

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

Planning and Infrastructure Bill

Second Reading, House of Commons
Monday 24 March 2025

Background

According to the government the Bill “is central to the government’s plan to get Britain building again and deliver economic growth. The Bill will speed up and streamline the delivery of new homes and critical infrastructure, supporting delivery of the government’s Plan for Change milestones of building 1.5 million safe and decent homes in England and fast-tracking 150 planning decisions on major economic infrastructure projects by the end of this Parliament. It will also support the delivery of the government’s Clean Power 2030 target by ensuring that key clean energy projects are built as quickly as possible.”

The Alliance welcomes these objectives but is concerned that some of the proposals in the Bill will negatively impact on rural communities, reduce local democratic accountability and do not ensure that rural communities benefit from development to the same extent as urban ones.

There are elements of the Bill where rural areas seem expected to shoulder the negative impacts of development without any guarantee of enjoying the full benefits. Moreover, those who own land are expected to accept their assets being taken below market value so the government can deliver on its objectives. The Bill lacks a balance between public and private interest and partly fails to recognise the impact on rural people.

The Bill must be understood in the context of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on which the government consulted last year. In delivering infrastructure, delivering housing and meeting environmental targets it is rural communities who will often be most impacted. These communities are key to delivery but they must be consulted in planning and infrastructure decisions and share equally in the benefits. For example, in rolling out the EV charging network and upgrading the grid infrastructure rural areas should not come second to urban ones. The experience of the rollout of digital connectivity has illustrated that delivery in urban areas is often easier and as such rural areas are treated as secondary and delivery takes longer and is less well-funded. This must not happen again.

The Alliance has restricted its comments to those areas of the Bill that are of particular interest or concern and to highlight some of those issues which must be addressed as the Bill progresses and in its implementation.

Bill content

Part 1: Infrastructure

We welcome the government’s recognition of the impact of electricity transmission infrastructure on “communities who do not experience enduring direct benefits from it in terms of new jobs, skills or investment. As the government notes: “This infrastructure is needed to move power from where it is generated, through lower-demand rural communities, and towards higher-demand urban centres, and may increase perceptions that communities living

near to it experience a lack of direct benefits and/or a disproportionate negative impact...Communities that live close to new network infrastructure are therefore a critical stakeholder in delivering cheaper, cleaner, secure energy – there is a positive externality for wider society. Community benefits ensure communities can gain from network infrastructure, that delivers a national need, being sited in their vicinity. The Bill will enable the government to implement a mandatory, centralised approach to providing bill discounts to communities closest to new or significantly upgraded electricity transmission infrastructure.”

It is imperative that as well as recognising the disproportionate impact on rural communities and compensating accordingly, the Bill also guarantees that an upgraded grid network is also delivered to rural communities, not least if we are to transition successfully to electric vehicles. Rural communities are far more dependent on private transport than urban ones.

The Alliance believes that to minimise the impact of upgraded grid infrastructure there should be a presumption of putting infrastructure underground rather than covering the countryside with more pylons. This would protect landscapes and reduce long term costs.

Electric vehicle (EV) chargepoints

While we welcome making it easier, cheaper and quicker to install charging points, we believe that there should be recognition of the very different challenges of installing EV chargepoints in rural areas. This needs to be integrated into reforms of the grid upgrade.

Rural residents are far more reliant on private vehicles than their urban counterparts who benefit from greater access to public transport.

The delivery of sufficient EV chargepoints should be a priority in rural areas and mandated.

Part 2: Planning

The Countryside Alliance responded to the proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system.

The government’s target to increase housebuilding targets from 300,000 homes per year to 370,000, with a goal of delivering 1.5 million homes over the next five years is welcome. This includes a mandate for local authorities to utilise low-quality green belt land, which will be reclassified as ‘grey belt’. The Alliance acknowledges the need to address the national housing shortage, and we recognise that the countryside must play a role in delivering this.

However, it is imperative that these new homes are affordable for the communities they serve, and that brownfield sites and reclassified grey belt land are prioritised over high-value greenfield areas.

Greenbelt

We welcomed the government’s reclassification of parts of the green belt as grey belt, particularly where the land in question does not meet the traditional expectations of green belt land, such as preventing urban sprawl or serving as a vital natural habitat. It is important, however, that any changes maintain protection for areas that are genuinely serving their intended purpose.

The government’s definition of grey belt, which includes land on the edges of settlements, alongside roads, and sites such as old petrol stations and car parks, is a positive step. However, we urge that individual councils carefully review these designations to protect land

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that remains important for stopping urban sprawl and maintaining green spaces near urban areas.

Solar energy

In addition to housing, the NPPF also includes plans to accelerate the delivery of renewable energy, particularly solar power. This is a vital step towards meeting the UK's net-zero targets, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and helping to lower energy bills. While we fully support the drive towards clean energy, we believe that the consultation has overlooked a crucial component: a rooftop-first policy for solar energy installations. The Alliance advocates for solar panels to be installed on rooftops of new builds, commercial structures, and car parks before considering the use of farmland or greenfield sites.

Rooftops across the country have untapped potential for solar power, and it is crucial that we utilise this before looking to our green spaces. By prioritising rooftop solar, we can spare valuable land for food production and wildlife, while making efficient use of the space we already have. Research from CPRE indicates that 60% of the UK's solar energy needs can be met through rooftop installations, reducing the need to sacrifice productive farmland.

Community consent – democratic accountability

The changes proposed in this Bill alongside the NPPF could disproportionately affect rural communities ability to shape development in their localities. The watering down or bypassing the role of councillors on planning committees would see councillors able to debate only proposals defined as “large” developments by the government. What is a “large” development depends on where that development is proposed. In rural areas, developments of a few dozen homes could be “large” regardless of any government definition. What is a small development in one place may be a large development in another. A dozen houses in a town may not be a large development but may be considered a large development in a village. Local people in rural areas could find themselves lacking a democratic voice over developments that could see their village or area hugely impacted, especially if the related infrastructure is not upgraded alongside additional housing.

Part 5: Compulsory purchase

According to government briefing “the government recognises the importance of making effective use of land and is keen for authorities to make greater use of their compulsory purchase powers to support the delivery of housing, growth and regeneration of their areas. However, complex land purchasing processes along with landowners’ unrealistic expectations on compensation can delay the assembly of land for housing and infrastructure by compulsory purchase.” We would question whether landowners have “unrealistic expectations of compensation”. Expecting a fair price when the state takes your land is not unrealistic but a matter of fairness.

The Alliance believes these proposed changes are a step too far and we cannot support them. The state should pay the market price for land it wants to acquire, including any increased value of the land due to it being needed to deliver the government’s objectives. The fact that there may be a public interest in the acquisition of the land does not mean that an owner of land should be forced to accept less than market value.

Excluding “hope value” from the price paid for assets compulsorily purchased is grossly unfair. Where land has permission for development, it has a higher market value. This should be recognised in a fair compulsory purchase price. It is perverse that land could be compulsorily

purchased for the express purpose of building houses or other purposes without this key aspect of market value included. “Hope value” is an integral part of market value.

The unfairness of these measures is exacerbated by the proposed reductions to loss payments, which will see them reduced by two thirds, to a maximum of £25,000.

We are particularly worried that there seems little reason, given these measures, why councils would purchase land by agreement when the proposed changes would seem to allow them to purchase it compulsorily for much less.

We are also alarmed by the proposal to extend compulsory purchase rights to Natural England in connection with its delivery of Environmental Development Plans (EDPs). This could have serious implications for rural communities and businesses, and perhaps could even see agricultural land being forcibly rewilded.

Taking land to deliver EDPs could result in a smaller landholdings becoming economically unviable, further undermining smaller family farms and food security.

Conclusion

We are supportive of many elements of the government’s proposed changes to planning policy, and we recognise the urgent need for more affordable housing, upgrades of infrastructure including electric vehicle networks, and streamlining the planning system. We also recognise the need to deliver environmental benefits alongside development as part of biodiversity gain and adaptation to climate change.

However, the Bill needs to be fair and proportionate and as it currently stands there is much to concern those in rural areas. There is an imbalance between the rights of individuals and that of public authorities and insufficient recognition of rural communities and democratic accountability. The Bill will do little to repair the broken relationship between the government and the countryside. Coming off the back of the hated Family Farm Tax and the sudden closure of the SFI scheme, confidence in the government’s ability to deliver for rural communities is at an all-time low.

We urge the government to listen to rural communities and address their concerns as the Bill goes through Parliament so that we achieve the government’s laudable objective of delivering economic growth, improving infrastructure and delivering environmental benefits in a way that is equitable for all communities across the country.

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