



Campaign to Protect
Rural England

Parliamentary News: September 2007

Planning and housing: a challenging agenda for the new Government

Gordon Brown's first weeks in Number 10 have seen a flurry of announcements with implications for the countryside. It is perhaps no surprise that planning reform and housing are high on the list of the new Prime Minister's concerns. The former was a priority for Mr Brown as Chancellor, when he commissioned the economist Kate Barker to look at the planning system and make proposals for reform. Her recommendations have played a significant role in shaping the Planning White Paper, and will no doubt also be reflected in a Planning Reform Bill later this year. Housing has become an ever more politically salient issue, with growing concerns about affordability and supply.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) has a keen interest in both of these areas of policy. Let's begin with the positives. We welcomed key aspects of the Prime Minister's announcement on housing, including his emphasis on robust protection for the Green Belt, and the need for brownfield regeneration. The Government has done well on brownfield development, comfortably exceeding its 60% target for 2008. We are now urging Ministers to set a new 75% target for 2011. We were also pleased to see the focus on subsidised, affordable housing. Provision of affordable housing has declined massively since the 1970s, and turning this around will require a significant injection of public funding, and stronger planning policies to ensure a better mix of market and affordable homes.

Sound evidence is vital

So far, so good, but housing is a challenging agenda. Ministers must base policy on sound evidence, rather than being led by the siren voices of the development lobby, which present planning as a bar to development. Planning is essential to deliver affordable and green homes. Recent research for CPRE gives the lie to the idea that simply increasing the supply of land for housing will make homes more affordable by raising house-building rates and lowering prices. Most local authorities already have large land supplies identified for development. Relaxation of planning controls would be more likely to lead to sprawl and greenfield development, rather than encouraging builders to redevelop more difficult urban sites. The answer to problems of affordability is to increase provision of subsidised, affordable housing, and to strengthen the planning system to make better use of previously developed land.

Ensuring development is sustainable

And so to planning reform. CPRE is part of a coalition of environmental and civic organisations, with more than five million members, which have serious concerns about key aspects of the Planning White Paper. The White Paper is biased heavily towards economic development, contrary to the principles of a planning system that should consider all factors, including environmental ones. Its proposals to streamline development of major infrastructure projects, and put decisions in the hands of an unaccountable Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC), risk sidelining the public from the decision-making process and downplaying vital environmental evidence, and are based on scant proof that planning is holding up major infrastructure development. It is disingenuous of the Government to suggest that its planning reform agenda is about delivering the infrastructure required to tackle climate change – among the projects that are likely to be pushed through by the IPC would be major roads, airports and power stations; hardly a recipe for cutting climate-changing emissions. We will continue to argue against these proposals as the Planning White Paper becomes a Planning Reform Bill. To find out more, and to see a map of potential major infrastructure projects, visit www.planningdisaster.org.uk.

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Saving tranquil places

CPRE launched its tranquillity campaign late last year, with maps showing the degree of tranquillity across England (500 metre by 500 metre square), and supporting methodology, based on a nationwide survey to test what tranquillity means to people.

We define tranquillity as ‘the quality of calm experienced in places with mainly natural features and activities, free from disturbance from manmade ones’. Tranquillity is primarily a natural resource, and one we feel is valued by people whether in town or countryside. It is worth protecting.

Since the launch, we have been pressing the Government to include tranquillity in a range of national policies, including by amending relevant planning policy statements. We have also pushed Ministers to honour the commitment in the 2000 Rural White Paper to develop an indicator of countryside quality incorporating issues such as tranquillity. We are therefore delighted that Natural England intends to include tranquillity in its Countryside Quality Counts indicator.

MPs can support our tranquillity campaign by signing EDM 1107, which enjoys cross-party support. Please help us to send the message to the Government that tranquillity matters.

Climate change: how will it affect Tomorrow’s England?

CPRE is one of a number of organisations that have been conducting research for ‘Tomorrow’s England’. This project looks at what difference climate change could make at a local level. It is asking how climate change will affect local landscapes and wildlife, local food production, the economy, jobs, where we live, how we live and, most importantly, our well-being.

The project aims to show people the likely impacts of climate change in their own backyard, and inspire them to take action. ‘Tomorrow’s England’ has talked to the experts, examining scientific predictions and looking into the future to try to paint

local pictures of climate-induced changes, region by region, and even town by town.

Nine reports will be produced during the autumn and winter, each tailored to a specific region. You can read the latest about the work being carried out by ‘Tomorrow’s England’ by visiting www.climatechangeandme.net.

CPRE at the 2007 party conferences

CPRE will be attending this autumn’s Liberal Democrat, Labour and Conservative party conferences. We are part of the Climate Clinic, and our main fringe meeting, jointly with Friends of the Earth, will be on the theme *Planning for climate change – does the system work?*

Liberal Democrat Conference (Brighton)

Tues 18 Sep, 8.00-9.00am, Friends Meeting House (with David Howarth MP)

Labour Conference (Bournemouth)

Tues 25 Sep, 8.00-9.00am, Punshon Church House, Exeter Road (with Yvette Cooper MP)

Conservative Conference (Blackpool)

Tues 2 Oct, 8.00-9.00am, Olympia Balcony 3, Wintergardens (with Jacqui Lait MP)

Please do join us at one of these meetings, or visit us in the Climate Clinic.

We’re here to help

Contact our National Office policy and campaigns team for information on our work, and how we can help:

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You can also find out more about our work by visiting www.cpre.org.uk