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*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)*  
7.01 pm

• John Howell (Henley) (Con)

I have been involved with neighbourhood planning since I first entered Parliament almost 10 years ago. I am the author of "Open Source Planning," which has guided many of the planning reforms initiated by the Conservative party in government. When I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), we introduced neighbourhood planning. When he was Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, he appointed me as the Government champion for neighbourhood planning, a role in which I was confirmed by the current Secretary of State only last week. In this role I have been to numerous Members' meetings to discuss neighbourhood planning. I say all that to illustrate that I have some experience of this subject.

I will particularly address two groups of points this evening. The first is on when neighbourhood plans carry weight. The Minister's predecessor introduced a helpful change—albeit only temporary, and it is currently subject to challenge—to ensure that when councils do not have a five-year land supply, those places with neighbourhood plans that allocate sites need only demonstrate that they have a three-year land supply. We also looked at changing the time when neighbourhood plans carry full weight and bringing it back to when the document is submitted to whoever will inspect the plan, but even that is not early enough.

Let me give examples from my constituency of why that time is not early enough. The initial attempt of two villages to put together neighbourhood plans was unsuccessful. Almost immediately, developers moved into the villages and put in planning applications, not for just a couple of houses but for large-scale developments. The developers did nothing wrong in targeting two villages that had not been able to produce a neighbourhood plan, but in other cases developers are targeting villages that have just started the process of putting a neighbourhood plan together, so that they can get in before the community can decide where it wants the housing to go. That amounts to sharp practice, as in many cases it forces a race between those putting the neighbourhood plan together and the developers attempting to get the planning application through. With more and more communities now moving to put a neighbourhood plan together, this creates a situation where developers are trying to beat a neighbourhood plan and to frustrate its intention by putting the housing where the developer, not the community, wants it to go.

• Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con)

I thank my hon. Friend for all his work on neighbourhood planning, and particularly for supporting and advising me in Mid Sussex, which is in exactly the position he describes. Does he agree that all the hard work and effort of our constituents in putting together these plans, voluntarily, needs to be reflected and recognised, as our right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) originally intended?

• John Howell

My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The thing we need to remember is that the people who have put these plans together are all volunteers—they all do this work for nothing and they all do it for the future of their village. I shall say a little more about that in a moment.

I should say at this point that in the main we are not talking about communities who are anti-development; we are talking of communities who want to embrace new housing for the long-term sake of their communities and to ensure that facilities such as pubs and sports clubs do not fall into disuse. They also want new housing above all to cater for younger people and families. There is nothing for the Government to fear here about being in the world of the nimbby; neighbourhood plans have allocated some 10% more housing than it was originally suggested they should provide by their district or borough councils. From that point of view, they have been a great success.

An emerging neighbourhood plan can be a material consideration according to the national planning policy framework. The Department for Communities and Local Government's own guidance suggests that factors to consider include the stage of preparation of the plan and the extent to which there are unresolved objections to relevant policies. It goes on to suggest that although a referendum ensures the final word, weight should be given to evidence of local support prior to the referendum and the quality of the consultation should be taken

into account. I want to add that the consultation on neighbourhood plans is normally very good, which is why they pass their referendums with almost North Korean levels of approval, and this level of consultation goes on throughout the process of putting the neighbourhood plan together. However, in actual fact little weight is given to such neighbourhood plans until the referendum has been passed.

The findings of research conducted in Cornwall show that emerging neighbourhood plans should be given weight in the decision-making process, but that the amount of weight must still be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

- Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

I had sought the hon. Gentleman's permission to intervene on this issue, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my constituency, Ards and North Down Borough Council has initiated a regeneration plan for the area and also a neighbourhood plan, in that it has sought the opinion of the general public by holding public meetings. Is the hon. Gentleman telling us that the general public's opinion is being ignored?

- John Howell

The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The point I would make is that we have initiated a process whereby public opinion is taken into account throughout the process of putting a neighbourhood plan together, and that is reflected at all stages of the neighbourhood planning process. Whether that is the same in Northern Ireland I will leave for him to judge.

In the Cornish case, it is harder for the council to refuse permissions for proposals that conflict with an emerging neighbourhood plan, although this may have now been taken care of if the three-year land supply required for the neighbourhood plan areas still stands. But what this shows is how precarious the weight to be attached to neighbourhood plans really is, because it is still for the decision maker, whether that is the council or the inspector, to assess the application on a case-by-case basis. There appears to be a great discrepancy between the emphasis given to neighbourhood plans by the Secretary of State and that given by the Planning Inspectorate. I suggest, therefore, that we need to put neighbourhood planning on a firmer basis.

The fact that there are so many cases where a neighbourhood plan has not been given weight causes great frustration. It is a cause of much frustration that so much work has been put into producing a neighbourhood plan and yet it has been overturned. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said, that work is undertaken by volunteers, to whom we all ought to give our grateful thanks.

- Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)

I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating this debate and I agree with everything he has said. Is not the danger that if neighbourhood plans are undermined in this way, confidence in the whole process and the willingness of volunteers to undertake the process of putting together a neighbourhood plan will be damaged?

- John Howell

My right hon. Friend makes a valid point. That is the last thing I want to see. I want neighbourhood plans to continue to flourish and contribute to house building and to the development of communities.

Of course, not all developers behave as I have described. Many follow what I set out in "Open Source Planning". They try to reduce tension between themselves and the community and to work effectively with the community. However, there are those who play the game of getting in before the neighbourhood plan is fully made and frustrating the work that is going on.

I suggest that the Minister considers introducing a moratorium on new house building where a neighbourhood plan is being put together. To prevent communities from cheating and claiming that they are producing a neighbourhood plan when they are not, rules would be needed that show that the plan is genuine. There would have to be rules to make sure that communities are allocating sites for development, not using the plan as a nimby charter. That could be done by strengthening the guidance to the Planning Inspectorate and making sure that it is applied consistently, or ensuring that neighbourhood plans are given more weight when, for example, they include a list of sites or the initial consultation has taken place.

Although I say it myself, neighbourhood plans are a great success. They are giving communities a real say and responsibility for new housing by allowing them to work in partnership with their district or borough council and decide where that housing should go. Villages that were once hostile to development have become pro-development. A neighbourhood plan can take up to two years to put together and it represents a lot of hard work for the community—all done by volunteers—but so it should. It makes a major contribution to the future

- state of any village and cannot be written on the back of a cigarette packet. However, we have to make sure that the effort is not taken for granted or wasted by allowing some developers an opportunity to move in ahead of a neighbourhood plan. Anything the Minister can do to strengthen guidance or advance the time when neighbourhood plans carry protection would be much appreciated.

One of the major things we need to do as a Government is to provide housing for younger people. The average age at which people acquire their first home is now over 30. As was put to me, one cannot expect people to be capitalists if they do not have any capital. We need to provide people with houses to buy, and there are two issues here—first, the number of homes and secondly, affordability. On the first, I encourage the Government to move ahead with the consultation on the changes to the calculations being made by councils of their housing numbers.

I was part of the local plan expert group—I am localist through and through—and the suggestions that we made to change how housing numbers were calculated were not anti-localist. Serious problems are generated by the lack of an agreed approach to strategic housing market assessments, which have become one of the most burdensome, complex and controversial components of plan making. We set out detailed recommendations for a shorter, simpler standard methodology for strategic housing market assessments, in particular for assessment of housing need, with the aim of saving significant time and money, and—most important—removing unnecessary debate from that aspect of plan making. I recommend the LPEG report to the Minister. I know he is new to his position, but I urge him to read it. It would help if a table of recommendations and how they are being dealt with were produced by his officials. The thinking behind that uplift is that allocating more housing land will lower prices, increase development and improve viability. Of course, the sites allocated need to be actually developed.

This is not entirely a district or borough council problem. As I have said, neighbourhood plans allocated more houses than was originally intended. We need to encourage neighbourhood planners to look to the future of their area when they plan and to be part of the solution, rather than being held at a bit of a distance as they are now.

We can be more localist by stressing to neighbourhood planning groups that they can and should have much more say over the type of housing they allocate. The need in my area and that of the Minister is not for vast swathes of council housing, but for affordable market housing. It is not for more developments of four-to-five bedroom housing, but for more developments of genuinely cheaper one-to-two bedroom houses.

I want to suggest to the Minister that it is time to be radical about the future and to be ultra-localist. The steps we have taken so far have given only some of the involvement to local communities. That process needs to go further and bring neighbourhood planning groups into the equation, so that they may stress the types of housing in terms of the number of bedrooms, and have some say over affordability. Schemes such as Help to Buy have actually touched very few people—some 360,000. We need to find a way of involving local communities in tackling the issue of affordability or they will simply blame us that houses continue to be unaffordable.

We need to stress that this is a dynamic part of the planning system. It is very unlikely that we got it right the first time and we should have the courage to make changes as we go along and to seek to expand the scheme as it proves to be ever more successful. But it is essential that we do not row back on our commitment to involving communities in the decisions over where the houses should go, what they should consist of and, crucially, what they should look like—their design. To that I would add that communities should also have a role in ensuring affordability.

- The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this incredibly important debate on neighbourhood planning policy. As he himself has noted, he has made an enormous contribution to developing our approach to neighbourhood planning, and I pay tribute to him for his enormously hard work. My hon. Friend mentioned his booklet “Open Source Planning”, which was crucial in informing the 2010 Conservative manifesto and the Localism Act 2011. He has played a leading role throughout that time as my Department’s champion for neighbourhood planning. He has also done an enormous amount of work in his own constituency to promote neighbourhood planning. In Woodcote, in his constituency, homes identified in the neighbourhood plan are now being lived in. It is a fantastic example of the real power of neighbourhood planning and of letting people decide where homes should go.

There are many other examples from around the country which have shown what neighbourhood planning can do to deliver more homes. Communities such as Winsford in Cheshire have planned for more than 3,300

homes. In Newport Pagnell, Milton Keynes, there are plans for 1,400 homes. I congratulate all groups across the country on carrying out this incredibly valuable work.

I am proud to say that thousands of community-minded people across England have turned the legislation passed by this House in 2011 into a reality. My right hon. Friends the Members for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) both noted that in their contributions.

Those community-minded individuals are now creating plans that make a real difference and are benefiting the places in which they live. My hon. Friend will of course be aware, because of the work he has done on this, that, since 2012, more than 2,100 groups have started the neighbourhood planning process, in areas covering nearly 12 million people. There have been more than 360 successful neighbourhood plan referendums, and over 500,000 people have taken the opportunity to vote on those plans.

- Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)

I see a different side to this. We have big issues in my constituency of Oxford West and Abingdon, with many keen groups who want to create plans, but who are very cynical about the planning process. We have two particularly large developments. In north Abingdon, we have 950 homes on the green belt. In Kidlington, the development involves four villages that will coalesce with a plan for 4,400 homes—an enormous number of homes. Local groups are rightly very worried not just about infrastructure, but, mainly, about their voices not being heard. Does the Minister understand that local people now feel very cynical about all levels of planning and that is the main reason why they are not taking up neighbourhood planning?

- Alok Sharma

May I make a general point to the hon. Lady that I hope will help other colleagues too? Local authorities need to consult their local communities in reaching these decisions on housing and, of course, they are accountable directly to them. The White Paper stated that we will amend national policy to make it clear that authorities should amend green-belt boundaries only when they can demonstrate that they have examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting their identified development requirements. The hon. Lady may well have noted that today the Secretary of State has launched a £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund that is now open for bids from local authorities to fund much-needed infrastructure. I encourage all local authorities to consider this. Let me turn to a number of the extremely important and valid points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley. I want to begin by making it absolutely clear that this Government remain firmly committed to neighbourhood planning. We all recognise the significant effort neighbourhood planning groups make and that is why we are keen to support them. The Government have made £22.5 million available through a support programme for neighbourhood planning for the period from 2015 to 2018. All groups can receive grant funding of up to £9,000 and priority groups, such as those allocating sites for housing in their plan and those in deprived areas, can receive up to £15,000 as well as full technical and professional support. The housing White Paper, which I know hon. Members will be familiar with and which was published in February, set out our commitment to further funding for neighbourhood planning groups in this Parliament.

My hon. Friend spoke of the importance of bringing forward the point at which neighbourhood plans start to influence planning decisions. As he will know, as plans are progressed they will gain increasing weight and our planning practice guidance makes it clear that decision makers must consider emerging neighbourhood plans. I will look carefully at his suggestion of changes to strengthen guidance to ensure that decision makers are in no doubt of the importance the Government attaches to neighbourhood plans.

When the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 comes into force, it will further strengthen the position. It will ensure that neighbourhood plans have full effect straight after a successful referendum. That is earlier than at present, when neighbourhood plans only have full effect after they have been made by the local planning authority. I can confirm that I have asked my officials to prepare the necessary orders to start this provision as soon as possible. The Neighbourhood Planning Act will also require local planning authorities to notify neighbourhood planning groups of planning applications in their local community. I know that many groups feel that that is incredibly important.

On my hon. Friend's comments about a moratorium on planning decisions while a neighbourhood plan is being produced, I recognise his concerns about those who seek to game the system and I know that other right hon. and hon. Members have made similar points in previous debates. I absolutely understand the frustrations felt by communities around the country when plans they have worked hard to produce are undermined. That is why the Government issued a written ministerial statement in December 2016 concerning an important policy for recently produced neighbourhood plans that plan for housing.

The statement sets out that relevant policies for the supply of housing in a made neighbourhood plan should not be deemed to be out of date under paragraph 49 of the national planning policy framework where all of the following circumstances arise at the time the decision is made: the neighbourhood plan has been made within the past two years; the neighbourhood plan allocates sites for housing; and the local planning authority can demonstrate a three-year supply of deliverable housing sites.

I know that all Members will agree that it is important that we strike the right balance so that we do not inadvertently create delays in planning for the homes needed. Of course, we keep these matters under review.

- Sir Nicholas Soames

I welcome my hon. Friend to his new job and look forward to working with him. Does he agree that what is extremely important is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, that although many developers behave perfectly properly, there are others who game the system? That is extremely prevalent in Mid Sussex. May I ask the Minister whether or not what he has just said will protect the district council and all those who work to secure their neighbourhood plans in the public inquiry, which will continue in late July?

- Alok Sharma

The Government are absolutely committed to neighbourhood planning. As the new Minister, I am completely committed to it. We want this to work, and it is important for the communities that we represent. I hope that that demonstrates to my right hon. Friend the strength of feeling in the Government when it comes to supporting neighbourhood planning.

The best protection against unplanned development is to get a local plan in place. The best local plans are those where the local authority has engaged proactively with the local community. A local plan provides certainty for communities, developers and neighbourhood planning groups. It also removes the pressure on neighbourhood planning groups to fill the vacuum created by the failure of local planning authorities to keep their local plans up to date. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley knows, the housing White Paper sought views on what changes are needed to ensure that all forms of plan making are appropriate and proportionate. We will consider how we can further speed up the neighbourhood plan process so that communities get the plans they want in place as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend touched on the wider recommendations of the local plans expert group, to which we responded alongside the housing White Paper. He made a strong case for the introduction of a standard methodology to assess housing requirements. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government confirmed earlier today in his speech to the Local Government Association in Birmingham that a consultation will set out further details later this month on our proposals for a new way for councils to assess their local housing requirements.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend for securing this valuable debate and for his ongoing contribution to neighbourhood planning. I have listened carefully to the contributions made by right hon. and hon. Members and I welcome further suggestions on how best we can support neighbourhood planning in practice.

*Question put and agreed to.*

