

## The Rt Hon Greg Clark MP

### Minister of State

Minister for Decentralisation and Cities

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## Local Planning for Sustainable Development

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*Draft text of the speech - may differ from the delivered version.*

It's a privilege to be here today and to follow in the illustrious footsteps of those who have given this lecture in the past.

The spirit of the CPRE is people's sense of connection to the place where they live. By and large people live where they do by choice, and they love where they live. They understand local life. They want to make their homes and neighbourhoods better places, not for the short term, but in a way that benefits people for years to come.

This same insight is at the heart of many of the reforms that this Government is making. What we would call localism shapes our approach to a whole range of different areas of policy. In a sense, your timing today is impeccable. I have just come from the House of Commons, and will be going back there very shortly to continue discussion with my parliamentary colleagues about the Localism Bill.

This is a landmark piece of legislation. It marks a break with a tradition that has endured for many years, and through different political administrations, where central government has passed new laws principally in order to draw more powers to itself. It did this with the best of intentions - thinking that taking power centrally - distilling a vision of 'best practice' and promulgating it more widely - is the most effective way to solve social problems, promote local growth and make public services perform better.

But there's a growing consensus in many different places that we've reached the point of diminishing returns of this approach. There's a growing acceptance of the importance of another tradition - of giving people a voice, letting them express their passion for an area, and granting free rein to their enthusiasm to do things for their community. And there's a new acknowledgement that too great a measure of central control can actually be corrosive, dispiriting the people who most want to play their part in improving local life.

With the Localism Bill, we're turning things around. Instead of hoarding power, we're giving it away. The Bill will cut red tape, introduce new rights for communities, and give local councils a degree of discretion unparalleled in the modern age. It will put real influence in the hands of local people. It will help them do things their way; make public services do what they want; shape the future of their neighbourhood as they want to see it. In a parliamentary session with many measures designed to put power back where it belongs, the Localism Bill is the single most radical measure, the keystone in the arch.

Among its major reforms, the Bill introduces profound changes to Britain's planning system - the area which has always been CPRE's priority.

An excess of central command and prescription has contributed to three major flaws with the system as it stands.

First, we built fewer new homes last year than in any year since the 1920s, bar the Second World War. At the same time, the rate of household formation is increasing. More people are choosing to live in smaller households. There is a great aspiration among young people to establish themselves independently, yet the age of first time buyers continues to rise. And waiting lists for social housing have grown significantly over recent years.

The second flaw is the impact on business. Businesses, domestic and overseas, often cite the current planning system as a barrier to growth and an impediment to inward investment in this country. We have a system that is slow to deliver development, and that can only be navigated with the help of costly specialist and legal advice. This is acting as a brake on the country's economic success.

The third flaw is the level of antagonism and heat in the system, which seems to have risen inexorably over recent years. It follows from a situation where people feel that they have little choice and little opportunity to influence planning decisions in a positive manner. When it has seemed to them to be the only avenue to express themselves, perhaps it is understandable that some people have felt inclined simply to say "no." This has left us in a disastrous situation. In some places, the assumption has taken root that any new building will be damaging, and that all development is bad. In some places there seems to be a culture of resistance to the very idea of development.

This goes against all our traditions. Our built environment has been a source of incalculable pleasure and benefit for generations. This city's great buildings, bridges and towers attract millions of visitors each year from the world over. In rural areas, the interplay of natural beauty and human stewardship has made this country's landscapes the envy of the world. I want us to be able to be proud of our built environment.

Let me be explicit: I am pro-growth and pro-development. Not any old growth - not slapdash, not gimcrack, not jerry-building. Not growth without care for the areas of peace and beauty that people love and value most. That's why we made the commitment in the Coalition Agreement to protect the

Green Belt. And that's why we intend to introduce a new designation whereby local people can protect the green areas that are most important to local life. I intend to set out to parliament our proposals for how that new designation might work very soon.

But I am in favour of, and want to see more of, properly planned, properly managed, locally-supported growth - well sited, well designed; meeting the right environmental standards; and in tune with what local people want. Our proposals are designed not to hamper development, but to unlock and encourage the right kind of development.

Faced with the shortcomings in the current system, there is a choice. You can tinker with the details - smooth an edge here, iron out an inefficiency there. Or you can reflect on the underlying causes of the difficulties, and take fundamental action to address them.

The Bill addresses two principal causes of the shortcomings with the current planning system. The first is to do with power. In recent years, the planning system has, in my view, come to rely far too strongly on elements of central prescription. Take Regional Spatial Strategies, with their housing targets. Perhaps it's a basic human characteristic, or perhaps it's a national trait, but people do not like being told what to do. They kick back. The result of housing targets has been not to get more homes built, but to create a stand-off between the people promoting the numbers from a regional office and the people on the ground who have to live with the consequences.

Conversely, cooperation and close involvement with local communities helps make sure that the right kind of development goes ahead: development that is sensitive to local people's needs and concerns, and their desire to protect what makes their home special. The principle of working closely with local people is embraced by environmental groups and developers alike. At Committee, Adrian Penfold of British Land said this:

"The best situations are where we work with local authorities and communities to get around the feelings of imposition, and developments happen."

A second cause of the problems in the current system is the fact that too often, local communities do not see the benefits of growth. New development is not accompanied by the vitally needed investment in infrastructure - in schools, transport, hospitals, parks and other amenities - to reflect new demands. It should come as no surprise that communities are reluctant to see new building in their area when they have no sense of ownership and feel they bear the brunt of the costs without proper recognition or support.

The Bill addresses both of these root causes. It gets rid of Regional Spatial Strategies and their housing targets, and I think there's increasingly widespread support for this. It introduces a requirement on developers planning large projects to consult local people before they make a planning application, as the best already do, so that communities can have a say at an early stage while plans are still fluid; meaningful input, rather than "take it or leave it." And the Bill introduces - in

the form of neighbourhood planning - a radical new means for people to take control, at a more local level than ever before, of the look and feel of the places where they live. All of these measures are intended to give people genuine choices and the opportunity to make decisions for themselves.

The Bill also introduces reform to ensure that local people feel the benefits of local development. In consultation on the New Homes Bonus, we're proposing that local authorities who take responsibility for encouraging development should be appropriately recognised, with six years of matched council tax for each new home. We estimate that this might be worth, on average, around £10,000 per new home. In the Bill itself, we're also proposing reform of the community infrastructure levy, so that a meaningful proportion of the cash raised from a charge on new development is passed directly to the very local community - that, is the people who live next door or down the road for the new estate or offices.

These are real reasons to say "yes" to development. But they must be seen in the context of a planned system.

I have the greatest respect for planning as a profession. We want to restore the place of planning as a unique form of service for the community and a noble calling. Too often, today, planning officers are caught in the crossfire between regional targets and local opposition. I want them to have the space and opportunity to get on with what called them to the profession in the first place - the chance to work with communities, to think for the long term, to create distinctive places.

Planning is also about creating the right conditions for economic success - because well-designed places represent a far better use of money, public and private. People are more likely to want to live in and invest in well-designed places than poorly-designed ones.

And planning is, at heart, a civilised enterprise. With the extraordinary natural and historic heritage around us, with our desire to grow, and with our commitment to taking responsibility for our impact on the environment, it's vital to have means of mediating between different needs and imperatives that is organised and transparent and fair.

So I want to say thank you to CPRE. We wouldn't have the planning system as we know it today without the CPRE decades of advocacy, firing up the grass roots, and encouraging and challenging political leaders.

The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, whose broad principles still inform great elements of the current and future system, owes a tremendous debt to the Campaign's way of thinking. Decades later, you helped swing the debate to "put plans first" through the 1990 Act. And after 85 years, you continue to be an essential voice in debate. I'm greatly encouraged that in many instances your concerns and the Government's coincide.

With "Planning for People", back in 1999, you galvanised the debate about how best to involve communities in planning, putting them "at the heart of decisions which affect their quality of life" - the essence of the Big Society a good decade before that phrase was coined. In 2006, you argued that it was time to end the unnecessary, meddlesome and ugly intrusion of clutter in our streets and countryside - our Secretary of State and the Transport Secretary could not agree more, and last summer signalled their desire for a return to straightforward, clear signage, and no more of it than is needed.

Today, I welcome the constructive role that the CPRE are playing in debate about the Bill. Shaun [Spiers, CPRE Chief Executive] was kind enough to give evidence at the Committee the other week, and it was encouraging to hear him say that the Campaign "overwhelmingly support" the Bill as a whole. Not without qualification, and not without a desire to test the detail of proposals, of course.

Shaun raised, for example, the third party right of appeal. This was an idea floated in consultation documents by both political parties currently in government before the last election. We have looked at it long and hard as we have pulled this Bill together, and come to the conclusion that we want, in essence, to be more ambitious.

The thrust of our proposals is to put decisions first. To get to an approach that is much more consensual and less acrimonious. To push for plans that are properly and comprehensively thought through, with the active involvement and participation of local people. We want a system that is genuinely about thinking for the long term about an area's future needs, and not "development control" - saying "yes" or "no" individual applications piecemeal.

Now, given that is where we want to get to, it seems paradoxical to give communities the right to challenge development that is consistent with the plans that they themselves have debated and agreed on. It would be to assume we would fail, and to plan for that failure.

But this measure is the exception rather than the rule - in as much as with most of the rest of the Bill, the differences between us are, by and large, more about detail than about principle.

We both agree that planning enforcement rules need to be tightened up, so that when communities make decisions about what should happen in their area, they can be confident that those decisions will be respected, and that it will be much easier for communities to enforce their choices with greater muscularity.

Or take the importance of sustainable development. We both agree that it is vital to require development to be sustainable - setting the bar in such a way that allows for growth, but that demands growth be properly managed, consistent with plans, and compliant with environmental standards. This idea will be at the heart of the National Planning Policy Framework.

The topic I want to say a little more about today is neighbourhood plans. I welcome very much the support that CPRE have given to the principle of putting power in the hands of local people, and giving them the opportunity to have a say over the look and feel of the places where they live.

Neighbourhood planning will be a very powerful tool. If local people's decisions are confirmed by a simple majority in a local referendum, then the local authority will be required to respect them and give them effect.

Our proposals have much in common with many of the points raised in your charter for planning reform, and in your joint work with Civic Voice from last November.

You called for an important role for parishes: in many places, we envisage that parishes will be best placed to lead the local debate.

You said that neighbourhood plans should be relevant everywhere: we think that they are just as applicable to urban areas as to rural ones, and in cities local people will be able to make common cause through a neighbourhood forum.

But you also raised a number of questions about how, exactly, these proposals would work. And, if you'll allow me, I would like to give some reassurance.

You asked - how will local groups be able to access support and advice to produce high-quality, workable plans? There are two parts to our answer on this. The first is that we start from the assumption that if you give people their head, and the space to make their own decisions, they are more than capable of being imaginative, rational, careful and kind. An assumption that people can't cope for themselves is at the root of centralism and a surefire starting point for designing a system that will imprison, not liberate, initiative and enthusiasm.

But we also recognise that planning can call for complex technical assessments and specialist skills. Local authorities will be under a duty to provide support to communities who want to do neighbourhood planning. As this would represent a new burden on authorities, at a time of constrained budgets, we would be providing appropriate support. We also know that some communities will want to call on independent advice, including on how you get people enthused, reach different parts of the community, or express complex ideas simply. We have invited charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups to bid for a share of funding, worth £3m a year for the next two years - so that that independent advice will be there when it's needed.

You asked - where do neighbourhood plans fit in with other plans? Neighbourhood plans pass unprecedented influence and power to a very local level. Let's be clear, though, that they are not an entirely blank slate. The legislation makes clear that we expect neighbourhood plans to be consistent with strategic elements of local plan, including the need for economic development. (And by the way this makes it even more important for local authorities who have been dragging their heels in

producing their own plans to get a move on.) Put plainly: if there's a pressing need for more houses in the wider local area, neighbourhood planning isn't a means for a particular parish to refuse any development altogether. If there is a piece of nationally important infrastructure due to be sited in the area, as decided by democratically accountable Ministers, then neighbourhood plans are not a means to block it.

But within these parameters, there is very wide discretion about what plans can do and say - the level of detail they can go into, and how comprehensive local people choose to make them. For example - they can, if they wish, give permission for more development than is envisaged under the local authority's plan. In some rural areas, for example, we know that communities may be keen to smooth the way for discrete and clearly defined small amounts of increased housing. And I think they are more likely to do this when they have the reassurance of proper recognition and support.

The third question you ask is - how can we make the process of neighbourhood planning as open, democratic and jargon-free as possible? I start like you from the conviction that, wherever possible, public bodies should speak plainly. It behoves a Government committed to putting power in people's hands to explain in clear terms how they can get involved.

It boggles the mind that we have a set of planning guidance, policy, circulars and statements longer than the Complete Works of Shakespeare. As we review and improve that policy and guidance - with the aim of producing a single, shorter document setting out the Government's priorities for the planning system - we will want to make it clearer and more straightforward too.

So, too, with neighbourhood planning, I am absolutely clear that it must be implemented in a way that makes it easy for people to get involved. I agree with the Campaign that in due course it will be vital to have an explanation of neighbourhood planning that is written in very simple, plain English. But what's clear is that there are many places and people who are already keen to get on and do it, and this hugely encouraging. Given CPRE's understanding of the grass roots, your skills at mobilising people, and your long track record of talking sense on planning, I believe this can represent a significant opportunity for you.

I began by saying the Localism Bill is the keystone of our legislative proposals to put power in local people's hands. Neighbourhood planning is a flagship measure in that Bill. Your members' expertise and experience could help enthuse, inform and inspire local communities about the new opportunities that will be opening up for them. I very much hope that we will be able to continue to work together in the months to come.