope councillors will make themselves aware of that.

My hon. Friends the Members for [Richmond Park \(Zac Goldsmith\)](#) and for [Cities of London and Westminster \(Mark Field\)](#) raised issues about the section 106 changes, permitted development rights and the Government's recent consultation, to which we will respond shortly. The vacant building credit applies to non-residential buildings, and the relief is intended to reflect the often high costs of conversion and refurbishment that are associated with bringing existing buildings back into use. One of the points that I would have made to Westminster council, if it had contacted us directly—I have said this elsewhere—is that the buildings were vacant, so the authority's argument that it is losing money does not stack up. The buildings are not currently in use and are not proposed to be used for anything. Therefore, they are new, fresh opportunities for residential use. However, I will write to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster with full details about how the process works, and I am happy to meet him and/or the local authority to go through the issues. On the issue of permitted development rights, he is right that there have been exemptions for parts of London.

On the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park about section 106, I will say two things. First, I have a great deal of sympathy with the arguments. We looked at that issue as part of the consultation, and I will deal with it when we respond. I am sympathetic to why the exemptions were put in place, and I understand their importance for the strategic commercial work spaces that we have in London. That is why those protections were introduced. I appreciate that there is a strong argument that nothing has changed.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c400WH)



[**Zac Goldsmith Conservative, Richmond Park**](#)

I do not know the stats for Westminster, but in Richmond the [majority](#) of the units that have been converted so far have not been empty. They were occupied by businesses that were pushed out by artificially raised rents to achieve exactly that outcome, so what the [Minister](#) says is not strictly speaking correct.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c401WH)



[**Brandon Lewis Minister of State \(Communities and Local Government\)**](#)

I would gently say to my hon. Friend that he should not conflate two different things. When I was talking about vacant properties, I was talking about the vacant building credits, to which my hon. Friend the Member for [Cities of London and Westminster](#) referred. My hon. Friend the Member for [Richmond Park](#) is referring to section 106 agreements that cover office-to-residential conversions, which is a different development right. I appreciate that there is a difference between the two. If local authorities think there is a specific issue in an area, they can use article 4 directions to deal with that. However, I will take my hon. Friend's points on board.

I am extremely grateful for the forthright debate that we have had today.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)

- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c402WH)



[Alan Beith Chair, Justice Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee \(Commons\), Chair, National Policy Statements Sub-Committee](#)

I appreciate that the [Minister](#) may not be able to respond on how Northumberland is to deal with the criticisms that have been made of its planning department, but can I have his assurance that he will write to me about that?

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c402WH)



[Brandon Lewis Minister of State \(Communities and Local Government\)](#)

Yes. Part of the reason why I cannot comment on any particular plan is because of the quasi-judicial process, but I will make sure my officials liaise with the right hon. Gentleman.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c402WH)



[Fiona Bruce Conservative, Congleton](#)

I sense that the [Minister](#) is about to reach his peroration. I would like to return to the issue that my hon. Friend [Zac Goldsmith](#) and I raised. [The Minister](#) of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend [Mr Hayes](#) committed to issuing new planning guidance when we withdrew our [amendment](#) on 26 January. When the Minister said that new guidance would be issued, was that the guidance that he was referring to, and, if so, what is the time frame?

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c402WH)



[Brandon Lewis Minister of State \(Communities and Local Government\)](#)

Before I respond to that, I see that my hon. Friend the Member for [Cities of London and Westminster](#) wishes to intervene. Let me take that [intervention](#), then I will deal with both issues together.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c402WH)



[Mark Field Conservative, Cities of London and Westminster](#)

I was keen to get some guidance and, hopefully, assurance from the [Minister](#) on the exemptions that are in place. Is his Department now keen to sweep away all exemptions regardless, or given the still uncertain economic times in which we live, is there an understanding that there is still a need to ensure—particularly in central business districts, such as the City of London, parts of Westminster and the royal borough of [Kensington and Chelsea](#)—that we do not have a rush towards developments that turn vital office space into residential space for short-term economic reasons?

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c402WH)



[Brandon Lewis Minister of State \(Communities and Local Government\)](#)

As we have not yet responded to the consultation, it would be presumptuous of me to give my hon. Friend a direct answer stating exactly what we are doing. However, the exemptions were put in place for a very good reason. The case was made at the time, and that is why they were there.

I have sympathy for the point made in some corners—my hon. Friend has said this today—that nothing has changed, and that the exemptions will still be important. We have always said, as I have openly and publicly, that we recognise the strategic importance of office space in some parts of London in particular. I go a bit further actually; I spoke at a conference some months ago and gave the examples of the City of London, and, I think, [Canary Wharf](#), as areas in which the exemption applies, and the logic of that continuing to apply is very strong. I did say that they were just examples, yet a story came out in the press the following day saying that only those two places would be getting the exemptions.

My point is this: again, I understand why the exemptions are there. I appreciate and have sympathy for the case that has been made, which is that those exemptions still have the same validity today as they did then, but my hon. Friend will have to wait for us to respond to that consultation. I am very happy to meet him and any representatives from the City of London or elsewhere in his [constituency](#) who would like to see us about it. I have spoken to the Mayor's office—we have been working with them on this—and I am very happy to meet representatives from the City of London as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton asked about guidance. In terms of time lines, any guidance we put out will be in the next few weeks, so she can have some confidence that it is relatively imminent; she was quite right.

Much as my hon. Friend the Member for [The Cotswolds](#) tempts me with his comments that the longer I speak, the more he enjoys it, I shall not keep hon. Members too much longer. I thank hon. Members for their strong, thoughtful and forthright comments today about planning reforms, and for their compliments, not only on the meetings we have had, but on the work done by Ministers over the last few years to make sure that we have a planning system that people can understand and be involved in. Those are gratefully received. The operation of the framework and that recognition, from several Members, cross-party, is testament to the work that was put in just a few years ago.

It is too early to assess fully the benefits and impacts, but we are seeing real benefits across our country, not only in the planning permissions that are coming through, but in the change in the acceptance of development. Recent surveys show a massive increase in people's acceptance of development and their happiness with it. That is a good thing. There is a real onus on developers to make sure that they are building with good-quality design to continue that work. However, I also appreciate that alongside our wider reforms, the framework is delivering real results. We are seeing positive economic growth as part of the long-term economic plan, while retaining the environmental safeguards that have long been part of our country's planning system, and that protect what we cherish and want to continue to enjoy.

- [Link to this speech In context Individually](#)

- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c402WH)



Geoffrey Clifton-Brown Chair, Committee of Selection 4:03 pm, 5th March 2015

May I thank you, Sir David, and [Mr Turner](#) for so graciously chairing today's superb debate? I wish the public saw more such debates on technical, difficult subjects. Ten colleagues participated in it, and if the public saw more of the working of Parliament, I think they would hold us in higher regard.

I thank all the Clerks and the *Hansard* Reporters, and I thank [Roberta Blackman-Woods](#) for her gracious remarks to me. She said a very important thing in welcoming the introduction of the [NPPF](#). That remark will be widely welcomed around the country, because that gives us certainty in the planning system, which is really important.

I repeat what I said about my hon. Friend the [Minister](#). I am incredibly grateful to him for being here, because I know he has a busy schedule. Some of his remarks today were incredibly important, in particular those on neighbourhood plans. They will be heard widely around the county and will give a big fillip to communities, so that tomorrow more of them may consider whether they could introduce a neighbourhood plan. I warmly welcome the Minister's offer to write to the [Planning Inspectorate](#) and leaders of local authorities to clarify certain matters relating to local plans, such as the weight to be given to them and to the five-year housing supply, as mentioned by my hon. Friend [Fiona Bruce](#).

I also pay warm tribute to [Sir Alan Beith](#). As [Martin Horwood](#) said, this might be my last opportunity to do that. His contribution to the House over the past 40 years has been immense. I have enjoyed working with him on the [Liaison Committee](#), where I have seen at close hand the quality work that he does.

All in all, this has been a thoroughly good debate. I will say just one final thing to the Minister: he could not say this today, but I stress again that those authorities that do not have a local plan need to be given a bigger stick.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting adjourned.

- Link to this speech [In context Individually](#)
- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 5 March 2015, c404WH)

[All Westminster Hall debates on 5 Mar 2015](#)

TheyWorkForYou lets you find out what your MP, MSP or MLA is doing in your name, read debates, written answers, see what's coming up in Parliament, and sign up for email alerts when there's past or future activity on someone or something you're interested in.

This website is run by [mySociety](#), the project of a [registered charity](#). If you find it useful, please [donate](#) to keep it running.

STAY UP TO DATE

Insights on TheyWorkForYou and other mySociety sites, in our popular newsletter

Leave this box empty:

Follow us

ABOUT

- [Help - Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [About us](#)
- [Link to us](#)
- [House rules](#)
-
- [News](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)

PARLIAMENTS & ASSEMBLIES

- [UK Parliament](#)
- [Scottish Parliament](#)
- [Northern Ireland Assembly](#)
- [Welsh Assembly](#)

DEVELOPERS

- [Source code](#)
- [API](#)
- [Raw Data](#)
- [Pombola](#)
- [Developer mailing list](#)
- [IRC chat channel](#)

INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

- [New Zealand](#)
- [Australia](#)
- [Ireland](#)
- [Mzalendo](#)