

Discussion forum on the operation of the National Planning Policy Framework

Draft note of discussions that took place on 1 September 2014

The draft note below records the main points made at the discussion forum on 1 September 2014 at Westminster, which was hosted by the Communities and Local Government Committee as part of its inquiry into the [operation of the National Planning Policy Framework](#). Those taking part were in small groups of up to eight participants around a table. Those at each table were invited to give their views on four themes, which were suggested from the evidence received by the Committee. The points made were recorded by note-takers at each table and have been consolidated below.

A finalised version of the note will be reported to the Committee in October and, subject to the Committee's agreement, reported to the House for publication on the Committee's website as part of the evidence to the inquiry.

The contents of this note are being circulated to the participants in the forum. Participants are asked not to publish the note until all have had the opportunity to comment on the draft and a finalised version has been put to the Committee.

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1. The National Planning Policy Framework

Several participants praised the overall intention and ambition behind the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), but all participants identified negative aspects of the Framework, mainly focused on how it was being interpreted and applied in practice.

The most common criticism was the NPPF's presumption in favour of sustainable development—particularly, the lack of a clear definition of sustainability. Participants considered the term to be woolly, ambiguous, subjective and so widely open to interpretation that it provided little protection against development that was clearly unsuitable. A number of participants considered that a heavy emphasis was placed on considerations of economic sustainability, to the exclusion of social or environmental considerations. Both planning authorities in handling planning applications and the Planning Inspectorate in dealing with appeals were responsible for this unbalanced interpretation. This had led to many communities and residents being ignored and to the belief that the supposedly democratic nature of the planning system was being undermined. The common view was that all three strands of sustainability should be given equal weight.

Many participants considered that the operation of the presumption in favour of sustainable development had given the NPPF a developer bias and a number of participants said that the Framework had become a developer's charter. When participants were asked which part of the NPPF they would like changed, the most common response was for a clearer definition to the presumption so that less weight was attached to the economic arm of sustainability. One suggestion was that the presumption should be made an explicitly rebuttable presumption so that a proper analysis of each application could be made against established standards.

More generally on definitions, individual participants felt that the parts of the NPPF relating to areas such as the green belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty were not sufficiently well defined to ensure that they were adequately protected. One participant expressed his view that, though the previous policy was over 1,000 pages, it was a more thorough document. The NPPF was described as being vague and allowed developers to interpret some rules as they wished.

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Infrastructure was also of concerns to participants, with a number of participants drawing a link between sustainability and the adequate provision of infrastructure. Several considered that developments were being allowed to proceed without adequate consideration of the necessary infrastructure. The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and section 106 agreements were thought by many to be inadequate in guaranteeing provision of infrastructure. One particular criticism was the opaque nature of residual land value calculations, and the fact that they are often determined on information supplied by developers. Many participants said that it was too easy for developers to hide behind considerations of viability agreements and commercial confidentiality to avoid their obligations. Promised infrastructure and facilities providing social benefit were often not delivered at the same time as housing, as the developers' priority was to erect the houses first. It was not uncommon for landowners then to be unwilling to sell land to be used for infrastructure or facilities because it was more valuable to sit on it and hold out to sell it for housing. Developers were also able to avoid obligations by not building the full number of houses originally planned for.

Another concern was the vulnerability of areas that had no Local Plan in place. Authorities without approved Local Plans were more vulnerable to speculative applications for developments on land they do not want to be used. The participants explained that it is very difficult for local authorities to block speculative applications under the NPPF without an approved Local Plan and five-year housing land supply plan. Several participants thought this a major flaw of the new system, because the lack of protection until a Local Plan was adopted resulted in a free-for-all. Individual contributors suggested giving local authorities more time to have their Local Plans adopted. The suggestion was also made that the NPPF should not have been implemented until all local authorities had a plan in place. The necessity for local authorities to identify a five year land supply was specifically criticised as a factor causing delay to the adoption of plans. Participants suggested that the requirement should be reduced or removed altogether.

Several participants highlighted that the five-year land supply rule was frequently used by the Planning Inspectorate to overturn council decisions in favour of developers, regardless of other considerations. Some participants recommended that the five-year land supply for each local authority should include land where permissions had already been granted but where building had not yet started, arguing that developers frequently sought permission for developments, but then had no

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further incentive to build. One participant explained that the largest 20 developments in the UK where permission had been granted but building had not yet started had planning consent for 200,000 houses, and some of these had had permission since 1993. The participant also highlighted the point that enough permissions had already been granted in the UK to meet the Government's targets for the next 10 years. These participants also recommended that developers with an unused permission should be blocked from seeking further permissions. A recommendation was made that permissions should be used or lost by developers after a given time.

Some participants expressed the view that, even where Local Plans had been approved, they did not adequately take into account the views of local people, had been tick-box exercises or had been overly influenced by developers. One participant highlighted a local authority which was aware it had an inadequate Local Plan, but had a choice between passing it anyway or restarting the process, leaving them vulnerable to speculative applications from developers in the meantime. The majority of participants disagreed that democratically-elected representatives in local authorities were responsive to local concerns about planning applications or would be willing to amend Local Plans when requested. Some participants suggested that some councillors were more interested in the views of planners and developers than local people. Another participant said that district councillors rarely attended parish or town council meetings when planning issues were discussed.

One participant expressed her view that the NPPF was weak on green issues, especially with regard to water, climate change, biodiversity and renewable energy. Others suggested that planning applications were never turned down for these reasons, especially on appeal.

Many participants said that the NPPF failed to protect communities from rapid and disproportionate expansions of their towns and villages. Several participants also criticised how the individual determination of applications gave little regard to their cumulative impact on communities. Many highlighted examples of towns and villages that had significantly increased in size over recent years following the approval of multiple large developments in short succession, and that this had often led to an erosion of the networks that tended to exist within smaller communities. Many participants explained that they were not opposed to new developments, but that growth should be more organic and involve greater consideration of the

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existing local community. The accuracy and the level of reliance on projected housing numbers produced by central Government was also questioned. Some participants were concerned about actual or perceived conflicts of interest among councillors in the formulation of Local Plans and in determining individual applications. Several participants were concerned about land banking by developers and that there were no effective coercive powers to make developers begin construction within a certain period of time following permission being granted.

Some participants raised their concerns that housing developments are often approved in the wrong places, especially in circumstances where a Local Plan is not yet in place. One participant said that the NPPF encouraged the segregation of rich and poor communities, with developers keen to build executive-level homes on out-of-town *green field* sites and affordable housing on inner-city *brown field* sites. Others expressed their view that developers were reluctant to build on *brown field* sites and suggested that the Government's New Homes Bonus should have been weighted to encourage building on *brown field* sites. One participant suggested that money should be ring-fenced for the remediation of *brown field* sites, to make them more attractive for developers.

Some participants questioned whether there really was a need for such a large number of additional houses. One participant suggested that houses were being built in areas where there was demand, as opposed to where there was need. Another participant noted the high number of new houses that had been purchased by foreign investors and left empty. They recommended that foreign investors who intend to leave houses empty should be forced to pay additional stamp duty.

A major area of concern was the appeals process. Several participants mentioned that smaller authorities had limited resources to challenge developers who chose to appeal when applications were blocked by planning committees. Some suggested that the costs of judicial review were too high, leaving some councils unable to resist applications from developers. Many participants also felt it was too easy for developers to overturn refusals on appeal. The prohibitive costs for local authorities in defending appeals, and the resulting expenditure of public money where they were defended, were widely criticised, especially when it was clear developers intended to use expensive lawyers, which created an inequality of arms between developers and local authorities. One participant suggested that developers should be prohibited from

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seeking costs on planning appeals. Judicial review was outside the reach of most local groups as it was unwieldy and costly. The lack of a third party right of appeal was also criticised.

It was noted that significant resources were needed to develop Local and Neighbourhood Plans, which were described as complex, and that these were not always available to smaller authorities. Several participants agreed that the spirit of local ownership within the NPPF was good, but that smaller communities had insufficient resources to prepare the necessary plans. One participant recommended that more support should be provided to smaller authorities to ensure their Local and Neighbourhood Plans are prepared in a way that is acceptable to the Planning Inspectorate.

Some participants criticised the transition from the old planning system to the NPPF and questioned why their old Local Plans no longer carried any weight with the Planning Inspectorate. It was noted that very little time was given for the implementation of new Local Plans.

Other issues raised that met with agreement included the encroachment on green belt land, a preponderance of decisions being made behind closed doors in private session by local authorities, an inappropriate level of liaison between developers and planning authorities prior to applications being submitted, the difficulties local authorities faced in implementing the NPPF's policies on garden cities, the diminution of agricultural land through increased development, and concern that the NPPF did not encourage the most suitable type of housing for local needs to be built.

2. Local Plans

A large majority of participants reported that Local Plans were not in place in their areas. Several participants indicated that some form of Local Plan was in place or was expected to be finalised within months.

Participants said the Local Plan process was most commonly frustrated by the objections of developers or, in fewer cases, rejection by the Planning Inspector. Many participants commented that repeated objections from developers made it very difficult for local authorities to finalise the Local Plan. Several participants highlighted the role of the Inspector and quoted examples of Inspectors rejecting Local Plans due to their judgment that insufficient house-building had been proposed.

On the adoption of Local Plans, one participant noted how much longer the new process was taking: 11 or 12 years compared with about five previously. They said the old planning guidance and regional spatial strategies had provided certainty, which lawyers had not liked, but now there was no certainty, so corruption had followed. Other participants expressed concern about questionable practices, with one alleging councillors in their area had tried to increase the housing estimate, while another thought their local councillors were close to developers and had been trying to push through plans with large numbers of houses.

The issue of housing estimates was noted by some as holding back the creation of Local Plans. The Planning Inspectorate was citing estimates as the reason for rejecting Plans at the last hurdle, leading to planning by appeal. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment was considered by participants variously to be a waste of space, an incredible waste of time and resource and one of the least democratic elements of the process, based as it was on Local Enterprise Partnership figures. Some participants complained that the SHMA did not include an objective assessment of need, and that this had led to three councils having to redraft their Plans. One said the Government's housing targets did not tally with local ones, and district-by-district arguments about housing estimates were now taking place.

One participant argued that as ONS population estimates were suspect so housing estimates were. Another alleged that developers in conjunction with some planners had twisted the SHMA based on ONS statistics that the ONS knew were

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wrong, and that this had led to estimates of double the number of houses actually required. They added that such estimates had then been backdated five years to show that places had not been meeting their requirement, and this was creating a false picture of under-supply. Participants agreed that time and effort would be saved if there were agreement on housing estimate figures, and noted the lack of central guidance for councillors on the issue of five-year housing land supply.

It was noted that, in the absence of Local Plans, developments were occurring without schools, doctors and with the potential to flood. Solutions to this problem included: saying no to new developments until a Plan was in place; deferring to existing Plans until a new Plan had been approved; and accepting emerging Plans. Some also thought Planning Inspectors were taking too long to decide on Local Plans.

Local authority consultation on Local Plans was seen by some participants as a tick-box exercise, with issues being noted but not taken account of. Others thought high-level, national political pressure was brought to bear on Local Plans, with chunks taken out due to back-room politics.

A few participants reported a positive experience of consultation and engagement with the local authority over the compilation of the Local Plan. Some quoted good relationships with council officers and elected Members. However, many people felt that residents did not have much of a voice in the process. A few individuals said they had raised concerns with the local authority about the evidence base for the Plan but that they hadn't received any meaningful responses from the local authority (if they had received a response at all). There was considerable concern about the involvement of developers in the process. A common sentiment among the groups was that the final Local Plans were too friendly to developers and that the NPPF process had handed over power to the developers. One participant said a developer had objected to the typeface of Local Plan when it was published on the local authority website and argued it should come down. It was said that the inspector had agreed that the Local Plan should be removed from the website while the local authority's legal team checked its legality. Several months later it was put back on the website—there were no legal issues with the choice of typeface—but this had obviously delayed the process, allegedly to the developer's advantage. Many participants held the view that developers were concerned only with profit and had no interest whatsoever in the needs of the local community.

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Several participants believed that the administrative hurdles of the Local Plan allowed developers to exploit loopholes in the process. Several participants said that the NPPF did not lead to strategic development but rather to planning by appeal. Participants cited scenarios where developers would be alert to the inspector rejecting a Local Plan and then be apparently free to apply for developments without restriction because the local authority felt it would be unable to object in the absence of a Local Plan.

There was general scepticism about a Local Plan being a strategic plan for development. Several people thought the Local Plan would be ignored by local authorities, which would allow even more building than that set out in the Plan. The idea that the NPPF was complementary to localism was also dismissed by several participants. A few said their Local Plans were unrealistic. One said their Local Plan expected 15% growth in housing building each year, while others considered the term affordable housing to be ridiculous as it was set at a rent of 80% of market rate which was far from affordable in their area.

Participants reiterated that the National Planning Policy Framework did not have a clear enough definition of sustainability. One believed it to be a complete abuse of the idea of sustainability, being not about sustainable living, but about sustainable growth. Participants agreed that paragraph 7 of the NPPF, on sustainability, was not being followed. On the application of the definition locally, it was suggested that one plan had been approved on the basis of sustainable development being about economic growth. One participant said their local authority's Local Plan was weak on renewables, while another noted that their authority, to get its Local Plan through, had simply taken out the paragraph on sustainability. They added there was no hope of a Plan failing due to biodiversity issues. But it was also seen as very difficult to vote out local authorities on the basis of their planning record.

Other participants believed the NPPF's primary objective was to get houses built, as the Government was keen to stimulate growth through housing, which it thought was the only growth vehicle. One participant argued, however, that the problem was not the policy, but its implementation. They noted that where housing supply was unmet, the harm caused by a proposed development needed to be considered, but in practice this did not happen.

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On economic and environmental considerations, participants agreed that employment should be an integral part of any new development, otherwise people would have to commute and a development would be less sustainable. Several participants noted that even where Local Plans existed, the sustainable developments identified in them were not coming forward quickly enough, so developments continued to take place in villages. It was suggested that developers were trying to pick holes in Plans and test the five-year land supply figure so that their developments could continue to go ahead, and that some councillors applied the Plan selectively and ignored the holistic view promoted by the NPPF.

Regarding *brown field* sites, one participant believed their local authority had been unable to come up with a five year housing land supply because cuts had meant it had no funds to transform such locations. It was suggested that the New Homes Bonus could be directed specifically at homes built on *brown field* sites, or that VAT could be removed from them. Participants agreed that *brown field* sites were not being built on and developers needed a carrot to make them do so. Contamination levels were massive on such sites, so developers needed an incentive—such as per hectare—to build there. Land banking was seen to be taking place on a big scale. In one area the ratio of planning permissions to houses being built was two to one.

On town centres, local authorities were considered to be useless. One participant believed developers were abusing the sequential test by describing their development as warehouses which would not fit in a town centre. It was also suggested that the NPPF was forcing local authorities to plan for out of town centres even when they were not needed. So areas ended with an out of town centre because it was in their Local Plan.

A few participants made reference to the planning departments of local authorities, suggesting these departments were experiencing low staff morale and high turnover rates of staff as a result of the NPPF.

3. Housing

The issue of a national housing shortage was challenged by many and some took the view that the problem was not as serious as developers claimed, pointing out that there were 1 million empty homes and offices in the UK and that this had been made worse by a buy-to-leave industry. Others stated that, while there was a need for housing, numbers had been inflated.

Discussion focused on the nature of England's housing shortage. In particular, many participants questioned whether there really was a universal shortage of housing or whether there was only a shortage of housing in certain areas or of certain types of housing. Many participants did not consider there to be a large local need in their area, but most accepted that there was unmet housing need due to an increasing and aging population, as well as internal migration. There was an agreement that developers should build according to where there was need for housing, rather than where it was seen as profitable to build. There was also discussion on the shortage of housing centred on the distinction between demand for housing and the need for affordable homes. A repeated comment by many participants was that local need was not a priority and was being ignored. They considered that developers were focusing on opportunities for profit, not on local need.

Participants drew a distinction between demand, which they saw as coming from outside the local area and driven by developers, and the local needs of residents. In many cases, participants who had been involved in carrying out housing needs assessment surveys said that the figures from these surveys and the number of houses planned by developers were very different. More houses were built than housing needs assessments said were necessary, but the price and standard of houses built were not suitable for local people. One participant said that a housing needs assessment had found only 11 affordable houses were needed in their area, but 200 houses had been built and applications for 180 and 70 houses had just gone through.

Participants identified a number of factors that led to a mismatch between supply and need. First, they said that houses for which permission had been granted and which developers had built did not meet local residents' needs because the types

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of housing required by local residents were not as profitable. Developers preferred to build large, 4-bedroom (or more) houses or complexes of small flats, while local residents needed bungalows (for older people downsizing), smaller homes (for young families), or larger flats. One participant suggested a return to the lifetime standard or Parker Morris standard.

As a result, the houses that were built often fed demand for second homes or for commuters to cities. One participant said that catering to external demand would also widen the north-south divide by encouraging northern entrepreneurs to move south by providing them with more housing, instead of encouraging them to stay in the north. Participants also said that new housing was often built in areas that promised greater profit for developers, rather than areas of greatest need. They argued that developers also sited new housing in certain areas to fulfil their requirements to build a certain number of affordable houses, while maintaining high profit margins. Participants noted that housing could be built in more affluent areas and qualify as affordable, while commanding high prices. By contrast, in deprived areas, where affordable housing was badly needed, few homes were built and they were rarely affordable for local residents. One participant suggested that local councils should reinvest their gains from selling council houses in building affordable houses.

Other issues raised were the prevalence of buy-to-let houses, which participants said increased prices and prevented local residents from buying homes, and vacant houses going unused. One participant said that the main objection to buy-to-let was that the rise of housing as an investment had led to a shortage of homes and suggested a buy-to-let tax. Vacant houses going unused were a greater problem for participants from the North.

Some said that councils were susceptible to intimidation from developers or that, on occasion, there was complicity between the two. The current system favoured large developers and policies should be brought in that favoured smaller developers. A suggestion was made for annual caps to be placed on big developers.

Many said it was easier and more profitable for developers to build new houses on *green field* sites than it was for them to re-develop vacant or derelict houses. They said the sale or re-development of these houses should be encouraged. They also said that ineffective planning procedures that led to houses being built where they were not needed would exacerbate this problem. A participant gave an example of a housing estate that had provided more houses than necessary and the

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vacant houses had gone unfilled until a large city Housing Association had sent their worst tenants there. This caused property prices to fall, trapping those people that had bought houses on the estate.

On the subject of the NPPF's relation to housing, participants identified unclear definitions and phrasing and a lack of enforcement as the two crucial problems in reaching the framework's aims. The NPPF often used the right words without having the means to reach its goals, and it was said that a lack of clarity reduced certainty in the system. This allowed a free-for-all for developers, which in turn allowed them to dictate development. Participants also said that the NPPF had made it easier to get planning permission, which was enabling rapid, unsustainable growth in some areas. One participant said that the first two years of the NPPF had seen permissions granted equal to between a quarter and a half of the permissions granted in the previous 10 years.

Unclear definitions and vague phrasing in the framework allowed developers to meet their obligations while exploiting loopholes to avoid following the spirit of the NPPF. They said that developers were meeting their quotas for affordable housing by building in gerrymandered areas with high incomes, which meant that while the properties qualified as affordable for the purposes of the NPPF, they were not affordable for local residents.

Participants also said that 'sustainable development' was poorly defined in the NPPF. They said that this meant that housing development was not well linked to wider environmental and low-carbon strategies. They said that the vagueness of sustainability requirements meant that environmental requirements could be ignored or would not be enforced by planning authorities. One participant said that an application to build on an area of ancient forest had been forced through. A participant from Gloucestershire also said that loose regulations meant that it was easy to build on flood plains and noted a local example of a field approved for development despite being under 3ft of water during the latest floods.

There was a general consensus that developers should focus on building more on 'brown field' sites and that this was not happening, with developers preferring to build on green field sites. Participants singled out the development of brown field sites as an area in which the NPPF had failed to achieve its goals. They said that while the policy of encouraging developers to build on brown field sites was positive, the NPPF lacked the ability to enforce or encourage this policy specifically. It was

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generally cheaper for developers to build on green field sites and that brown field sites often had a number of barriers to successful development. They pointed to multiple ownership of many brown field sites and decontamination requirements as particularly obstructive to development. They also argued that the requirement for land being deliverable for inclusion in five-year supplies meant that brown field sites were not included, as it could be difficult to show they are deliverable.

Participants said, in light of the difficulty and expense of developing brown field sites, developers needed either an incentive or to be forced to develop them; encouragement alone would not be enough. One participant suggested that VAT be removed from brown field sites to make them more attractive.

Participants said that this contributed to another major problem: the rift between local residents and planning authorities and developers, which prevented local issues from being understood. They said that housing needs assessments, surveys, consultations and neighbourhood and local plans were often ignored by district councils or local planning authorities and that core spatial strategies were often in conflict with local assessments. They felt that the disregard of local assessments was so that councils and planning authorities could meet targets more easily and for the benefit of developers. They also said that ignoring local assessments prevented sustainable and sensible housing growth.

It was pointed out that planning authorities and developers often focused only on their specific targets to build a number of houses (and affordable houses) in an area, at the expense of other aims. In particular, this process neglected the effect on local infrastructure, the impact on local communities, and the availability of employment. This contributed to the inability of developers to meet local needs and particular housing shortages. Participants said that the effect on infrastructure was not taken into account when approving permissions, with the result that local infrastructure would soon become overburdened. Plans would lead to over-use of transport infrastructure, with one participant saying that their local council had approved enough houses so that 94% of road capacity would be used. Another participant said that the increase in housing density in their area had put major strain on the water network, leading to sewage overflows.

In some cases houses were being built where there was little or no infrastructure to support a viable community. Houses were being dumped in the countryside where there were few employment opportunities and poor transport links, or where

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transport to local towns would be expensive. Some participants said that affordable housing was not being built in the centre of town near available employment, forcing people into estates in rural areas. Double counting of employment opportunities or school places was used to justify increasing housing density. Participants argued that these developments prevented the regeneration of urban centres.

There was also concern that permissions were granted without thinking of the effect on local communities. Villages were doubling in size and many of the new occupants were commuters. This was damaging the community and local landscape. Participants were not opposed to a sustainable level of growth, but they were worried by sudden, huge expansion that turned villages into towns. It was important that the speed of addition to an area should remain in proportion to the organic growth of that area, as the infrastructure of many towns was being overwhelmed by the influx of new residents. One participant said that 700 houses had been approved in a parish of 500 households. Participants said that nice areas were targeted for developers building large, expensive houses, at the expense of local residents. It was unfair that local residents could have their house prices damaged by over-development. Some participants also said this was damaging their towns' reputations as tourist destinations.

Many participants said that a major cause of these problems was the lack of strategic overview of housing needs and that a more centralised approach was needed to remedy this. The current system did not seem well directed and led to a scattergun approach, so local authorities needed to be forced to do more to take an overall view of the effect on the community. Some participants recommended bringing back Regional Spatial Strategies or other evidence-based impact analyses.

Some participants said that a problem that they had often encountered was that their Local Plan was objected to by neighbouring boroughs as it was felt that residents would leave other boroughs to move to the borough with a Local Plan, thus leading to sink towns.

Some participants were of the view that a lack of centralisation allowed developers to exploit the system and build houses close to one another but in different planning authority areas. The system allowed developers to slice up areas to make it

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easier to get planning permission, to show housing was affordable or to minimise the overall effect on infrastructure. The absence of an overall view meant that local authorities did not take note of what their neighbours were doing and as a result there was too much building in the countryside. One participant compared the low level of permissions in Dartmoor, where there was only one authority, to the high rate of construction in the Cotswolds, which was covered by 15. Another participant drew attention to an authority which had been criticised by its neighbours for a lack of co-operation.

On the green belt, participants were divided between those who were opposed to any relaxation of green belt protection and those that believed that it could be relaxed but only with strong regulation to protect. However, they agreed that current regulation of the green belt was too lax and that developers were already being allowed to re-define green belt areas. Many participants said the current lax approach to safeguarding greenbelt areas, as well as the attractiveness of green field sites to developers, made them wary of any changes to green belt protections.

Participants said that the green belt was being nibbled into and development was taking place on a piecemeal basis. Construction on the green belt was already happening, as many houses were being built in the countryside and in villages and that green wedges were being lost. Core strategies had already locally redefined what was or not green belt land and had released areas. One participant said that he had asked the Department for Communities and Local Government how much land had been released from the green belt and built on, but it had been unable to tell him because it did not track land usage once it had been released from the green belt.

One participant said that a city's green belt was being redefined so that it could expand, with green belt land added back on to the outside of the previous green belt. They said the green belt was being managed for development and that developers would buy green spaces in cities and then swap the permission on that land to get permission to build on green belt land, with the end result being that both sites would be developed.

Participants who opposed relaxing the green belt restrictions based their opposition primarily on the fear that relaxing protection would lead to a slippery slope. One suggested that the green belt (as a concept) was a brittle thing and could shatter if the Government tried to redefine it. Others worried about the effect of salami-slicing the green belt regulation

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and suggested that building more cleverly on existing land would be a better alternative. They also rejected the idea that certain parts of the green belt—such as scrub land—were valueless and said that their environmental value was overlooked. The Government seemed to listen only to developers on the green belt and it needed to be protected, not only for people who lived nearby, but for everyone.

On the other hand, some participants said they would accept relaxation of the green belt, as long as there were strict regulations and controls. They said that, in view of changing demographics, the green belt might now be outdated and need to be re-drawn. One participant said it should not be an act of faith to be defended at any price. Others said that re-defining or relaxing green belt protections might actually help to protect the countryside and would produce better housing outcomes. Allowing higher density expansion in areas where the edges of towns met the green belt would be better than the current strategy of building large numbers of houses further out in the countryside. One participant said this would prevent the current situation in their area, in which people were isolated by living in a ring of housing estates outside the city's green belt, which separated them from employment opportunities and infrastructure. The green belt could also prevent sensible expansion, by forcing all development to happen on one side of a town. Participants said that it was also not always clear why some areas were protected and others were not. However, all participants wanted some continuing protection for the green belt and for it to be kept in the NPPF or other frameworks. They emphasized that strong regulation and strict enforcement were needed to protect the green belt effectively.

The design of new housing was raised. Some expressed concern that homes being built were identikit, others that the design of houses led to serious parking problems within their local area as garages were built in blocks some distance from them. The majority of new homes being built were not user-friendly and contributed to many homes remaining unsold.

4. Localism

A number of participants said that local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate paid only lip service to consultation. Comments were recorded but not acted upon. When new versions of plans were published, there was little evidence that detailed submissions by local residents had been taken on board. Some described the process as bureaucratic: they had been working on a Local Plan for four years but it was still unfinished. Others were frustrated by the fact their authority had more development agreed than would have been allowed under their yet-to-be-approved draft Plan. Some participants were, however, more positive about the steps local authorities took to consult local people. In one case, the council had modified the core strategy to take account of local opinion. Nevertheless, these modifications had been undermined by the inspector increasing housing numbers during the examination process.

On planning applications, some felt that the consultations were simply information sessions presenting a *fait accompli*: the most important decisions had already been taken, often during pre-application discussions with the authority. The two-week deadline for responses made it difficult to scrutinise them properly and their assumptions. Others described instances where, though many suggestions were made, not a single change had been implemented. In one instance, there were 400 local objections, all of which were discounted. A further example included a consultation where only those in one particular ward were consulted, even though the proposed development was on the edge of two wards. One participant described how a large number of residents had objected to the relocation of a school, but the local authority had gone ahead anyway. When asked, no participant could give an example of a consultation which resulted in material change to the proposed development.

Across the participants there was a view that localism was not working. One participant considered it unfair that developers had a repeat right of appeal but local people had no right of appeal at all. Local residents could not afford the costs of judicial review. One participant voiced disquiet that residents were allowed to speak for only three minutes at local authority

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committee meetings in objection to planning applications. Another participant, however, considered this to be reasonable as there had to be a structure to such meetings.

The NPPF treated the whole country as being similar, when there were significant differences: what is sustainable in one part of the country might not be sustainable in another. The NPPF was much shorter, but its oversimplification had left too much flexibility in its interpretation which developers were exploiting. Procedures were easier to handle but not easier to implement than the previous system. The previous guidance, although long, was precise and fair and therefore easier to navigate. The NPPF did not define proportional growth. The focus on economic sustainability alone was a flaw: environmental and community sustainability were also important.

On neighbourhood plans, one participant was concerned that money was being wasted and that local people were unwilling to see planning as a professional discipline. Another, whilst considering neighbourhood plans to be a good idea in principle, did not think that sufficient resources were available to communities to make them work. Others considered neighbourhood plans to be a fig leaf: nobody in authority paid them any attention. The requirement for Neighbourhood Plans to be consistent with Local Plans created a *chicken and egg* situation: there was a risk of the Local Plan undermining work that had already taken place on the Neighbourhood Plan.

There were differing views about the role councillors played in planning. Some participants, spoke highly of the support provided by their councillors. Others considered councillors to be ineffective, refusing to stand up to their leader and to planning officers. In one area the leader had refused to allow a public meeting to take place. The fact that councils voted by secret ballot made it difficult for residents to hold councillors to account for their votes and decisions. One suggestion to improve democratic accountability was to get councils to vote by a show of hands. There was no appetite for a community veto of planning applications.

Some concerns were raised about corruption within the local authority planning system, which had been exacerbated by the abolition of the Standards Board for England. It was incumbent upon councillors to ensure planning decisions were fairly

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taken. One participant thought the NPPF should prevent local authorities making planning decisions in relation to their own land.

On green field and brown field sites, it was suggested that the Government could waive VAT on work required to make brown field land ready for development and impose additional taxes on green field development.

Many participants raised concerns about speculative development, especially where the absence of a Local Plan or five year supply of housing land was leading to a system of planning by appeal. Councils would often grant permission to avoid facing the costs of an appeal. When appeals went ahead, planning inspectors used the presumption in favour of sustainable development to pull the council's planning decisions apart.

Across the participants, there were a range of views about the process of producing local plans. Some participants thought that the NPPF should have given a longer lead in period to enable councils to get their plans in place. One participant described how her area's local plan had been through several stages of consultation. However, although the inspector was happy with the bulk of the plan, it could not be adopted because there were outstanding issues relating to a small number of settlements. In the meantime, the whole district was vulnerable to speculative development. Allowing the partial adoption of local plans would provide many communities with much-needed protection against unwanted development. The NPPF should also require weight to be given to emerging local plans.

Several participants noted that any homes built before the local plan was agreed did not count towards the five year plan. There were also concerns about slow build-out rates by developers. In some cases, they would get a digger on site and dig a trench to demonstrate that they had started building, but after that nothing would happen. One participant said in an area there were 280 developments on the books but only four had been started. Developers would also claim that sites with planning permission were not viable and therefore should not be included within the five year supply. To address this, the NPPF should state that all sites with planning permission should be counted as part of the five year supply.

One participant made a suggestion that as soon as an application was agreed, it should count towards the five year supply to stop multiple applications being approved.

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Participants had concerns about Strategic Housing Market Assessments, which some participants considered to contain flawed statistics. SHMAs were conducted by external companies who did not disclose their models and therefore the conclusions could not be tested or challenged. In one area, two organisations used the same data and starting point but the resulting assessed need of one was double that of the other. The inspector could not reconcile the two and therefore dismissed them both. One participant suggested that the system for assessing housing need was corrupt, because of the close relationship between consultants and developers, and that falsified data were being used to justify incursions into the Green Belt. Others suggested that there should be a mechanism in place to enable residents to challenge the results of the SHMA.

Some participants suggested that the good intentions of the NPPF were not being matched by its interpretation. For example, the NPPF suggested that great weight should be given to areas of outstanding natural beauty, but this was not happening in practice. Others considered that the wording in the NPPF was too weak to protect against threats to open countryside. There was concern about inadequate definition of terms in the NPPF and about a lack of consistency between different sections. In particular, several participants considered the NPPF definition on sustainability to be unclear. It was suggested that a series of metrics be introduced to enable decision makers to judge more effectively whether development was sustainable.

Concerns were raised about the resources available to local authority planning departments. Most participants agreed that planning authorities were not adequately staffed. Cutbacks meant that teams were overwhelmed. Officers did not always have the time or resources to respond to local residents. One participant said that officers had not even read all the letters written in opposition to a development. Others felt that it was not a lack of resources that caused under-performance but a lack of care. Frequently, officers were poached by developers, creating a skills shortage and leaving councils understaffed. The independence of some senior officers was questioned by some participants: some were said to be too close to the developers. Councils were often driven by financial incentives—the Community Infrastructure Levy, the New Homes Bonus and Council Tax—and so were under pressure to satisfy developers. They also lost time and money when their arguments about numbers and housing need were rejected by the Planning Inspectorate.

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There was some concern that social housing requirements from authorities did not reflect local need. For example, one authority required rural developments to have a higher proportion of social housing than urban developments but it was perceived that the need was in urban areas.

There was much concern that neither authorities nor inspectors were checking or forcing developers to stick to approved plans.

It was argued that the balance of power was stacked against councils in favour of the developer, with the inspectors' approach cited as an example. In one area 93% of appeals led to council decisions being overturned, in another two thirds. The fact that a planning authority's power would revert to the Secretary of State if many rejections were overturned, and that authorities did not have the resources to fight appeals, made some authorities reluctant to reject applications. Authorities had lost the confidence to challenge developers and some councillors felt powerless. Planning authorities should have the authority to reject applications and their decisions be backed by Government. The pressure exerted by DCLG on councils to approve developments was unhelpful.

Although there might be a requirement for adequate infrastructure to be put in place before a development started, in practice this rarely happened. Developments were thought to be considered in isolation, failing to take into account the planning applications that had already been granted. Where there was no local plan, some sites were approved with no additional infrastructure provision. There were examples of problems with sewage, school places, transport and parking. One difficulty may be that different organisations are in control of different parts of the local infrastructure.

Participants were concerned that homes should be of the right type and in the right places. Rural areas were providing homes for people who worked 20 or 30 miles away: people should be looking to live closer to where the jobs were. Developers should be encouraged to build smaller homes to enable people to downsize, thereby freeing up larger homes for those who need them. One participant raised concerns about the number of empty homes, stating that 80% of new housing in London was left empty. Heavy taxes should be imposed to deter people from leaving houses empty.

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Participants stressed that they were not NIMBYs, nor were they anti-development. They wanted to ensure that development was sustainable. They were particularly concerned to ensure that development was accompanied by the infrastructure necessary to support it.

5. List of Participants

Barbara Archer	BANDAG
Zack Beaufort (<i>accompanied by Neil Bradley</i>)	
Geoff Beaven	Dogsmerfield Parish Council
Victor Betts	Save Our Greenbelt Dinnington and Anston
Jill Britten	Whitchurch Village Action Group
Richard Broadbent	
Professor Patricia Broadfoot CBE	Keep Kingswood a Village
Ian Carman	Newport Pagnell Town Council
Will Chapman	
Dr Anthony Cooper	Cambridge Past, Present and Future
David Daniel	
Dr Nicola Daniel	Otter Valley Association
Sarah Day	Shrivenham Parish Council
Dr Rebecca Driver	
Roger Fairclough	Barugh Residents Against New Development
Paul Gadd	Weareresidents.org
Frank Egerton Gilman	



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Cllr Robert Gough

Anthony Hampton

Victoria Harvey

Peter Hutchison

Gillian Kaloyeropoulos

Valerie H. Kennedy

Martin Lane

Ruth Langhorn

D. J. Lockett

Julie Mabberley

Peter Martin

Ian McKintosh

Mike Morris

Ron Morton

Diana Nason

Dr Sue Nodder

Diane Odell

Shaun O'Reilly

Earls Barton Petition

Kirklevington and Castle Levington Parish Council

South Bedfordshire Friends of the Earth

Olde Hanwell Residents Association

West Heath Action Group

Cotswold Conservation Board

Twynning Parish Council

Community Voice on Planning/Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

Western Vale Villages/Compton Beauchamp Parish Meeting

East Devon Alliance

Hook and Rotherwick Petition (Hart District Council)

Shortwood Greenbelt Campaign

Watchfield Parish Council

Leonard Stanley Parish Council

Welwyn Garden City Society



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Susan Parker

Guildford Greenbelt Group

Liz Quantrell

Mount Hindrance Action Group

Ann Reed

David Rockey

Martin Round

Daniel Scharf

Harry Shutt

Future Horsham

Allyson Spicer (*accompanied by Susan Senior*)

John Stubbington

Jacqueline Thompson

Elaine Tickell

Cllr Bryan Timms

Four Marks Parish Council

Jenny Unsworth

Protect Congleton

Graham Waite

Buntingford Civic Society

Nick Walker

Save Whalley Valley Action Group

Mary Walsh

Whitchurch Village Action Group

Doug Webb

Carol Wellwood



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Alan Wing

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