

Backbench Business

Planning and House Building

Mr Speaker

Before I call Bob Seely, I inform all Members that we are starting with a four-minute limit in order to fit in as many speakers as possible, to ensure that our constituencies are represented.

11.46 am

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)

I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the Government's levelling up agenda and supports appropriate housing development and the Government's overall housing objectives; further welcomes the Government's consultation, Planning for the Future, updated on 6 August 2020, as a chance to reform housing and land use for the public good; welcomes the Government's commitment to protect and restore the natural environment and bio-diversity; and calls on the Government to delay any planned implementation of the changes to the standard method for assessing local housing need proposed by the Government's consultation, Changes to the Current Planning System, published on 6 August 2020, and Proposal 4 of the Government's consultation, Planning for the Future, on a standard method for establishing housing requirement, until this House has had the opportunity to hold a debate and meaningful vote on their introduction.

I speak in support of the motion, which is supportive of the Government's aims overall but requests that the new algorithm, process and formula should not be introduced without a meaningful parliamentary vote, I assume in a Bill next year.

In our manifesto, we promised to level up and connect the country so that everyone can get a fair share of future prosperity. If levelling up means anything, it surely implies an integrated plan for infrastructure, jobs and housing to revive overlooked northern and midland towns and to stop the endless drift of jobs and opportunities to the south, the shires and the suburbs. I support levelling up 100%, but broadly speaking, the danger in the way the new targets have been shaped is that the biggest housing increases will be in rural shires and suburbs, and the biggest falls will be in the urban north and midlands. The worst of all worlds would be to hollow out our cities, urbanise our suburbs and suburbanise the countryside, yet I fear that that is what we might accidentally achieve. That is not levelling up; it is concreting out, hence this debate.

The figures I will be quoting from the House of Commons Library show that in rural and suburban England, excluding cities, the new algorithmic process demands an additional 772,072 homes—more than three quarters of a million—or more than 100 new towns of 7,000 souls. The new total for shire England, minus the cities, is 1,513,529 properties, or more than 200 new towns. Both those figures are underestimates, in that, for example, they do not include Dorset, Cornwall or the Isle of Wight. So over 15 years, compared with current agreed local plans, rural and suburban Gloucestershire will see an additional 29,000 homes, taking the total to 54,000; rural and suburban Surrey will see an extra 45,000, creating a new target of 84,000; and in rural and suburban Northamptonshire, an extra 26,000 will take the total to 72,000.

However, while the suburbs and countryside see dramatic rises, the numbers for the cities, where there are already infrastructure and services, will fall. For example, over 15 years, against the current standard method, Manchester falls by 14,000 over 15 years, but Cheshire East rises by

10,000; Nottingham city falls by 3,700 while Nottinghamshire rises by 25,000, and Southampton falls by 2,500 while Hampshire rises by 26,000 to 115,000 overall. Targets for Liverpool and Newcastle are 48% and 56% lower than their current building rates, and 30 local planning authorities in the north have targets lower than their current building rates.

We have shrinking targets in cities and rocketing targets in shires. The glaring exception to that urban free pass is London, which sees astonishing rises against local plans over a 15-year period. Westminster's housing requirement is up 438%; Barnet sees an additional 50,000 properties, Bromley 27,000 and Hillingdon 21,000.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con)

My constituency of Kensington sees a seven-times increase relative to the December 2019 proposed London plan. While we all want to see more housing, does my hon. Friend agree that targets need to be achievable and realistic?

Bob Seely

If the targets are unrealistic, it will cause grief for no purpose, so I thank my hon. Friend for her remark.

In the last three London boroughs that I mentioned—Barnet, Bromley and Hillingdon—alone, the algorithmic process demands a total of 153,938 new properties, or the equivalent of 20 small new towns in three London boroughs. I am sure the Minister and I would agree that we need to increase density to make better use of land, but we need our targets to be achievable.

All this is being done for the absolutely laudable reason of affordability. That is exceptionally important, but the Royal Town Planning Institute says that increases in house building do not necessarily have a discernible impact on price. The why is complex; developer choice, foreign investment purchases, stamp duty and slow wage growth all play a role, but, above all, land banking may show why the liberalisation of permission does not necessarily equal more supply.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)

I praise my hon. Friend for the work he has done on this; the Isle of Wight is incredibly lucky to have him as its MP. Will he consider that we have a million permissions unbuilt in England and we have failing councils, such as in Eastleigh borough, which I represent a part of, that still do not have a local plan in place. Should we not be looking there as one of the ways of trying to get to the 300,000—an absolutely right figure and a manifesto commitment—before we start some of the destruction he talks about?

Bob Seely

I am just coming to that point. The 10 largest developers control 70% of supply. They withhold land to inflate value; while 80% of residential permissions are granted, half remain unbuilt and 900,000 permissions, as my hon. Friend says, are outstanding. If just 10% of those were finished every year, the Government would be close to or on target. That raises two critical questions. First, is the problem with the system, or with the building firms that are abusing it, maybe because of the foolish laws being put in place? Secondly, do we need to scrap the current system and potentially face the law of unintended consequences, or do we need to reform it?

I think the Minister and I can both agree that the market is failing first-time buyers. The answer is not greenfield sprawl or unachievable targets, but a new generation of community-based, affordable

housing, accompanied by creative rent-to-buy schemes accessible to first-time buyers in existing communities, whether in city, suburb or countryside.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)

I thank my hon. Friend for the detailed work he has done and the figures he has shared. Does he agree that this is not about the national figure, which many Members on this side of the House fully support and want to see built, but that the test of any good planning system is whether it reflects the true geography of an area and fully takes into account the need to protect things such as national parks, to take care of floodplains and the inability to build on them, and to make full use of brownfield land?

Bob Seely

I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and I agree wholeheartedly.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con)

I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he has done supporting communities such as mine in Totnes in south Devon. He talks about the need for a plan to be reasonable, but it also has to be realistic for our communities. He has also just mentioned engaging communities and ensuring that there is a community spirit about the way in which we develop. It was our party that pushed forward the idea of neighbourhood plans, and neighbourhood plans must be enshrined in the development of housing across the country.

Bob Seely

I agree with my hon. Friend and thank him for his intervention.

I will now make a few brief points about my constituency. The Government tell rural England that it needs to do its bit, and the Isle of Wight has a story that is similar to many others. Since 1960, the population of our beautiful small Island has grown by 50%—not 15%, but 50%. In the same period, the populations of Newcastle, Sunderland, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, and Stoke-on-Trent have all declined, not relatively but in absolute terms. The message from many parts of Britain is that we have been doing our bit for decades, and levelling up is about other people now doing theirs. The new standard methodology simply does not make sense for the Island. It is based on local income calculations, but housing demand in my patch, and others, is driven by other factors—in my case, the migration of retirees from across Britain.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)

My hon. Friend is making a powerful point, particularly because he emphasises the localism that comes into question. Areas such as the Isle of Wight are distinct. Kent is also distinct. Does he agree that local control exercised by local councillors at county, district and borough level is exactly where this should lie?

Bob Seely

I thoroughly agree with my hon. Friend. The good folks who retire to the Isle of Wight use assets. They use cash from house sales, not income, to buy. Therefore, affordability criteria based on income make little sense and artificially inflate our housing need by 70%. Our targets have little to do with our need. The indigenous population of the Isle of Wight is expected to decline by 11,000. Official figures show that all our population growth until 2034 will come from those who are 65-plus, either indigenous or retirees. It is great that we have retirees—don't get me wrong—and I look

forward to being one, one day. However, the demographic imbalance damages our society as well as our economy. For the first time in 50 years, we need the White Paper to prioritise Islanders, young and old, and not primarily to build for a mainland retirement market. I have yet to meet a single Islander who disagrees with that agenda.

We face exceptional housing constraints. We have our own housing industry. As a legal baseline, our housing industry can build 200 to 250 units a year. We have managed 350 units in the past few years—not affordable, and almost all on low-density greenfield estates that damage our tourism economy. The Government might as well be asking us to lead a moon landing programme, for all our ability to deliver either the current targets or the new ones. We are being set up for failure, and like other Members, I find that difficult to accept. If the Minister wishes to build for young Islanders, I will show him where and how to build, and I will tell him what we need. The answer is not low-density greenfield sprawl, or the numbers demanded. The Isle of Wight Council and I are at one on that.

Time prevents me from going into other reasons such as infrastructure, all of which are made worse by the Island's electricity, sewerage, water supply and hospitals, which are under pressure. In 40 years, we have had a 50% increase in population, and we had have half a mile of dual carriageway, and some cash last year to tinker with the wrong roundabout in Newport. Our 1938 rolling stock on Network Rail will now be upgraded to stock from 1970, which I suppose is modernity of a sort.

Anthony Mangnall

I am sorry to have two bites of the cherry, but—

Mr Speaker

Order. For people on the call list to have one intervention is pushing it a bit, but to have two is a little discourteous, given the amount of people who also have major constituency interests. If the hon. Gentleman wants to go ahead, fine, but he will go down the call list.

Anthony Mangnall

Fine, Mr Speaker, but my hon. Friend is making an important point about the need for infrastructure. Our manifesto said that it would be “infrastructure first”.

Bob Seely

I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, as well as you, Mr Speaker. In general, whether we represent suburbs or national parks, islands or cities, there is worth in the beauty of nature and place. We cannot keep ramming in housing without damaging our stewardship of the world. We must think long term, and not just until the next election. The poet Tennyson and the painter Turner did not come to the Island because it was convenient; they came because it was beautiful and it inspired them. That is one reason why the Island is an UNESCO biosphere reserve.

Our beauty has an economic as well as a moral value. Visitors spend half a billion pounds a year on the Island, and the greater the urban sprawl in the name of random algorithmic targets, the greater the damage to our economy, our quality of life and the intrinsic worth of our landscape and natural beauty. I fear that long-term overdevelopment in some parts of Britain is now destroying the things we love.

As I am keen to get as many other people in as possible, I am just going to make a couple of points on the White Paper, but I will speak for no more than another three minutes or so. There is good

stuff in the White Paper, but I fear the Government have not made the case for why the current system should be scrapped, as opposed to reformed. What are the unintended consequences here, and is the way to stop building firms land banking to give them more land with which to land bank? I am not quite sure that that makes sense.

Here are some ideas that a Conservative Government should follow, in my humble opinion. They should stick to the levelling up agenda; if not, shire Tories will be furious and red wall Tories betrayed. They should legally exhaust brownfield sites before greenfield is allowed; give communities the right to ban low density greenfield development; strengthen, not weaken community engagement; respect the rural, suburban and, indeed, city natures of a place; and develop a plan-led system. Above all, we need to change the incentives. If the Minister wants a sustainable future, let us be radical: put VAT on greenfield sites and provide financial incentives for brownfield sites; make developers pay council tax on undeveloped plots—that will get them focused; incentivise small developers to build out small plots or build above shops, where there is much more popular support for unused buildings; free up Government land for large-scale projects, but let us make it beautiful and respect the work done by Sir Roger Scruton and others; and, potentially in London, tighten the rules on foreign buyers who leave property empty and ban offshore shell purchases.

The White Paper needs to herald an era of sustainable, greener development in significantly greater harmony with the world around us. I hope this will not be a missed opportunity, and for that reason I support this supportive motion.

12.01 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), not least because it means that I am second on the grid for once. I notice that there are 55 Conservative Back Benchers hoping to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, no doubt all to heap praise on the Government's overhaul, or shall we say overturning, of the planning system—not only in the White Paper, but in the consultation and the changes to permitted development rights.

These certainly do bring many disparate expert practitioners to the same conclusion. The president of the Royal Institute of British Architects says that

“these shameful proposals do almost nothing to guarantee the delivery of affordable, well-designed and sustainable homes... they could also lead to the creation of the next generation of slum housing.”

The Campaign to Protect Rural England says that the

“acid test for the planning reforms is community involvement and on first reading, it's still not clear how this will work under a zoning system.”

The Mayor of London says that it

“will be a disaster for London and will ride roughshod over communities and locally elected representatives. It will mean fewer social and affordable homes being built every year, poorer quality housing and local people left with out-of-place buildings and no opportunity to have their say.”

Shelter says:

“Section 106 agreements between developers and councils are tragically one of the only ways we get social homes built these days, due to a lack of direct government investment. So, it makes no sense to remove this route to genuinely affordable homes”.

Is anyone happy? Yes, developers are happy because it slays their opponents—the provision of affordable housing and local democracy, and in the time I have I want to touch briefly on those two points.

Removing the locus of the public from individual applications destroys half a century during which local communities, either through their elected representatives or directly, have been able to influence the built environment—the very substance of where they live. I do not know about other Members, but I regularly speak at my planning committee. I am engaged with about 30 schemes at any one time. I meet—now, I Zoom—residents and I make representations to developers on their behalf. Councillors do the same, and there are the formal powers that a local authority has. However, this is not just about elected politicians. I have the most amazing amenity societies, such as the Hammersmith Society, the Fulham Society, the Hammersmith and Fulham Historic Building Group and many ad hoc groups. Between them—not only using their own skills and expertise, but through judicial reviews and planning consultants—they make a real difference, and stop the worst excesses of the state when it is brought to bear locally. I can think, in the last 10 years, of the campaigns we fought to stop the demolition of Charing Cross Hospital, the West Kensington estate—750 good social homes—and Shepherd’s Bush market. We have a history in this country of mistakes made by top-down planning. Look at the destruction of communities and charities that occurred in the ’60s and ’70s. A lot of political capital is expended on stopping things happening. I do not regret a moment of that time, but I do regret that those powers will now be taken away from local communities.

The Government have a terrible record on affordable housing. The removal of section 106 agreements, which, as Shelter says, is one of the few methods of getting affordable homes, the exemption up to 40 or 50 units allowing developers not to include affordable housing, and the permitted development rights will together destroy a majority of the very limited provision for affordable housing that we have.

We need subsidy. We need developers to stop sitting on a million approvals that should already have the green light. We need the Government to actually work to incentivise and enable the building of housing. It is a red herring to say that the planning system is preventing that.

These are appalling proposals, which will make misery for our communities, and I hope that Government Members will also oppose them.

12.06 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this debate on a very important subject, and on his excellent speech.

We need to build more homes; the Government are absolutely right about that. We need to level up across the country; the Government are right about that, too. But the problem with the algorithm on housing numbers is that it does not guarantee the building of a single extra home and, far from levelling up, it forces more investment into London and the south. That is a mechanistic approach and it is ill-conceived.

We need to reform the planning system. We need to ensure that that planning system sees the right number of homes being built in the right places. But we will not do that by removing local democracy, cutting the number of affordable homes that are built and building over rural areas. Yet that is exactly what these reforms will lead to. We do need, as I said, to build more homes, but we will not do that by forcing local authorities to grant more planning permissions to developers so that they can build more homes to bring the price down, because developers simply will not do it.

The Government need to think again, and they need to understand the impact that their proposals will have throughout the country—an impact that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight so ably set out. But I want to focus on my constituency. For the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, the housing target will go up by 21%. Given a previous planning inspector's decision, most of those homes will be in Maidenhead, not in the Windsor part of the constituency, and there is already an implication that green belt needs to be built on. But those numbers are less significant than the increase that is faced in the part of my constituency under Wokingham Borough Council. That council, over the past three years, has seen the delivery of homes over and above its target, but its target of 789 homes per year is now to be more than doubled, to 1,635 homes per year.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con)

Does my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour in Berkshire agree that councils such as Wokingham Borough Council and Bracknell Forest Council should be given some credit for delivering against mature local plans, and that very well run councils like them are best placed to understand the local requirement, instead of having national targets imposed on them?

Mrs May

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on those points. What seems to be happening is that if councils have delivered in the past—and they deserve to be congratulated on that—they are being forced to deliver even more in the future. Yet, by definition, if you have delivered in the past, you have less land on which to deliver in the future. It just does not seem to make sense, particularly when those who have not delivered are being rewarded by lower target numbers. That is the opinion of parish councils and town councils across the Wokingham area, including those in my constituency—Charvil, Remenham, Ruscombe, St Nicholas Hurst, Sonning, Twyford, Wargrave, and Woodley town council, part of which covers my constituency. They have urged the Government to think again, and to ensure that a realistic and manageable plan is put in place, that is achievable and does not create more problems than it solves.

I say to the Minister that one of the strongest arguments, if not the strongest, against this new housing algorithm—I would have thought that the Government might have abandoned algorithms by now—is that it simply does not deliver a single extra home. We want those homes to be built, but one of the problems that we see at local level is that developers just constantly put in planning permission applications. What we will see is not homes being built, but more planning permissions being built up by those developers.

One of the difficulties is that councils often find that, because of the way the five-year land supply is calculated, they reject planning permission and it is then allowed on appeal because there is not a five-year land supply. Why not count previously granted planning permissions in the five-year land supply, giving developers an incentive to build them out, because otherwise they would not get planning permissions in the future?

What the algorithm does is build up planning permissions; it does not build houses. As Cox Green Parish Council in my constituency has said:

“The real block to delivery is the developers’ appetite to build at a level which will affect house prices and their profit margins.”

It says of the Government’s approach:

“All that this strategy will accomplish is to further undermine public confidence in the planning system.”

My second objection was about the fact that this does not level up, as was very ably set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight. What the new algorithm does with regard to levelling up is fly in the face of the Government’s flagship policy. My point is simple: these proposals do not deliver on Government policies. The Government need to think again and come back to this House with a comprehensive proposal for a proper debate and—dare I say it?—a meaningful vote.

12.11 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. Our planning system is critical to delivering on some of the most important challenges that we face: the desperate need for new homes to address the housing crisis and the urgent need to tackle the climate and ecological emergency, decarbonise our economy, and protect and enrich our natural environment. To meet those challenges, our planning system must establish a clear and ambitious vision for our country, set high standards for design and environmental performance, give strong protection to the buildings, spaces and landscapes that people value, and actively support the involvement and engagement of a wide and diverse range of voices in decision making.

Yet the Government are not concerned with reforming the planning system so that it can address those urgent challenges. They are applying the usual, natural Tory instinct to deregulate, regarding the planning system as red tape to be cut through rather than as a valuable toolkit that must be further improved to secure genuinely progressive, sustainable planning outcomes, particularly in terms of the provision of new, genuinely affordable homes.

The reforms proposed in the planning White Paper are undemocratic. They will reduce the opportunity for local people to have a say on planning applications in their neighbourhood. By front-loading community involvement to the plan-making process, communities will be denied the opportunity to have a say on the specifics of new development. Under the Government’s plans, communities will have a say on only the broad designation of the site and an identikit pattern book of designs. There will be no opportunity for residents to have their objections heard and considered by a democratically accountable planning committee.

The Tories are going even further than that, and removing the need for planning permission altogether in a wide range of circumstances. In 2013, the Tory-Lib Dem coalition Government relaxed planning rules to make it possible for empty office or light industrial buildings to be converted into housing without the need for planning permission. That policy resulted in some of the most appalling housing the country has seen this century, in unsuitable locations with no amenities and often not adhering to even the most basic standards of design.

The coronavirus pandemic has shone a bright light on the injustice and inequality of our housing system. The Prime Minister’s instruction to the country on 23 March to stay at home had profoundly

different consequences for people depending on their housing situation. The experience of lockdown for people living in cramped, overcrowded, damp housing was worsening physical and mental health, family relationships strained to breaking point, an impossible environment for home schooling and, for those in the private rented sector, often the fear that as soon as the eviction ban was lifted they would be made homeless. Lockdown provided, lest we need it, a stark reminder of the public health consequences of inadequate housing, and the urgency of delivering the genuinely affordable homes that my constituents in Dulwich and West Norwood and so many people across the country desperately need.

The Government's planning reforms allow building owners to convert shop units into housing without the need for planning permission. That will not result in high quality, affordable sustainable homes or thriving town centres and high streets; that will result in high streets and town centres across the country being undermined by gaping holes in their retail frontage, reducing further the critical mass of reasons for shoppers to visit and support local businesses, when across the country our high streets and town centres face a perfect storm of economic challenges.

We need a vision for every part of our country, based on high quality, low-carbon jobs, distinctive and special town centres at the heart of every community, good public transport connections and genuinely affordable homes. We need a planning system with the core purpose of addressing the climate emergency, delivering the new homes we need, improving public health and involving everyone in shaping the future of their neighbourhood to deliver those vital outcomes. The deregulated, identikit, box-ticking, algorithm-generated mess set out in the White Paper will not.

12.15 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con)

I declare an interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council and the North Northamptonshire shadow authority. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on bringing this matter to the attention of the House. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who is always a doughty champion for the concerns of her constituents. She is quite right to say that the proposals will reduce local say in where new housing is built.

I want to bring to the attention of the House the malign impact the proposals will have on North Northamptonshire. For those hon. Members who do not know, North Northamptonshire comprises the boroughs of Corby, Wellingborough, Kettering and the district of East Northamptonshire. Several years ago, they came together to establish what I think was the country's first joint planning unit, which has been co-ordinating housing developments over the past decade or so.

Despite that innovation in planning, the key proposal in the Minister's recent consultation is to change the method for assessing local housing need. That will have a devastating impact on the ability to deliver new houses in North Northamptonshire, because it will mean that across the four boroughs and districts we will now have to deliver a staggering 3,009 homes every year. That is 72% more than the adopted joint core strategy requirement. At the moment in Corby, 506 houses a year are required under the existing formula. That will rise to 799. In Kettering, presently it is 526. That will rise to an unrealistic 853. In Wellingborough, 348 goes up to 535. In East Northamptonshire, presently it is 457 a year. That will go up to 821. Across North Northamptonshire, it will go up from 1,837 a year to 3,009 a year. On average, since 2011 we have only managed to build 1,640 a year and at the very height of the market the maximum that was achieved was 2,100, so the target is completely unrealistic and undeliverable.

It is a shame that we are faced once again with another mutant algorithm and I urge the Government to reconsider. The local housing needs assessment for North Northamptonshire under the formula means that my local area will be the highest for any authority in the Oxford to Cambridge spatial development arc. That is completely nonsensical since North Northamptonshire is right on the edge of the arc and all the towns in our area are only regarded in planning terms as of secondary economic importance.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con)

My constituency, like my hon. Friend's, contains areas of high urbanisation as well as areas of environmental sensitivity. Does he agree that those factors should be taken into account in the final algorithm the Government are currently consulting on?

Mr Hollobone

My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents, who are lucky to have him, and he puts his finger on an essential point, which I hope the Minister will take cognisance of.

I have to say frankly to the Minister that the scale of growth proposed is not supported by local people. It will work against any kind of community consensus on the local plan that North Northamptonshire will begin to prepare in 2021 to replace the existing plan. If the Government proceed with the revised standard method they propose, at the very least, the formula should be amended to remove the affordability adjustment in high-delivering areas such as North Northamptonshire, where housing land constraints are not the major factor in local house prices. Just like in the Isle of Wight, house prices have been driven up in North Northamptonshire because of incomers being attracted to the local area, due to the existing councils delivering high-quality housing. It is not related to local income growth levels.

The Government are being sent a clear message by Back Benchers today that they have got this wrong and they need to think again. I will leave the Minister with the words of the local joint planning unit, which said that it is "inconceivable" that new house building could be accelerated to an average of over 3,000 a year

"unless the local economy is transformed and there is a firm commitment by Government... to make substantial and sustained investment in infrastructure and services."

The Government have been warned: they need to think again.

12.20 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab)

People in Wirral West care passionately about the environment and the green belt and green spaces that make Wirral West such a beautiful place. They care, too, about nurturing wildlife habitats and addressing the urgent issue of climate change. In some areas, flooding is an issue that really brings that urgency home. There are numerous campaigns to protect green belt and green spaces, including campaigns against proposals to build a golf resort in Hoylake, against building on ancient glebe land in Rectory Road in West Kirby and against the development on green belt right across Wirral West. I fully support my constituents in those campaigns.

Currently, people have a legal right to oppose specific developments when individual detailed development applications are submitted, but this Government seek to do away with all of that. The Government's White Paper is a developers' charter. It sweeps away the right of local people to

challenge developments on their doorstep, tearing up democratic rights that have been there for over half a century. The Government have plenty of rhetoric about putting local communities at the heart of the new planning system, but they have failed to deliver—in fact, worse than that, they are taking rights away.

Instead of improving local accountability, this Government seek to take away the voice of local people. Constituents have written to me with their concerns that, under the Government's proposals, while local people will have a say about whether their areas will be growth, renewal or protected zones, once those zones are set in place, they will have no say at all on individual developments. I share their serious concerns. As the Wildlife Trusts have pointed out,

“public engagement in planning tends to be when individual detailed development applications are submitted and the impact that these will have on local people, infrastructure and nature becomes clearer. Under the new system, public engagement at this point would not be possible.”

We on the Labour Benches oppose this attempt to prevent local people from formally objecting to inappropriate developments in their neighbourhood. We want to see local people given a bigger say on the development of their neighbourhoods, not less.

The Government have said that their reforms will ensure that

“Valued green spaces and Green Belt will continue to be protected for future generations, with the reforms allowing for more building on brownfield land.”

However, the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England has warned that the Government's proposals

“would weaken protection of green space designated for growth or renewal, and offer no additional safeguards for those earmarked for protection.”

According to the CPRE, the Government's proposals give

“no consideration to the importance of undesignated green spaces near to where people live.”

There is no guarantee on protecting existing green spaces and green-belt land.

The Government's proposals risk delivering a dystopian nightmare in the heart of our communities, with no regard to the consequences for the environment, flood risk, climate change or quality of life. Let us be clear: our country desperately needs new homes, and it needs those developments to be on sustainable and brownfield sites. The “Planning for the Future” consultation document refers to driving up the provision of affordable homes, but the Royal Institute of British Architects has described the Government's proposals as “shameful”, adding that they will

“do almost nothing to guarantee the delivery of affordable, well-designed and sustainable homes.”

RIBA says that the proposals

“could also lead to the creation of the next generation of slum housing.”

Could there be any more indictment of the Government's proposals? The Government must respond to the outcry from people right across the country and drop these reckless proposals.

12.24 pm

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con)

The debate is timely for my constituents, who are currently fighting unsuitable and unsustainable housing developments across my West Yorkshire constituency. Developments include those on Netherton Moor Road, in Crosland Moor on Blackmoorfoot Road, in Pentlands on New Mill Road and on Wesley Avenue in Netherthong. Labour-run Kirklees Council's local plan is leading to greenfield sites being dug up for unsuitable and unsustainable developments, much against the wishes of local people.

A few weeks ago, I joined hundreds of local residents from Netherton in opposing a 250 Persimmon Homes development on a picturesque greenfield site on the edge of their village. The planning committee met virtually, but I and other objectors were cut off halfway through our statements. The development was controversially passed, despite legitimate concerns about flooding, highways and local ecology and wildlife. Residents were left feeling angry and disenfranchised by the planning committee's shoddy conduct. The scale and nature of the development is unsustainable for the community of Netherton, and there are similar concerns about plans for 700-plus houses in Crosland Moor.

That is why I have deep concerns about the "Planning for the Future" White Paper. We need more local control and democracy when it comes to developments. We need more protection for green spaces—not just green belt, but the green fields that give my village communities the much-needed green lungs.

It is all well and good making a local plan sacrosanct, but what if it was rammed through against local wishes and has not got the confidence or support of local people? We have lost confidence in Labour-run Kirklees on planning. Hundreds of houses keep being imposed on village communities, with no regard for highways provision, school places, doctors' surgeries and so on. When there is section 106 money, supposedly for local amenities and infrastructure, it just disappears into a general pot. We need more local involvement and more opportunity for local people to scrutinise and have their say on local planning applications. More priority needs to be given to brownfield sites and building more affordable homes to meet local needs. So often, the developments are for four and five-bed executive homes, crammed on to greenfield sites.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), I have huge concerns about the supposed new housing formula or algorithm. I think we have all had enough of algorithms this year. I fear that the new formula will allow developers to build hundreds of new houses on much-valued greenfield sites in my patch.

My constituents and I are fed up with the wrong houses in the wrong places. The White Paper should give local people a bigger say in the future of their communities. I agree with CPRE. Let us create a planning system that delivers genuinely affordable homes and protects locally valued green spaces, while boosting trust and participation in the planning system of the future.

12.28 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op)

Our planning system is not fit for purpose. I am sure that Members across the House agree that it needs urgent reform, but the Government's proposals do not offer the solutions for my constituents in Vauxhall.

The current system is already weighted in favour of local councils and developers, and the Government now want to frontload local participation towards development of the local plan and away from individual applications. That will not benefit my constituents, many of whom are already

involved in long-running battles to protect their quality of life and the homes and communities that they love so much and have invested in over so many years. In my experience, that is not about nimbysism or vexatious complaints. My constituents have valid, legitimate concerns and I support them in their battle to ensure that their homes, streets and neighbourhoods are not blighted by unsympathetic developments. We must remember that, at the end of the day, when the planning officials and developers have left, they are not the ones who have to live in the area and suffer the consequences of the developments. My constituents and your constituents will.

I have seen long-established, stable communities broken up and divided by inappropriate planning decisions, whereas if we invest in and contribute to these communities, they will create the social cohesion and collective wellbeing we all want.

Last week, I had the pleasure of welcoming the Earl and Countess of Wessex to Vauxhall City Farm in my constituency. They were able to meet local schoolchildren, the staff and the trustees in the community centre, which was built by a section 106 development. The Government have promised that the new planning system will develop at least as much affordable housing, if not more, yet we have no detail on what mechanism will replace section 106 and the community infrastructure levy.

It goes without saying that it is fundamental for our democracy, whereby we govern with consent, to allow constituents and local residents to have their say at every stage of the process. Does the Minister agree with the 61% of Conservative councillors in a recent poll who said that the reforms will make planning less democratic? We must ensure that we think about the people who are going to bear the brunt of these proposals, and I ask the Minister to come back with an answer to that.

12.30 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con)

I declare an interest as a sitting member of Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council. There is much to be supported in the planning White Paper, not least the Government's commitment to a brownfield-first strategy, the recognition of the need for appropriate supporting infrastructure for new developments, and higher design and style standards.

Several brownfield sites in my constituency have lain derelict for years, while developers have been enabled by the local authority—Wigan Metro—to build a tide of houses on green fields over the past decade. It is vital to prioritise brownfield above the green belt or greenfield sites to regenerate northern constituencies such as mine, but we must be diligent in ensuring that standards are upheld. Too often we see traffic impact assessments for planning applications that belong in the fiction section of the local library. On one site in my constituency, West Leigh Waterfront, Wigan Council seems hell-bent on seeing development on land categorised in part as having a level 3 flood risk. Such bad practice must be driven out of the system.

As for infrastructure, my constituents regularly point out that, aside from the East Lancs road and the sadly unfinished Atherleigh Way bypass, which has languished in such a state for roughly 35 years now, we have broadly the same main roads as we did in 1750. So furious are my residents at this state of affairs that a recent planning application for 69 more houses in the village of Lowton generated over 1,500 objections from residents sick of congestion and poor air quality. Councils such as Wigan Metro must be held to account for those failures.

Turning to the design, style and type of new properties, too many developments suffer from shoddy so-called affordable or social housing thrown up in a corner, often almost as an afterthought. They often manifest as undesirable, cramped two-storey blocks of flats—too small for young families

seeking their first home and unsuitable for single pensioners seeking to downsize from a three or four-bedroom council house to a council bungalow. We must ensure that social and affordable homes are of the right quality, even if it means they are fewer in quantity.

That brings me to my final point. Across my constituency, from Astley to Atherton and from Pennington to Golborne, grave concerns have been expressed about the sheer number of houses proposed by Wigan Council, whose only concern seems to be an insatiable thirst for the revenue generated by new properties without any regard for infrastructure. The number of properties that local authorities set out to build must be both reasonable and sustainable, and I worry when I hear talk of 300,000 houses being built, mainly because I fear that Wigan Metro may volunteer to build every single one of them.

12.34 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD)

Let me start by declaring an interest: my husband is a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute.

I particularly wish to speak about the parts of the White Paper that propose to phase development areas into three categories—“growth”, “renewal” and “protected”. That proposal gives rise to great concern in Richmond and Kingston. I cannot think of any part of my constituency that would fit neatly into any of those categories. My constituency contains some beautiful neighbourhoods of great architectural and historical interest, and all of its neighbourhoods have their own distinctive features. We would like to see some of those preserved and some regenerated, and there absolutely is space for growth, but it would be difficult, even in the most environmentally and historically sensitive sites, to say that no possible development could be permitted in an area. Equally, I cannot think of a site where unrestricted growth, with plans going unanalysed, would be at all desirable. Any kind of development can be agreed only by considering each site on its merits, which is why I am really opposed to the idea of adopting this phased approach to development.

I welcome the White Paper’s emphasis on local plans, which are good for local communities. I agree that local authorities should do more to get local communities engaged in that. In Richmond Park, we have already embraced the opportunities offered by local neighbourhood forums and their recognised role in developing neighbourhood plans. I wish to pay a particular tribute to the North Kingston Neighbourhood Forum, which I have been a member of in the past, and its incredible chair, Diane Watling, and to the very successful neighbourhood forum that was built up in Ham and Petersham. They have made a great contribution to local planning and thinking, and more of that sort of thing should definitely be encouraged.

We heard earlier from the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) about some of the issues with our current planning system that stem from private developers getting permissions that they then do not build. That provides part of the evidence of market failure in some aspects of our private sector housing development, and if we were able to encourage more public sector housing development, that could provide the competition we need to see prices driven down, and improvements in carbon standards and in building quality. That is much more the sort of change we need to see in our planning, rather than the ones proposed by this White Paper.

Above all, I wish to emphasise that taking decisions away from local communities makes it much harder to co-ordinate local services. In Richmond Park, we have a proposal for a development on the old Stag brewery site in Mortlake involving 1,275 homes. The massive issue we have with that is that it is no longer going to be decided by the local authority, because it has been called in by the Mayor,

and the local authority no longer has oversight of what kind of development is taking place in its area. It cannot think about the impacts on schools, health services and transport, and the development will be difficult to integrate without that overview.

The proposal to allow building upwards without permission will be a massive problem in my constituency, where we have some beautiful views. Turner painted one of the views from the top of Richmond hill. We have so many views that we want protected and we need the powers in our local authority to prevent building upwards—I am very opposed to that aspect of the White Paper.

12.38 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con)

On my way here in the mornings, I go past an abandoned factory site right next to the railway station in Market Harborough. It was given planning permission in 2004, yet it is still derelict. If I were Housing Minister, I would be focused on giving councils the powers and tools they need to unstick those stuck sites long before I came to look at anything to do with this housing algorithm. What people object to in my constituency is not that we are building more houses. We have a quarter more houses in the Harborough district than we did in 2001—we are pro-development. What people object to is being told that in the Harborough district we will double our housing target, whereas Leicester's will be slashed by a third, with its decrease perfectly cancelling out our increase, no extra houses built and the only thing being achieved is a sprawling outwards of that city, despite the fact that it is full of brownfield land that should be developed first. This is the wrong approach.

This formula is flawed in so many different ways. It is driven by population forecasts, so we see what is sometimes called the "Matthew effect", named after the gospel, whereby to those who have, more shall be given, meaning that because somewhere took houses before, it is going to get even more now. That is fundamentally flawed, a fact acknowledged in the consultation, yet it is there in the formula and still driving a big part of the problem.

The second part of the problem is that the so-called affordability in this formula is nothing of the kind. It is a ratio of workplace-based median earnings to median house prices. What we are doing—because people commute into cities, and that makes their workplace-based earnings look higher and affordability look better—is comparing the house prices in an area with the incomes of people who do not live in that area. That cannot be intellectually defended and it is one reason why we see the anti-urban bias in the formula.

We are then using earnings to house price ratios. Geoffrey Meen at the University of Reading—one of the doyennes of this field, whose modelling is always used by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—says that this "reveals little information" and that

"increases in the ratio over time do not necessarily imply a worsening of affordability... For these reasons, price to earnings ratios are rarely advocated in the academic literature",

and yet we are using them. If instead we were to look at total income—not just earnings—and all housing costs, including the costs of people who are social renters and private renters, who are more common, of course, in cities, we would see that the housing problem, the affordability problem, in this country is concentrated in cities. That is where the poll shows that people are worried about there not being enough housing, so instead of sprawl we should have a more urban-focused approach.

A sprawl-focused approach is bad for the environment and for the Prime Minister's target of net zero. In cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bradford, Sheffield, Nottingham and Leicester, the household emissions are 15% lower than the national average. The transport emissions are 35% lower—there is more walking, more cycling and more public transport—and yet they are being asked to deliver 37% fewer houses than they are delivering at the moment, so that is bad for the environment, exercise and health, because people who live in cities walk twice as much as those who live in villages, and there is more cycling. It is also bad for productivity because the places we are slashing the housing targets for are those that are seeing faster productivity growth. Successive Governments have been trying, whether with the northern powerhouse, the modern industrial strategy or now levelling up, to target urban growth to get the productivity of our great cities going again. That is what we were trying to do instead of just going back to a south-east-centric, shire model of growth and what we had in the 1980s.

In conclusion, Ministers should fundamentally rethink this formula so that it actually hits the target. Yes, we should build more houses, but we should do it in the right places. We have to reflect the advantages of building in urban areas and bring in caps, because if we have huge increases, the pace of change is part of the problem. People do not object to change. They do not object to more houses—in fact, they want more houses—but they do not want to see the character of their area change overnight. That is why we need caps back in the formula. There are so many good things in the White Paper. Ministers have so many good things to talk about. I wish we could solve the issue of the flawed housing algorithm, so that we can get on with doing all those good things.

12.42 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab)

The latest Government figures show that about 2.5 million planning approvals have been granted by councils since 2009-10, but only about 1.5 million have been actioned, so I am not sure that councils are the problem. In my constituency, the lack of action to tackle developers who breach planning laws is a major concern: 97% of residents in my local survey want a quicker and easier system to address that. They also want a right of appeal on applications that have a major impact on the character of their area and change of use applications.

Raising the minimum number of houses before a developer contribution applies will not improve the supply of affordable housing. Affordable housing need does vary. It is a major issue in Birmingham, and I feel that thresholds would be better determined locally based on local needs.

The abolition of section 106 payments could rob local communities of benefits that they derive from new developments. Government statistics released in November last year showed that nearly half of all affordable homes in England delivered in 2018-19 were financed or part-financed through section 106 agreements. We need to know that the infrastructure levy will be at least as good as the system that it is replacing.

Like the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), I have concerns about proposals to allow additional storeys. I am not clear whether that will apply to student accommodation, but I say to the Minister that there is already an issue in my constituency with landlords who build unsuitable extensions. They are basically seeking to cram in as many rooms as possible, and I am really worried about the safety implications of this proposal.

Finally, reducing the planning timescale from 16 weeks to eight weeks will reduce the time for people to marshal objections to unwelcome proposals. In fact, moving all the notifications online will

further curtail local awareness of proposals, so I wonder whether the Minister wants to look at that again.

12.45 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con)

We were elected 12 months ago on a platform of building more houses, and we need to build more houses; there is no doubt about that at all. But we were also elected on a platform of rebalancing our economy, protecting our green belt and looking after natural England. I am afraid that although I praise many elements of what the Minister is trying to achieve, this housing algorithm is completely inconsistent with the promises we made a year ago.

If we go ahead with a housing approach of the kind that the Government are setting out in the algorithm, the reality is that economic growth, the brightest and best people in society, and opportunity will continue to be sucked into the south-east of England. That is exactly the opposite of what this country needs to achieve. If we are to be successful in the future, we need to be more like countries such as Germany, where the economic centre of the nation is not in one place, but is spread out over a number of successful and prosperous cities. If one walks around the cities of the midlands and the north, it is clear that there is not a lack of developable land and opportunity; there is plenty. There are endless relics of more prosperous times for those cities in the past that can and should be regenerated for the future. The solution is not simply shoehorning more and more into the south-east.

I represent one of the constituencies that will be directly affected if the Government go ahead with this policy. The Office for National Statistics says that our future housing need is around 250 new houses a year. The previous target, which was unsustainable, was already 579. This algorithm would push the number to over 600. I represent an urban constituency where the available land is either green belt or parkland, but there are some opportunities. I have myself put forward to the local authority a proposal to build several thousand new houses by remodelling the commercial areas. We can build on the strengths of the area, which has one of the finest creative universities in the country, and create new business premises in an integrated urban village environment where people can live close to work. We can develop a new generation of digital and creative businesses. It is a real opportunity, which we can deliver.

We can deliver new homes—new homes aimed at first-time buyers and at the right demographic to keep people in our area—but what we cannot do is build 600 new houses a year in perpetuity. It is simply not possible. Actually, it is possible: by tearing up the manifesto commitments that we made a year ago and building all over the green belt. Even then, we will still probably need to build lots of tower blocks, which goes diametrically against the commitments we made about protecting communities.

In a nutshell, this policy simply cannot work for a constituency like mine. It is impossible to deliver it and keep the promises that we made to the electorate, and it is the wrong thing to do. It will have the counterproductive effect I have described of sucking economic activity into the south. It will destroy the environment in the area I represent. It will congest already congested infrastructure. Of course, it is also based on so many false premises, because, as with many other constituencies in Surrey, the algorithm forgets altogether the income from commuters by focusing on affordability, so it misses altogether the incomes of the most prosperous people in my area, who work elsewhere and get the train into the City in the mornings. It only focuses on the incomes of those who live and work in the constituency.

I praise the Government's ambition. I simply say that the mode of implementation—the route they are currently following—is the wrong one for the country and for the constituency I represent. I urge the Minister, who is a good man, to think again, because I regret to say that, even as a loyal supporter of the Government, I cannot support this policy in its current form.

12.49 pm

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing this debate and for his superb speech. I used to be generally against development, but since being elected I have come to see just how difficult it is for young people to get on to the housing ladder, and I have changed my views. Many of my constituents have changed theirs, too. However, like them, I have grave reservations about these proposals.

My first reservation is about the undermining of local democracy. In 2017, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) introduced new housing targets. The people of Farnham in my constituency, to give an example, did the right thing; they did not really want more houses, but they found the places to put those houses. Councillor Carole Cockburn undertook painstaking local consensus building, and 88% of the town supported the neighbourhood plan in a referendum. But then we were told the local plan was not ambitious enough, and they had to go back to square one. Once again, they painstakingly found where to put new houses and put it to the people of Farnham, and this year they got 95% support. Now they are about to be told that that is not good enough. Increasingly, it looks like the Government are not interested in what local people think at all. I urge the Minister to think about the impact of showing contempt for local democracy. In the end, if we want more houses, we have to carry people with us.

My second concern is about affordable housing. The average income in my constituency is £39,000, much higher than in many parts of the country, but the average house price is £447,000, so someone needs to be on £60,000 to afford an entry-level house. That is way out of the reach of a nurse, a police officer or a teacher. However, simply increasing the housing targets does not help them, because the price of new stock is set by the price of existing stock, and all that happens is land banking, which is why in my constituency currently, only 28% of all the housing permissions granted are actually being built out. These proposals will make that problem worse, not better.

Finally, I am concerned for the local countryside. Some 77% of my constituency is green belt, area of outstanding natural beauty or area of great landscape value. Upping the housing targets by more than 20% will inevitably force the local council to encroach on those beautiful areas. People sometimes say that the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 was a sort of mistake in planning policy, but we should be incredibly proud that we can drive in virtually any direction from this place for an hour and be in the most beautiful countryside. That is an enormous achievement for our country. One of the best things about our country is the beauty of the English countryside, and we lose that at our peril.

In short, I am concerned that these proposals do not recognise serious risks. The argument for building new houses has been won, but what is on the table risks eroding local democracy, reducing affordable housing and encroaching on our beautiful countryside. The Government must think again.

12.52 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op)

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt). I agree with what he said.

Anyone who has ever visited York will understand why we must not make a mistake with planning. Layers of history lie under our streets. The minster dominates our landscape and the green strays reach into the heart of York. "Planning for the Future" threatens that, it threatens our economy, and it will not meet our housing need.

York tells the story of planning. The inspirational Rowntrees, through their work on poverty, moved York's slums into the UK's first garden village, New Earswick, more than 100 years ago. They built spacious and well-proportioned houses with gardens, with allotments and amenities nearby. The Rowntrees met need and provided the very best of housing.

This is not just about numbers; it is about the quality and type of housing. It is so necessary to address those things, but the White Paper does not. Seebohm Rowntree held the first land inquiry in 1912, which sowed the seeds for the first Housing Act in 1919, based on his experience in York. The White Paper removes local democracy, residents' voices, and investment in amenities and the environment. It is a handout for the development industry, not a hand up for those in housing need.

Before I highlight a couple of failings in the White Paper, I want to dig underground. Archaeology is the springboard to York's tourism. All archaeological interest, perhaps, as yet, unrecorded, undesignated and currently undiscovered, must have time for a full desk and field evaluation. Getting planning wrong, as was the case with the Queen's Hotel in York, which was built in 1989, left archaeologists unable to prove where our Roman forum lay. That resulted in an obligation being placed on developers in 1990 to safeguard archaeology in the planning system. The White Paper "Planning for the Future" puts this back, as planning permission goes before archaeological evaluation in both growth and renewal areas. It is turning back the clock on planning by 30 years. Our economy depends on good archaeology. It must come before planning decisions.

We have a housing crisis in York. Last year, only 22 homes for social rent were built in my constituency. More houses were sold under right to buy and, with need increasing as we speak, more than 1,775 people are on the housing waiting list. This White Paper does not address that need. Homelessness, overcrowding, poor placement of housing and, of course, extortionate costs for the private rented and purchase sector means that people and skills are being moved out of our city, skewing our economy as a result, so we must address the housing need before us. With local determination removed, there is automatic outline planning permission in growth areas, presumption in favour of development and renewal in infill areas, and no obligation in those areas on affordable housing. That is wrong and a huge mistake by the Government. We will find out about this only through digital portals, which excludes those who are not connected but read the printed planning proposals in York's press. We must keep those traditional methods in place.

Finally, let me turn to York Central. The Minister and I need to talk. This densely planned housing development will choke off York's economic opportunity for the future, building luxury houses for the investment market rather than building houses to meet the housing needs of my city. That will further skew the housing economy. "Planning for the Future" is not what our city needs. What we need are proper plans, which involve local people shaping the future of York for all.

12.56 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell).

In the late 1990s, as a new MP, I led a campaign in my constituency against plans by John Prescott, now the noble Lord Prescott, to impose top-down centralised targets for house building in Ashford. I would have been shocked and depressed had I thought that, 20 years later, I was having to make all the same points about proposals from a Conservative Government.

Of course, life moves on. The latest manifestation of the gentleman in Whitehall knowing best comes with that essential 2020 attribute—an algorithm. People have said enough about algorithms already today, but I say gently to the Minister that algorithms are a tool for mathematicians, not politicians. I object to this particular algorithm for two reasons: in principle, because a national algorithm destroys local decision making; and, in practice, because it will bake in over-development in the south and under-development in the north. It is exactly the opposite of what the Government's excellent levelling-up policy should be about. This will not be levelling up; it will be levelling over green fields with concrete.

I know what links the bad proposals from the 1990s with today's bad proposals: the eternal view of the Department, which has changed its name many times but which is always fixed in its views, that we do not build enough houses because local councils pay too much attention to nimby residents. That may be true in some places, but I can absolutely say that it is not true in Ashford, where local plans for years have designated building new homes in the high hundreds and where the physical evidence can be seen in new estates. The same is true all over Kent. My neighbouring colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson), and for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), make the same point. We are in danger of turning the garden of England into a patio.

What is frustrating is that I agree with many of the things that the Government are trying to do: we need to build more homes; we need to design them better; we need to take more account of the countryside, and that includes green fields and not just green belt; and we need to continue with levelling up. The instincts are right, but it is the execution that is wrong. I have stood at that Dispatch Box often enough to know that it is all very well to hear people around you moaning, it is what should be done instead—that is an entirely reasonable thought. The answer for the Minister is that, instead of taking away local powers, the Government should be looking at the number of planning permissions given that do not result in houses being built.

The Secretary of State has said that it is his ambition to build 1 million new homes during this Parliament. CPRE—I should declare an interest as vice-president of Kent CPRE—has pointed out that there are about 1 million housing plots with planning permission in this country. The Secretary of State could achieve his very laudable ambition without granting a single extra planning permission in this Parliament.

At this point, it is usual to blame greedy developers for land banking. I do not blame them. If anyone had a product that they could sell for £200,000 this year and £250,000 next year, they would delay selling it as well. It is the system that is wrong. There are any number of ways of changing the system. We could have planning permission lasting only for a few years. We could charge council tax, perhaps at punitive rates, on the plots of houses that are not being built. There are a number of other ways that I know people could think of to make sure that planning permissions actually turn into homes, because it is new homes that we want.

There are good parts of the planning Green Paper, but if the Government do not respect local input into decision making about numbers as well as zones, the good will be thrown out along with the bad. I urge Ministers not just to prepare a few minor concessions, but to start again, scrap the

algorithm, work with local communities, not against them, and give us the planning policy the country desperately needs.

1.00 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab)

I say to the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) that one thing has changed more frequently than the title of the Department, and that is the Housing Ministers themselves. In the past 10 years, we have had 10 Housing Ministers, five of them lasting less than six months. That suggests that the importance given to housing is not that great, but it is certainly the biggest issue for my constituents.

I would therefore like to be positive and suggest 10 things that the Government might want to take on board. No. 1: I know it may be contrary to some people's view, but not all green belt is green. I do not mean the genuinely rolling fields, ancient woodland or areas of outstanding natural beauty; I am talking about the car washes, the waste plants and the scrublands that no one would ever dream of calling green. There are 19,334 hectares of unbuilt green-belt land within a 10-minute walk of London train stations, where there is enough space for 1 million new homes.

No. 2: it is time for the Government to say to councils, to the Ministry of Defence and to the NHS that it is mad to sell their land simply to the highest bidder. Instead, the first consideration for any piece of publicly owned land should be: can it be used for housing and can it be used for social housing?

No. 3: I am glad that the Government are now interested in modular homes, but there is a catch—they are not having them until 2030. Where is the ambition? Modular homes are cheaper, quicker to build, more efficient, and ready to go right now.

No. 4: it was reported last year that there are now more than 216,000 long-term empty properties in England. That is equivalent to 72% of the Government's annual new homes target alone. Let us get some money out there and get those homes back into use.

No. 5: How can it be right that one in 10 adults owns a second home while four in 10 do not own their first? Even the stamp duty holiday is exacerbating that difference. It is not a sustainable future for our country or our democracy.

No. 6: we must deal with land bankers. In 2019, the FTSE 100 house building companies were sitting on a land bank of more than 300,000 plots between them. If we add in the rest—the FTSE 350 house building companies—then the collective land bank was a staggering 470,068 plots. Yet they completed just 86,685 homes in the previous year. Where is the punitive or preventive action on land banking?

No. 7: what about the reducing the proportion needed to buy into shared ownership, to let families and single people buy at 5%, 2% or 1% rather than the 20% floor, giving them the opportunity to buy and to get in on home ownership with a smaller deposit?

No. 8: why are we not incentivising the development of more specialist accommodation for the elderly, improving the options available for older people, while releasing some of the current housing stock?

No. 9: why are so many properties across our capital owned internationally, rather than by Londoners and people in this country? Let us take ideas from some other countries. I am really sorry; I am not going to get to No. 10, Madam Deputy Speaker—[Hon. Members: “Go on!”] All right!

No. 10: I have offered all these questions in a similar situation back in other debates. Everybody has good ideas, so let us just get on with it.

1.04 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)

I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for all the work he has done on this and the Backbench Business Committee for granting time to debate this important matter. With dozens of colleagues still wanting to speak, I am going to make just three short points. First, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) made the point that people now accept that we need more homes and that, for affordability, we need to increase the number of homes, including in constituencies such as mine in East Hampshire. However, we need to look not only at the aggregate number but at the mix, and for people on low incomes, focusing on the median price may be largely irrelevant.

My second point is about the algorithm, or, as we used to call them back in the olden days, the formula. With any such exercise, of course it is right to look at the input elements and to consult on whether they are the right ones, but it is also right to look at what happens when we run the numbers to see what the output is. If the outcome of that formula or exercise is to entrench historical patterns of population growth and contraction, in tension with the Government’s correct emphasis on levelling up and in some ways in direct contradiction to that emphasis, we need to look afresh at the formula.

Steve Brine

Is not the other problem with the formula or algorithm, or whatever we call it, that it seems to have a tin ear to constituencies such as my right hon. Friend’s and mine, where vast parts of the districts in question are covered by national parks? The algorithm does not seem to consider that.

Damian Hinds

My hon. Friend is bang on. That is going to be my third point, which I will come to in a second.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con)

My right hon. Friend and I share a local planning authority, which has already been meeting the five-year supply requirements, but the algorithm means that the numbers will go up by 50% in our constituencies. Does he think that is acceptable?

Damian Hinds

My hon. Friend makes a good point—[Interruption.] Opposition Members are getting very upset about the clock, and I apologise, but do not worry, I will come in at well under four minutes anyway.

My third and final point is indeed about national parks. The local authority that I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) is bisected by a national park. If a housing needs assessment is made on the basis of the local authority area but it then has to be heavily disproportionately implemented in the area outside the national park, that causes two sets of problems. First, inside the park, in areas such as Petersfield and Liss, housing will become more and

more unaffordable over time. Also, just outside the national park, in places such as Alton and Four Marks, there will be a great deal of pressure and it will be difficult to keep up in terms of service provision. If two different parts of an area have very different constraints, a separate housing needs assessment should be made for each one. The Minister is a good Minister and a good man, and I take it very much at face value that this is a consultation. I encourage him and the Government to think again about some of these important matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)

Order. We seemed to be having a bit of a problem with the clock. I will keep my eye on the four minutes, so if hon. Members would like to look at me, I will gesticulate appropriately when it gets towards the end of their time.

1.08 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this important debate. The “Planning for the Future” White Paper states that it plans for local communities to have control over where development goes and what it looks like, in its plan to build the homes this country needs. I wholeheartedly agree that local communities should have a great deal more agency regarding building developments in their area. However, given the recent activity in my constituency of Poplar and Limehouse, I very much doubt the Government’s credentials in this field.

The controversy surrounding the Westferry Printworks development in my constituency illustrates that this Government’s priorities lie in serving billionaires rather than the interests of local people. I believe that viability assessments must be undertaken centrally, and published, for sites on which affordable housing is contested. By allowing private companies to undertake their own assessments, controversies such as that of Westferry Printworks become built into our housing system.

In a BBC report, one of my constituents was quoted as feeling “cheated” and described local people as losing out as a result of the Westferry Printworks development. That controversy is indicative of a failing housing system—a system that has led many in my constituency to live through the covid-19 pandemic in overcrowded housing.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con)

Will the hon. Lady give way?

Apsana Begum

I will not.

Some of my constituents now face the threat of homelessness with the evictions ban lifted. One fifth of residents in my borough are paid less than the living wage of £13,650 a year. We have one of the highest average rents in London, while at the same time having some of the highest levels of poverty in the entire country. Clearly, the combination of high rents and low wages is toxic. With the Government’s already patchy pandemic support being withdrawn, we are facing the possibility of mass homelessness this winter.

It is therefore shocking that now, of all times, our Government plan to further empower private property developers, instead of turning their efforts to building social housing to deal with a winter homelessness crisis that is around the corner. Since the Prime Minister was elected, the Conservative party has received £11 million in donations from property developers. This White

Paper is evidence of the influence such developers have bought themselves from our Government, with many referring to the Government's planning reforms as a developers' charter.

For many, job security has been hit hard by the covid-19 pandemic. With the Chancellor's financial support being gradually withdrawn, many are facing a winter of uncertainty. To illustrate the point, it has been reported that there are now more food banks in the UK than McDonald's restaurants. That statistic is an indictment of the lack of care that our Conservative Government have for so many in our society. Can the Minister explain what adjustments will be made to proposed housing reforms to combat the oncoming homelessness crisis that we may face?

Algorithms used by the Government have been in the news for negative reasons recently. The A-levels fiasco illustrates the flagrant lack of regard the Government have for the welfare of those living in less affluent areas. This White Paper sets out the use of a new algorithm and compulsory standardisation methodology that will dictate the allocation of new housing across local authorities. The planning and development consultancy Lichfields has reported that the algorithm will result in greater levels of planning allocation in rural areas as compared with built-up metropolitan areas. With areas such as Tower Hamlets facing some of the greatest housing poverty in the UK, the algorithm looks set to be another design to further engrain the social inequalities we face in this country.

1.12 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)

Test Valley Borough Council historically has delivered new housing numbers above target and produced local plans in accordance with local need. Indeed, that is unlike the neighbouring borough of Eastleigh, where my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes), who cannot be here today, is pressing the Liberal Democrat council to do the same. Test Valley has played its part, but sees the projected increases from the algorithm as punishment for having done so. My contribution to today's debate is most certainly not about saying, "No more house building here"—we need more houses—but it is about saying, "Let local councillors who have a track record of delivery carry on delivering."

The Housing Minister and I were first elected in 2010 on a manifesto that committed to no more top-down housing targets, and this algorithm looks suspiciously like a top-down target. I have urged both residents and local councils such as Wellow parish council, which wrote to me just this week, to complete the "Planning for the Future" consultation, because the sensible voices of Romsey and Southampton North must be part of the process. I urge the Minister to heed their thoughts, because Wellow has been working hard on delivering a neighbourhood plan, recognising the special situation of a village that sits part inside a national park, in close proximity to sites of special scientific interest and flood plains.

Test Valley has benefited in recent years from the development of specialist housing communities for older people. First homes are crucial, but so are last homes, which free up larger properties for growing families. Under the current system, when calculating numbers, such homes count for only 0.7 of a dwelling. I am not sure how anything can be 0.7 of a home; it is either a home or it is not. As the population ages, we need to find solutions for those who wish to downsize. I urge my right hon. Friend, when he is inevitably reviewing this algorithm, to also look at how he can resolve that arithmetic anomaly.

Like so many colleagues in the Chamber this afternoon, I want measures to tackle land banking.

The Romsey brewery site has extant planning permission, but Stanborough Developments is building on it at a glacial pace. I was 11 when the last brew started, and will confess to our being a few decades on from that. Powers against developers who blight brownfield sites in that way must be retrospective and they must be powerful; perhaps, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) suggested, there could be punitive council tax for houses not yet built.

But what Orwellian horror might pattern books produce? What about innovation, imagination and variety? If we must have new homes, can we not just entrust local councillors to decide what has kerbside appeal and what does not?

Turning to green belt, in Hampshire we have none, save for a tiny corner in the south-west, which is designed to prevent the spread of the urban conurbation of Bournemouth—a town, of course, in an entirely different county. Please will my hon. Friend the Minister think a little about those counties that have no green belt and might want to introduce some?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) spoke of the need to repurpose commercial areas. We know that, over the course of the past six months, town and city centres have been left like ghost towns and there is an enormous amount of commercial property that we would need to use a great deal of imagination to bring into residential use. That is the sort of innovative planning for the future that we need: one that will recognise the planning needs that exist and the numbers that are needed, but provide new ways to solve them, not simply a mathematical one.

1.16 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab)

I also speak as a sitting local councillor in my constituency of Luton South, which has many examples of the housing failures of 10 years of Tory rule, most recently brought to my attention by the Luton Community Forum. A lack of genuinely affordable housing and the changes to housing benefit and universal credit for the under-35s have increased the reliance on houses of multiple occupancy. Alongside that, an increase in unfit housing created through permitted development rights means that young people and families alike are living in substandard, overcrowded conditions, and house prices and private rents are unaffordable for many.

So what is the Government's response? Cutting red tape—or, as I would say, removing regulations and democratic oversight that are there to ensure good-quality, safe homes. As the president of the Royal Institute of British Architects put it:

“Deregulation won't solve the housing crisis.”

The Government's “Planning for the Future” White Paper fundamentally misdiagnoses the cause of and the solutions to the housing crisis in this country. Affordable homes are no longer affordable and there are not enough homes being built, particularly for social rent.

In Luton, we have more than 13,000 people on our council house waiting list. Luton Council's affordable housing document identified an unmet need of around 5,500 affordable dwellings, but there are few brownfield sites left in our town to develop. The duty to co-operate has been more or less ignored by neighbouring authorities.

Alexander Stafford

Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Hopkins

I will not.

Key workers in Luton are struggling to pay rent. The very people we have relied on throughout the pandemic to keep us safe—our nurses, hospital cleaners and care home staff—are going home worried about keeping a roof over their own and their families' heads. The latest End Child Poverty statistics state that 46% of children in my constituency live in poverty. The Government should be supporting children out of poverty, not consigning them to it. A good-quality, secure home is the foundation for a stable future.

While the planning system needs reform, simply slashing red tape ignores some of the real issues, including the fact that there are no measures to force developers to use unimplemented planning permissions or to tackle land banking, as has been raised by many hon. Members. As the Local Government Association has noted, nine in 10 applications are approved by councils, with more than 1 million homes that were given planning permission over the last decade yet to be built. That must be addressed.

The White Paper's front-loading of public participation towards involvement only in the development of the local plan and away from individual applications strips local people of their voice in planning applications and removes their ability to formally object to specific developments in their area. It deprives elected councillors and communities of the ability to shape their area and shifts the balance in favour of developer choice instead. If we want to build back better, local people and communities must be at the heart of any regeneration and they should have more say, not less.

Scrapping red tape and extending permitted development rights will lead to the creation of more slum housing that does not meet the needs of local people. My constituents in Luton South desperately need a better plan, one that will build high-quality, genuinely affordable and environmentally sustainable homes. The Government have fallen way short of the mark for a decade as the situation has worsened, and now they have presented the House with a plan that takes local communities further away from planning decisions, while lining the pockets of wealthy developers. The Government need to rethink.

1.19 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con)

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), who gave a splendid exposition of the issue facing us today. Although she is no longer in her place, I also agree with the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) in wishing that our planning Ministers stuck around for a bit longer than they have done during the past 10 years. I do not wish to sentence my right hon. Friend the Minister to a life sentence in that post, but he is perfectly able at the job, and I look forward to his continuing for a great deal longer than his predecessors. Indeed, I can think of no greater comparison than with the late Lord Stockton, who was a man of great erudition and charm—qualities that my right hon. Friend possesses in abundance. No doubt he will be an equally successful housing Minister.

Contrary to the impression we sometimes give, Conservative Members are not bananas, and we are not part of the “build absolutely nothing anywhere near anybody” brigade. On the contrary, we believe in building more homes but, as many colleagues have said, we must build them in the right places. I congratulate the Government on their “brownfield first” policy. In my borough of

Stockport, that policy made the council realise, once it was compelled to have a proper look around, that it could make available not 7,000 housing units on that type of land, but 12,000 units.

I thank the Minister for the work that Homes England continues to do. I recently visited a site off Melford Road in Hazel Grove—a partnership between Viaduct Housing, Stockport Homes and Mulbury. That is a great example of where pump priming from Homes England can make brownfield sites more viable for development. I am also pleased by the greater focus on rezoning, particularly of commercial and retail sites into housing, which is welcome.

Arguments about planning will continue to rage for as long as we have an adversarial system for that. We will continue the argumentative process until we abandon the notion that planning is something that is done to communities. Instead, we must revive and continue to champion the neighbourhood planning process, which actually gets more built because communities are bound together and see the need for such a process. In my constituency, neighbourhood forums are developing in Marple, High Lane, Mellor, Marple Bridge, Mill Brow and Compstall, and that is exactly the sort of thing we should encourage. Those plans need even greater strength in law, so that we can allow homes to be built where communities see a need for them.

The land-banking disgrace must be remedied and rectified quickly: 1 million units with permission remaining unbuilt is not a story to be proud of. Given the number of times that I have made this speech I might sound like an old record, but the green belt is sacrosanct. We must protect it. The vagaries around the Greater Manchester spatial framework and the Greater Manchester combined authority must be tackled, but I reiterate that the green belt must be protected intact, as it is now.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)

Order. As colleagues can see, a large number of right hon. and hon. Members still wish to speak, so after the next speaker I will reduce the time limit to three minutes.

1.23 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)

There is an elite dining club called the Leader's Group. It is a club exclusively for the super-rich, and to join, a member must donate £50,000 to the Conservative party. The Conservative party's website described the group as follows:

"Members are invited to join the Leader and other senior figures from the Conservative Party at dinners, post-PMQ lunches, drinks receptions".

I say "described" because, as The Daily Telegraph reported this summer, that page has been quietly removed from the website, along with the public register of the Prime Minister's dinners with the party's biggest donors. I draw attention to that because some of the Conservative party's biggest donors are property developers who qualify for membership and will have attended those dinners.

In the Prime Minister's first year in office, the Conservative party has received more than £11 million from these super-rich developers and construction businesses. These people have paid small fortunes to sit down with Cabinet members and talk about whatever it is property developers like to talk about with the people who decide planning policy.

Eleven million pounds is a lot of money, but with this planning White Paper, property developers have really got value for money, because this White Paper is a developers' charter. It strips away local oversight of planning applications, with pre-approved applications in designated zones getting an automatic green light. It significantly raises the threshold needed for section 106 requirements, meaning that for many more projects, developers will not need to provide any contribution to affordable housing. It cuts away what the Government call red tape, rather than learning the lessons from the Grenfell Tower tragedy on the need to raise standards and safety.

As the Campaign to Protect Rural England highlights, these plans contain no new protections for green-belt land. Instead, they "weaken protection" of undesignated green spaces in what the CPRE describes as a "free-for-all for development". The president of the Royal Institute of British Architects has described these plans as "shameful" and said that it could lead

"to the creation of the next generation of slum housing."

Housing charity Shelter says that social housing could face "extinction" under the plans, and dozens of my constituents have told me of their concerns. They fear for our green spaces under these plans, which too often are already under threat. They know that the priority for Coventry is council and genuinely affordable housing, but these plans do nothing to meet that need.

This White Paper is a good deal for developers, but for the thousands of people in Coventry struggling to pay rent, for those on the housing waiting list desperate for a decent home and for people praying to get on the housing ladder, it is a rotten plan set to make a bad situation worse. Instead of a planning system rigged for developers, it is about time we put human needs first. That means the biggest council house building programme in generations, with local councils given power and funding to build the homes that people need. It means rent controls, and ultimately, it means a Government who are no longer in the pockets of developers.

1.27 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con)

I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) has been listening to the debate, but every single Conservative Member has talked about having the correct development, not unrestricted development across the country.

In the short time I have, I want to concentrate on my constituency of Dartford, which is a very proactive builder. It has allowed a garden city with some 7,500 homes to be built on a brownfield site in Ebbsfleet, which is less than 25 miles from the Chamber of this House. I defy any Member to point to a development within 25 miles of the Chamber that has been put forward with less controversy than the garden city in my constituency. Dartford Borough Council has ensured that it has exceeded its target each and every year.

Last year, Dartford built a new house for every 104 local residents. In comparison, Manchester built one house for every 389 people, and the West Midlands built one house for every 1,340 people, so we cannot be accused of not playing our part. However, I regret to say that our housing target has been doubled under these proposals, while neighbouring Gravesham has seen its housing target halved. Anybody who knows Gravesham will vouch for the fact that it is a fairly similar local authority, with a similar mix of rural and urban areas. It is very Kentish in its identity, and it has similar house prices. We therefore find ourselves in a bit of an odd situation.

It is essential that we bring local authorities with us in proposing these targets. Good, proactive councils that are already building houses need to be encouraged, but there is a danger that they will get rebuffed and end up building fewer houses as a consequence. I spoke to the leader of my council, Jeremy Kite, who rightly said that house building is at its best when there is an enthusiastic relationship between the developers, the local authority and local residents. We need to ensure that that continues.

People are realistic about housing targets. They realise, because they have youngsters at home who want to get on the housing ladder, that we need to build new houses. However, that is only up to a point. What they fear is a lack of infrastructure. Too often, we see Governments of all persuasions sitting down and working out where we can put more houses and more developments on brownfield sites and how we can get local authorities to build, when people at home are saying, “How can I get an appointment with my GP? How can I get a place for my child in school? How can I get to work through the congested roads?” We need to also concentrate on infrastructure.

1.30 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con)

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I hope the Minister for Housing, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), who I thank for listening to my concerns, will forgive me if I do not praise the good bits in his White Paper because I do not have time to do so.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) said, the real flaw in the White Paper is that all it does is concentrate building in the south-east and central south of England, and does not use the Prime Minister’s wish to build more infrastructure to level up the rest of the country. It is really important that a planning system is led by a well-executed local plan. National designations under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, such as national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and green belt, must be respected. I understand the Government’s desire to increase housing numbers. A formula or algorithm, if correctly designed, will always achieve that. However, it is a very blunt instrument that does not take into account any local variations.

There is a particular concern about the proposals, which deal with housing needs and requirements, between the housing numbers in the planning White Paper and the algorithm in the change in the planning system consultation. The Cotswolds is 80% AONB and the current local plan requirement is 420 houses. The proposed standard method would deliver a staggering 1,209—a 188% increase. If every area had a 188% increase, the Government would hugely overrun their targets. The current formula will certainly increase the numbers, but will not necessarily improve affordability. It is fundamentally wrong to automatically assume that affordability will be solved in areas of housing demand. It is the housing mix, not housing numbers, that is really important. In my area, what we need are small one and two-bedroom flats to meet the aspirations of first-time buyers, the young and the old. As was so ably said by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), if we stripped out those people who live in the Cotswolds but who do not actually work in the Cotswolds, both housing prices and average salaries would come down immeasurably and we would be nearer the average on affordability.

The current proposals need to be looked at seriously. The present proposals would so radically alter a very special area like the Cotswolds, which the planning system to date has so successfully

protected, that future generations and visitors alike would not be able to visit the area and see why it is so special.

1.33 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con)

In East Surrey, neither I nor my constituents deny that we need more homes. When I go to schools, I ask the teachers if they live in the area. They rarely do and that is a red flag. It comes up in my work, from trying to increase GP provision, to talking to families who tell me that their children cannot afford to live nearby. We should not be blind to that, as it is the current residents who will suffer from worse public services and local investment if working families cannot thrive.

However, I seriously worry about centrally designed housing numbers which do not take into account a local area's capacity to deliver. This is a legitimate concern raised with me by many with longstanding expertise, such as Councillor Jeremy Webster, who led the work on the Caterham local neighbourhood plan. There is already a major worry in my area about a potential new village or town of thousands of homes in south Godstone. As one of the highest green belt areas in the country, in East Surrey we do have particular constraints and they must be taken into account. If high housing targets have to be met by '70s tower blocks in Oxted or Horley, we will not be serving old or new residents well.

I would, however, like to thank the Secretary of State and his team for their many conversations with me about my concerns. I hope we can hear more from them about their assurances about the numbers, in particular that the final target will be decided with local input and that only once that has been agreed between local and central Government—only then—will that number be binding. That would be an important distinction between a binding number, foisted on local communities by central Government, and a number that is agreed by local people but which then local government is bound to deliver—in other words, a binding build-out rate, which I would support.

My second point is that it is mission critical that we address the very legitimate concerns of local residents. In the past 10 months alone in this job, I have heard from families in Smallfield facing raw sewage overflow inside their homes because the sewers are at capacity; from the Caterham Flood Action Group, which says that inadequate maintenance and overdevelopment has put existing homes at risk of flooding; and of the sore need for investment in our creaking junctions on local roads. My East of Surrey local economic taskforce, which I run with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), is working to ensure that we get our fair share of funding for infrastructure. We are making progress, but there is much more to do.

Lastly, it is crucial that the new homes live up to our Conservative principles of creating places that strengthen rather than erase family ties. I would like to see an ambitious, affordable target of 40%, with homes that are affordable for local people, and earmarked for local people and key workers. We must also ensure that they meet local design aspirations, to create communities where families can thrive, and that they come with the required infrastructure and provisions to protect and enhance our natural environment. I believe that that can be done, and look forward to ongoing conversations with the Secretary of State, and his Ministers and team, to ensure that that is the case.

1.36 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con)

I have three minutes, and I will be brief. I welcome the fact that the Government are looking at this area. I stand by the manifesto commitment to increase housing numbers by 300,000. That is the biggest change in 70 years, and we therefore need to get it right, which is why I also support today's motion to have further debate and a meaningful vote.

Even before covid and the consultation, planning was the biggest issue in my inbox. Hinckley and Bosworth is a good example of where planning gets into difficulty and the current system fails. Since being elected, the current Lib Dem-led council has no local plan or five-year housing land supply, which has resulted in speculative, piecemeal development with no overall strategy. That causes community resentment and loss of trust in the aspects of planning.

Hinckley and Bosworth has a willingness to take its fair share of sustainable development across Leicester and Leicestershire, but the following must be considered: under the formula consultation, I am concerned that the affordability aspect is based on work-based median house prices, which appears to assume that residents live and work in the same place. That is demonstrably not true in a constituency such as mine.

I am also concerned that the formula does not take into account infrastructure, as has been mentioned, or future plans for generations. My working days in this House are spent trying to improve the infrastructure of the likes of the A5 and such schools as Hinckley Academy. We need to future-proof our communities, and of course our country, especially in areas such as mine that attract young people, as they will have families. That will only compound the issue of a low level of amenities and connectivity.

Finally, on the algorithm, the numbers produced by Lichfield analysis suggest that Bosworth increases its numbers by almost 100% of current levels; yet Leicester city, only 15 minutes away, is dropping by 30%. How can that be levelling up? How can that be building better? How can that be using brownfield sites and quality regeneration? One solution that I might offer is to turn the formula to use 0.75% of housing stock, not the 0.5% in the consultation.

We can consider the algorithm, but we must also consider the White Paper, of which I am broadly supportive. Zoning and the pattern books are a great asset. The key thing is to ensure that who makes the decisions in zoning and patterns is transparent to local people. Without that, I fear that councils will be unable to bring residents with them.

The final thing to mention is neighbourhood plans, which need to be simplified and strengthened. The likes of Bagworth, Stoke Golding and Market Bosworth are all at various levels trying to do so, but they need to know that the Government are listening to what they are saying. Otherwise, what happened to localism?

1.39 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con)

I rise to speak in this important debate because this subject is so important to my constituents. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing the debate. It is so vital that we have this moment to discuss this issue and make sure that our constituents' voices are heard.

Planning applications are probably some of the most difficult issues we deal with as MPs. The impact on residents of the suggestion of an inappropriate development or a speculative planning application causes so much stress and anxiety. I know that residents living on Moorland Road in Leek

are absolutely beside themselves with fear at the moment about what a planning development could be like if it is given permission to be built just behind their homes, with inappropriate housing included in that development.

One of the things that has helped people cope with and live with planning is that it is the decision of local councillors, and that it is a matter for those locally elected representatives to make the decision. I, like the Minister, was so proud to be elected in 2010 on the premise, as was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), that we would have no top-down targets: we would get rid of the regional targets, we would get rid of central targets and we would let local people decide what housing needs there were in their areas. I have been absolutely thrilled to see neighbourhood plans being worked on in my constituency. I pay great tribute to Staffordshire Moorlands District Council for the years and years it has put into developing and finally agreeing, only in the last few weeks, a local plan. The local plan has local support, which will allow us to have the right housing mix in the right locations in the constituency.

How can it be the case that the Government are now considering any form of central target, because that is exactly what the algorithm looks like? I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister, who I know is a very good man and a constituency neighbour of mine—well, not a next door neighbour, but a fellow Staffordshire MP—that he should trust the good folk of Staffordshire to make the decisions and trust the good folk to elect the right people to make those decisions. He should take the measures that were suggested by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) to deal with land banking, which causes so much grief and anxiety, and please just stop this algorithm.

1.41 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con)

Very many colleagues have said that we need to build more houses. I am not sure that that is entirely true as a statement in itself, because the planning system so far has built very many houses. What it has not done is built the kind of houses that young people in particular can afford. It has failed in that respect, and it has also not built enough houses that older people may want to downsize into, thereby freeing up the houses they formerly lived in.

As was so very eloquently said by my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), we are building the wrong kind of housing. It is pointless to come to Gloucestershire and build more three, four or five-bedroom houses. All that does is concrete over green fields and perhaps the green belt—and, indeed, floodplains in my area, which I will come back to in a minute—and create all those extra car journeys, and we are still left with the problem. We are left with the problem because the wrong kind of houses have been built.

Of course, house building has never—certainly not in living memory—been a free market, open-ended way of going about business; there have always been restrictions. However, when the state does intervene—and I think it is right that the state should intervene in planning—it needs to make sure that it intervenes in the right way. We really do need to get away from this idea that having more and more houses therefore makes them more affordable. In itself, it will not, and we have to think beyond just the housing numbers.

We also have to think about where we are building those houses. Tomorrow, I am visiting an area in my constituency called Twigworth, just north of Gloucester, and I am visiting it because very many fields there are flooded. That is not unusual in my constituency, which has always had a lot of flooding problems. The reason for visiting those flooded fields is that there are diggers on them: 500

houses are being built on those fields. It is ridiculous. If we are going to go forward with this algorithm or any other system that insists that my area builds thousands and thousands of houses, I have to tell the Government that those houses will be built in flood risk areas and on the green belt. Does that not go against the policies that this Government and the party I support also have about protecting such areas?

Councils, as I understand it from the White Paper, will be given the opportunity to designate certain land as protected, but will that protected land take precedence over the housing numbers when they are handed down by the Government?

I do not think that it will. As things stand, I think that the housing numbers will take precedence. That is wrong and it goes against what we stand for as a party. We want more affordable houses, we have to redefine what “affordable” means and we have to build them in the right places.

1.45 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con)

I recognise that the building of homes is one of the biggest domestic issues facing our country. I am unashamedly pro home ownership. A large contingent of people in my constituency are stuck in the rental trap, and I want to be able to provide them with the opportunities that many other people in the UK already enjoy. So although there is a legitimate debate to be had about housing numbers, the much wider issue is about the tenure of those homes and where they are built.

For years, we have seen a planning system that has been far too rigid, a lack of adequate and appropriate land coming forward, and huge disparities in the way applications are being considered, not only between different authorities, but within individual planning departments. We have to recognise the inadequacies of the current system. Houses being built predominantly by large house builders puts huge pressure on local services immediately. At the moment, there is little involvement for small and medium-sized builders in the planning system. We are faced with constant section 106 delays, which help no one and delay the building of affordable housing. We also have to wait a long time for infrastructure because we have no community infrastructure levy to provide some of that support.

Although there are some challenges within the White Paper, I broadly welcome the idea of highlighting areas for growth, renewal and protection. I also recognise the need for local authorities now to engage with town and parish councils to bring forward land for development and areas for protection. We recognise the challenges in Cornwall, which relate to people getting deposits; people being stuck in the rental trap; the cost of land; the lack of land; and the lack of housing opportunity.

What do I want to see in the planning Bill? I know that the Minister probably has not heard that he has not been ambitious enough, but on self-build I encourage him to go further. We have an opportunity to get serviced plots in some of these areas where people do not have ownership of any land or housing. Why not give young people in Cornwall the opportunity to be able to build their own home? That is what I would like to see, as I am excited about what that might mean. The Minister has done an excellent job in bringing forward 30% discounts for key workers, and for local people in communities such as mine. For the first time in a long time, we are able to see a design guide in Cornwall—since the abolition of the district councils, there has been no design guide, and we have seen samey, identical houses that are all standard and no character—and I am excited about that.

I have a couple of questions to ask in the 20 seconds I have left. How will neighbourhood plans that have been out to referendum fit in with land allocations? How will the 30% discount work in terms of developer contributions? Will the community infrastructure levy be ring-fenced? Let me finish by saying that I cannot turn a blind eye to the people in Cornwall who want a plot of land or a house.

1.48 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con)

Some time ago, I had to make a three-minute speech on why it was not a very good idea to spend £179 billion on putting our deterrent into four submarines, when I found myself as the only Conservative putting forward that view. So I am delighted that on this incredibly important issue of planning the tide of opinion seems utterly uniform: the presentation that the Government have made is potentially catastrophic for delivering the wider objectives of Government policy. I have listened to this debate, and to the great speeches made by a former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and all the glitterati of colleagues elected at the same time as me and after who have made a better fist of their careers in this place than I have. They have demolished the algorithm, in particular, and the basis on which it is done.

However, it is necessary for us to come forward with proposals for the planning system that will help the Government to deliver. Some of the analysis is fine. It points out the lack of public trust in local planning authorities. It is hardly surprising—we are engaged in a massive con trick. Local planning authorities do not have any real authority over planning because they are given a number that they have to deliver; they then find that the number has been changed by fiat at the Dispatch Box by up to 30%, and now—in the case of Reigate and Banstead—they find that the number is going to double again. That is quite remote from local circumstances.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) is now my neighbour and we shall fight London's green-belt cause determinedly, but we need a fundamental reappraisal of the whole planning system. I used to believe that if local planning authorities were given the real power, those that wanted to protect quality of life and the environment and were elected to do that would promote development in areas of the country where economic development was a more important priority, thereby leading to a natural levelling-up process. I am afraid that that is simply not good enough. It is certainly not good enough if the Government produce a target on the scale that they have done and expect it to be delivered.

The introduction to the White Paper refers to the Dutch and German planning systems. It is quite a good idea to have a look at them. We have to move to a national plan-led system. We must achieve what we are trying to do with the northern powerhouse and deliver for the honour of all our new colleagues. That means that inner cities in the north of England must have the kind of vision that we have already provided. We did it in 2000. It was a Labour Government and Lord Richard Rogers co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group for London's green belt with me.

The message to the Government is that we have got to think again. We must think strategically about how we will deliver national and local plans and sound environmental policy.

1.51 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con)

I want to note something for the record, which colleagues have also seen: there is not a single Liberal Democrat MP in the Chamber. I mention that because between 2006 and 2010, West

Worcestershire was a Liberal Democrat target seat. I remember campaigning vehemently against Gordon Brown's top-down, Stalinist imposition of a regional spatial strategy on the midlands. I have a horrible feeling of déjà vu when I look at the way in which the algorithm has been approached. It seems incredibly top down.

I am proud of the fact that, under Conservative and Conservative-led Governments, we have increased house building in our country. We have managed to get it from lows under Gordon Brown to heights of nearly 250,000 units a year. I fully sign up and aspire to delivering 300,000 units a year by the end of this Parliament and to providing 1 million new homes. We are the party of home ownership and what we have done in the last decade should be sung from the rooftops.

We have delivered the dream of home ownership to so many people through incentives and bottom-up reforms. For example, I want the neighbourhood planning strategy to become stronger and have a statutory footing in the reforms that the Minister proposes. I also want the bottom-up involvement of local communities in determining their housing need to be greatly strengthened. The new homes bonus was a powerful way of showing communities the value of welcoming new building in their areas.

Let us have bottom-up reforms and Conservative principles of economic incentives for home building. Let us move away from the Gordon Brown approach and the top-down imposition of Stalinist housing targets, and let us get a new algorithm and abandon completely the one that we have.

1.53 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con)

I have seven points to make to my right hon. Friend the Minister. First, whatever the housing targets are, please will he ensure that they are on a manageable scale locally? For the two local authorities that cover my constituency, current targets would mean 60,000 new homes over 15 years. That would be the equivalent of building seven towns the size of the largest town, Biggleswade, in my constituency. That does not seem a reasonable burden.

Point No. 2: will my right hon. Friend please ensure that the burden is shared? No algorithm will fix the country as a whole, but equally, my local authorities have the same housing target as Cambridgeshire, which is three times the size. We are part of the Oxford-Cambridge arc and it would be better to share across the two counties.

Point No. 3: we were elected on a manifesto commitment to infrastructure first. Delivering ahead of new housing developments the GP surgeries, the schools and the roads is a crucial part of making my right hon. Friend's reforms successful.

Point No. 4: as we have heard many times in today's debate, delivering houses is essentially a contract of trust between the state, nationally and locally, and the developers who build the houses. If the developer does not fulfil its part of the contract, trust is broken and therefore we need some remedy in the form of penalties for not building planned homes when given approval.

Point No. 5: there are a number of what I call "creepy" developers who are using loopholes in the current local planning system to build housing in areas that really do not want it and where it changes the local character. Can the reforms please make sure that those creepy developers are pushed to one side?

Point No. 6: if we are going to continue with neighbourhood plans—I think it is essential that we do—they really need some teeth and they must matter.

Point No. 7: my right hon. Friend the Minister will have heard today a torrent of voices pushing in one direction, and that shows why change is so hard, but he should not be dissuaded from his central task. The planning system needs reform. He is on to something, and I urge him to work with his colleagues on the Government Benches to get it right.

1.56 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con)

I rise to support the motion in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely). He was quite right to praise the Government's levelling-up agenda and to offer support both for the Government's overall housing objectives and for appropriate housing development, and I join him in supporting those aims, but the key issue is how we get there.

I have concerns about the algorithm and the targets that it has produced, apparently without regard to local policy objectives, supply constraints or environmental impacts. Those concerns are shared by many hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) and for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) who, like me, represent constituencies in the London borough of Bromley. In recent years, Bromley has consistently surpassed the targets required by the local plan—typically by 10% in an average year—but the proposed new standard method would require an increase of 288% on the current local plan requirement and 252% on the rate of current delivery.

Much of the London borough of Bromley is green. Indeed, two thirds of my constituency of Orpington, which is on the south easterly edge of Greater London, is rural. The White Paper rightly seeks to retain green-belt protections—I welcome that and would oppose any attempt to water them down—but the massive targets imposed by the new standard method would lead to a situation in which Bromley could not possibly achieve the numbers required without creating a series of high-density, high-rise housing developments all over the borough. Existing family housing may well have to be demolished to find sufficient space.

Orpington town centre and outlying villages such as Petts Wood and Chelsfield, could be turned into high-density housing estates more common to central London than to rural Kent. That point is especially important because, despite Orpington being classed as an outlying part of Greater London, it is historically part of Kent and still has far more in common with neighbouring Sevenoaks than with Southwark, Camden or Islington. Having such changes forced upon local people would be the very opposite of progress. We desperately need the right number of houses in the right places with the right infrastructure to support them. Starting with an aggregate national number and retrofitting everything else around that will, as top-down algorithms tend to, lead to unintended consequences and bad outcomes.

The Government could take alternative approaches, and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight outlined some of them, as have other hon. Members during this debate. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform our country for the better, and we must not get it wrong, so I urge the Government to heed the words of hon. Members in this debate and to revisit the proposals.