

Planning rules pave way for green belt housing bonanza

Ben Webster Environment Editor

Large tracts of countryside will be developed under new planning guidance that could trigger a building boom by weakening environmental safeguards.

Developers will find it easier to get permission to build housing estates, offices and retail parks in the green belt, under the plan to revive the economy by creating a "presumption in favour of sustainable development".

The Times has obtained a recent draft of the National Planning Policy Framework before its publication later this month. The document, marked "restricted" and dated June 13, tilts the balance in planning negotiations in favour of developers. It makes it much harder for local authorities in England to secure concessions, such as the addition of affordable housing, playgrounds and community centres.

The burden of proof will shift to the authority, which will have to show that a greenbelt application would result in adverse impacts that "significantly and demonstrably" outweigh the benefits. Present planning guidance, which the framework will replace, contains a strong presumption against any development of the green belt.

The document states that applications should be approved "without delay" and overrides existing safeguards which allow authorities to take time to consult widely and seek changes. Developers will no longer be forced to focus on previously developed sites.

They will also be able to ignore existing guidance requiring them to ensure housing estates have good public transport and walking or cycling routes to shops and



workplaces. Developers will be able to argue that creating alternatives to car travel would be too expensive. Councils will be unable to reject developments that worsen congestion and pollution unless they can prove that the impacts would be "so severe" that they would outweigh the urgent need for new homes.

The document seeks to force authorities to earmark large areas of new land for housing. It says they will be obliged to approve all applications if they fail to identify a "five-year supply" of sites attractive to developers. Councils could also lose the power to stop landowners from putting up advertising billboards in the countryside.

It states: "A positive planning system is essential because, without growth, a sustainable future cannot be achieved. This means the Government expects the planning system to proactively encourage growth to meet the needs of business." The document also weakens a coalition agreement commitment to "protect green areas of particular importance to local communities".

Stephen Joseph, of the Campaign for Better Transport, said: "The document overall is a manifesto for sprawl and congestion. It opens the

floodgates for more car-based development."

Paul Miner, of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, said: "In the headlong rush to boost the economy, the Government is forgetting what makes England an attractive place in which to live and work."



But Liz Peace, of the British Property Federation, which represents developers, said the system needed to be reformed to permit more housing: "It is clear that there is a desperate need for housing in many parts of the UK."

The number of new houses under construction rose by 22 per cent to 106,590 in the 12 months to March 2011. But there are 1.75 million households waiting to be allocated a council or housing association home.