

Housing and planning

Last Tuesday the Communities Secretary of State made a speech about the need to build more homes and to provide more affordable accommodation. His intention to get many more homes built was clear. His local government audience had mixed feelings about the message and the means to bring it about.

Some local authorities do not have up to date local plans. The Minister was right to stress to them the continuing need to do this. Developers and owners of property look to the Council to set out in a plan which areas are protected, where development may occur, and how the Council will provide infrastructure to support new development. There is a need for some new development in most communities, and a need to relate this to the roadspace, public transport, schools, health facilities and the rest that are available.

The problems come more when there is an extant local plan. The Council may decide to concentrate the development of new homes in a limited number of places. This makes it easier to provide the services and transport links, and protects more residents elsewhere from additional development they may not want. A Council may set out enough space for the likely or required build rate.

If the developers who own or control these chosen sites do not then build at a fast enough rate to meet the targets, they or others may put in for planning permission elsewhere in the area. The Council will turn it down as against the plan. Then the Inspector on appeal may grant it on the grounds the Council is not hitting its build rate!

Because we have created such artificial scarcity by inviting in many migrants and not building enough homes, this gaming of the system can be profitable. The conversion of brownfield or greenfield to development land usually results in a big uplift in values, so why wouldn't a developer want to exploit it?

The UK is both wedded to a planning system, and very critical of its results. This is another difficult disagreement between developers and Councils. I am exploring ways that we can reconcile these differences of view and approach between Councils, Inspectors and developers. We need to control development in a sensible way and bring demand and supply for new homes into better balance.