

Constructing a fairer, faster house building system from the ground up

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England needs more homes. For many decades and under successive governments, we simply haven't built enough to meet steadily rising demand, and it is our children and grandchildren who are paying the price.



In 1997, the average home cost around 3.5 times the average salary. By 2010 that ratio had doubled. And higher house prices means rents are higher too.

Today, 20- and 30-year-olds are forced to spend three times as much of their income on housing as was the case for their grandparents.

I'm sure readers of The Daily Telegraph will understand that we need to build more homes than even the 217,000 that were completed in 2016-17 – one of the highest levels of net additions for 30 years.

At last year's party conference, I set out my personal commitment to fixing our broken housing market. Today sees the latest step in that process, as the Government rewrites the planning rule book, overhauling it to make the system fairer, more transparent, and get more of the right homes built in the right places more quickly.

The new rules will speed up the planning process, ensure that permissions are turned into homes more quickly, and see to it that new developments are supported by appropriate infrastructure.

But building the homes our children and grandchildren need doesn't have to mean destroying the open countryside we all treasure.

Across England, Green Belts continue to serve a valuable purpose, preventing the kind of unchecked urban sprawl that has led to vast, faceless megacities in the US. The local character of small, rural towns and villages is important to people, and should not be unnecessarily sacrificed in order to boost developers' profits.

So our new, fairer planning rules include extra protection for Green Belt land, with more stringent tests that raise the bar local authorities will have to clear before being allowed to open it up for housing. This includes ensuring that any use of Green Belt for new homes focuses first on sites that have already been built on – for example, old industrial buildings and disused power stations.

And that's not all. In line with our 25-year Environment Plan, we're introducing the policy of "net gain" into the planning system. That means all housing development, no matter how large, should aim to enhance biodiversity and the local environment rather than undermine it. Where possible, developments will also have to improve air quality – and the impact on air quality will also be taken into account when deciding where to site homes. Our new rules also contain stronger protections for our historic coastlines and ancient woodlands.

Enhancing the environment isn't just about preserving green fields and protecting wildlife. When constituents contact me about local planning proposals, another of their concerns is about design.

Across the country there are beautiful houses of all shapes and sizes, from thatched cottages in tiny hamlets to grand town houses in city centres. But all too often, new build homes all come from the same template – row after row of identikit red-tiled boxes that could be anywhere in the country and say nothing about their surroundings or the community into which they are inserted.

Maintaining the beauty of our countryside means ensuring that the built environment is equally attractive. So our new planning rules put a stronger emphasis on good design that reflects the character of existing places and community views. We are encouraging more developments with traditional streets and squares, and buildings that better suit their surroundings.

Even new roads and other transport links will have to be designed with the local vernacular in mind.

We're also introducing the "agent of change" principle, so that builders of new homes, rather than the existing community, become responsible for mitigating issues such as noise. This means centuries-old church bells won't be silenced to avoid disturbing residents on a new development nearby, and will stop new arrivals insisting that local farms take action to reduce smells and noise.

And the new rules will make it harder for developers to game the system, closing loopholes that allow them to frustrate local plans and build outside the boundaries that communities have accepted.

I want this to be a country in which everyone can afford the home they need without sacrificing the unique character and beauty that makes it such a wonderful place to live. Our new planning rule book will make sure that happens.