

Can the NPPF Crack the Housing Crisis?

Lord Matthew Taylor of Goss Moor

Well, it's here at last. After a year's exhausting work by officials at DCLG and my own Planning Practice Guidance Review Group, and despite a couple of days' IT glitches keeping it hidden from some of you longer than we intended, the new streamlined planning guidance is out—at least in Beta.

When I was first approached to take on the leadership of this Review, the questions suggested to me ranged from “Do we need any planning guidance at all?” to “All guidance, government or otherwise, should be equal”. Many proposed we start by delving into definitions and philosophies of guidance. My approach was simpler: to start by reading it all.

This audience, better than any, will recognise what we found. Overwhelmingly it was out of date, hard to navigate (in fact DCLG itself struggled to find it all), and, not to put too fine a point on it, fundamentally not fit for purpose.

It was full of references to bodies or funding streams which no longer existed. Much of it read like special pleading, unsurprisingly as often they were standalone papers authored by standalone specialists in the topic. The oldest “current” guidance was written in 1963, the year I was born. A given subject was often addressed in multiple overlapping documents—for example we found guidance on appeals in 26 different documents. Some older pamphlets had not been replaced, but rather booklets of amendments published, making the guidance all but impossible to follow. We lost count of the various contradictory summary explanations of what “planning” is. Plenty of opportunities for planning barristers perhaps, but deeply unhelpful for the rest of us.

Buried within, however, beyond the preambles, the special pleading, and the dated case studies, was useful and sometimes vital guidance. Often a particular paragraph was well known as crucial and in active use, whilst the source document was forgotten, gathering dust on the shelves.

The new planning guidance website reflects our recommendations: a radical recasting of how guidance is presented, centring on those essential paragraphs, comprehensively updated. The guidance is refreshed, clearer and vastly more accessible, hosted on a single site (printable and date stamped), and with the ability for users to sign up for email notifications to alert them when changes are made. Some 7,000 pages of outdated material has been reduced by well over 90 per cent. The guidance site is directly linked to the NPPF, and wherever possible to statutes and regulations—in fact we have brought the NPPF online too to allow this. It aims to be a coherent whole, and I think is pretty close to it—though I won't claim perfection, possibly because on occasion the underlying statutes leave something to be desired on that score.

The suite is not finished yet. Work in progress includes application fees, Community Infrastructure Levy, compulsory purchase orders, land stability, planning for sustainable waste management, prison development, safeguarding aerodromes and travellers—amongst others. We also need to incorporate the new onshore oil and gas and renewables guidance into the site, and though they were largely written with that in mind, they will nonetheless need a bit of tweaking, including inserting links to other relevant guidance. We aim to finish it all by this year, just 15 months after we began.

Crucially for the future—as no one (especially not us) would wish to have to go through this review process all over again in a few years' time—we are working on a clear set of management tools to ensure that the guidance is kept up to date; that there are clear processes for this; that the style and approach is kept consistent as material is added or deleted; and that there are annual reviews (open to public comment via the website) going forward. All this to ensure a coherent suite of guidance is maintained and user comments properly considered on a regular basis.

As if this is all not enough, we have also recommended a light is now shone on other planning-related material wholly owned by other Whitehall departments. There is a great deal of government material that directly impacts planning, much of it referenced in the planning guidance suite, but which was not included in our work since it is not “owned” by DCLG. We think it is vital to get this material as accessible, coherent, and up-to-date as possible too.

All in all, I am well aware that within it there is a morsel, or two, for all of you to get your teeth into. This is your chance to comment on, and so help shape, the new guidance before it goes live. Your chance to suggest areas missed and the paragraphs to improve, before all 230 pre-existing guidance documents dating as far back as 1963 are cancelled. Since in just the first three weeks the guidance site attracted more than 19,000 unique users, you can imagine the review group are bracing ourselves for a comment or two. And you only have a couple more weeks to get your comments in.

But today I want to step back and think about the issues all this work—and the NPPF before it—set out to address. Thinking framed in my case by what I regard as the central planning failure of our time: the failure to deliver sufficient housing, and how we can solve this sustainably and attractively by creating, through better planning, much better places.

Before I do that, I need to deliver my own clear piece of guidance. I am not today speaking on behalf of the planning guidance review group, still less the Government. Nor for that matter the National Housing Federation (“NHF”). The thoughts I now want to challenge you with are purely my own.

I have been fortunate over the past five years to have been in a position to influence the thinking of both the last and the new governments on planning reform. In many ways the National Planning Policy Framework (“NPPF”) reflected the core principles I articulated in the Taylor Review “Living Working Countryside” back in 2008.

I argued then that rather than seeing sustainability as a barrier to change, the challenge was how to promote a more sustainable future for communities through better development. I argued for simpler planning policy, weeding out the inherent contradictions across separate PPSs and PPGs. I argued the vital importance of better addressing the full range of social, environmental and economic need across all communities, using larger-scale integrated new communities, towns and villages to deliver the majority of the housing and economic development we need, whilst also empowering smaller communities to address their own needs far more flexibly. Above all, I argued that there is a fundamental housing crisis, and that planning plays both a central role exacerbating it, but is also fundamental to solving it more sustainably.

So let me first set out this housing issue. Then the effort to offer a sustainable solution, rooted in better planning through localism, the NPPF, and the guidance review. Finally I want to talk about the politics of delivery.

First, the housing crisis.

It is a fact that demographics have rapidly pushed up housing need (especially in the South). This includes:

- The aging population, and a preference to stay in your own home longer; a preference supported by social and health policy. Mum does not want to go into a “home”; she has one, thank you very much (and she would quite like you out of it now you are 20 ... or 30 ... or 40).
- Recent net immigration, notably from Eastern Europe, chiefly of working age. The guy from Poland has met someone from Estonia. Or Slovakia. Or Hungary. Or Tottenham. They are having children. They are here to stay (and luckily so for the rest of us who want a builder/plumber or pretty much anything else an aging population was getting short of).

- In many areas the impact of net immigration is as nothing compared to the pressure of net internal migration away from northern industrial areas to the “new economy” in the South, plus the move from inner urban to the suburbs and rural communities. Like it or not, lots of people want great jobs and to live in thriving communities like yours.
- It is not just people moving South and out of city centres. More people living singly, divorcing and sharing child care between separate homes, means more homes are needed and often too spare rooms for part-time children.
- Whilst those children may be hanging out with mum and dad longer than many of us may care for because they cannot afford a place of their own, family units are less likely to choose to be multi-generational. Fewer of us want granny to move in (and granny does not want to), and given the choice young people want to move out (believe it or not).
- Finally, I think I can share with this audience that despite the extortionate price of a home, some of you can afford two, or even three. There are ever more people at the upper end able to afford a second home or flat or investment (and in London overseas investors too).

In summary, according to recent analysis of the new census data by the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research, even if the economy remains depressed and household formation rates remain low, “there will still be almost a 20% increase in the number of households over the 20 year period to 2031”.¹

That is between 240,000 and 245,000 additional homes required in England each year, more than double current delivery rates and nearly 50 per cent higher than peak delivery pre-2008. That is without addressing the existing 2 million home backlog of undersupply, which led RIBA’s Future Homes Commission to argue we need more than 300,000 homes a year.

Whilst the need for housing has been driven up and up, for decades the “politics” of planning has driven down the acceptability of new build at local level. Planning *should* be, and I think the founders of modern planning clearly intended it to be, about creating great places that respond to all the needs of a community without ruining the countryside as a whole. To achieve what we now call sustainable development, *balancing economic, social and environmental needs*. Yet for decades planning has too often been pressed into the business of preserving in aspic, defending against change, at the cost of severely rationing the supply.

This is the “planning” problem—and it *is* a planning problem. As people and therefore *local* politicians resist development for all sorts of sometimes good reasons, and sometimes blatantly selfish ones, the unintended consequence is the imposition of an overbearing supply constraint that gradually excludes more and more people from finding a decent home.

Ironically, as I will come on to argue later, despite being expressed in the vital terms of protecting heritage and the environment, I think the unintended consequences from rationing land are also wreaking huge damage to our natural and built environment in the very places most important to us. Certainly, the inevitable outcome of rocketing demand and under supply in the housing market should be unsurprising to those with even the most cursory notions of supply and demand theory. In July the NHF published research suggesting that over the next decade insufficient house building will lead house prices to rise by a further 42 per cent. Of course, for years a lot of us have rather enjoyed rising house prices precisely because we owned a house. However, the same NHF research estimated that the resulting price rise would leave 3.7 million young people living with their parents by the early 2020s. That is a rather more indigestible thought for those like me with little children just now.

But let me spell out the impacts in a little less personal detail:

¹ Holman Report: “New estimates of housing demand and need in England, 2011 to 2031”, Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research.

1. In an open market responsive to demand, the great majority of those in work could afford to buy a home, since the bricks and mortar of building it does not cost all that much relative to average earnings. However, in a market where housing land supply is highly constrained, prices of homes are pushed up far beyond the bricks and mortar cost by the price of land. This is fine in naturally constrained small areas (Chelsea, Kensington, Islington) as the need can be satisfied a little further away—down the tube line or around the M25. If such constraint becomes regional or national, the rising demand and failure to supply will increasingly price people out of the housing market altogether.
That is why house price downwards adjustment post-2008 was never going to be permanent—the inevitable result of undersupply is back. RICS this month showed the strongest price reading since November 2006, and commented that while the supply of housing for sale was growing it was inadequate to keep pace with the “sheer weight of demand”. Two weeks ago the Halifax said average house prices have broken through the £170,000 barrier for the first time since the financial crisis of 2008. Now RICS are calling on the Bank of England to control house price rises.
2. Of course, there are always those who cannot afford the upfront cost of buying, or do not wish to buy. Again, an open market responds with a wide variety of rental options. However, shortage of supply bids up rental levels. Worse, if those who previously could afford to buy are priced out, they will look to rent instead, that pushes rents up faster still. If housing benefit is allowed to rise to compensate, that only pushes up rents even more.
NHF research earlier this year predicted a 42 per cent rise in private sector rents by 2020. Of course, rising rents will attract new offers, notably expressed by the buy-to-rent boom. However, in the absence of a great deal of new land supply to meet this surge in demand, buy-to-rent is competing within the limited housing and land supply, raising prices further, rather than delivering significant new housing on top. Inevitably as rents rise, more and more are pushed into the next category—those who cannot even afford to rent (unless subsidised).
3. So those who could never afford either to buy or rent decent accommodation, are joined by increasing numbers of those who used to be able either to rent or buy but cannot any longer. Ever more either go on the list for subsidised housing where rents are held down through Government grant, or have to rely on housing benefit to meet rising private sector rents if they can find a place at all. So demand for social housing far exceeds supply, housing benefit bills mushroom to the point the Government cannot afford them, and more and more people miss out on a decent home—to become the dispossessed, or the sofa surfers, or the cuckoos hanging on in the nest, or those eight-to-a-room victims of the new slum landlords. As the shortages of housing increase, both the burden on government finance and the number of those excluded from the market grows.

So it is that housing in one of the world’s wealthiest countries becomes a crisis of under delivery, masked by the wonderful news that the majority of us are reaping a windfall of rising house prices. Though that also means 27 per cent of parents now have at least one child between 21 and 40 living at home, two thirds of whom say this is because house prices mean their children can’t afford to move out.²

Of course, don’t get me wrong. There are still areas where housing demand is very low and accommodation can easily be found. However, these areas are like that for a reason—victims of a changing economy, they can no longer offer decent employment, are often very run down, and in so far as those who are desperate *do* move there, the problems of deprivation may only increase.

² Comres survey for the NHF, August 2013.

So in short what is needed?

Increased land supply for more homes in places where the demand is and, in so far as possible, regeneration of those places where it is not, sufficient over time to bear down on the real price of homes (to buy or rent) until supply and demand comes into some kind of balance.

Before anyone asks, this does not mean concreting over the countryside. I would be the last person to advocate that, having a record of championing both the environment and rural communities, there is no chance I would support that. However, I do ask all those who think this is an “either/or” dilemma, to remind ourselves that England is still better understood as a green and pleasant land than an over-crowded island.

In the most developed area of England, the South East, the Generalised Land Use Database shows that only 12.2 per cent of the land (outside London) is developed, and that definition includes gardens and other urban green spaces. So over 87 per cent remains green fields. Across England, delivering Kate Barker’s maligned 3 million homes would have amounted to just an additional 0.5 per cent developed area at 45 dwellings per hectare.

So don’t get me wrong. I don’t mean “let rip”, carve up the countryside into building plots, and concrete over the green belt. Neither do I want to abandon good planning. I want a supply and demand balance, but I also want a great planning system that does deliver sustainable development—sustainable environmentally as well as socially and economically. In point of fact, I want much more environmentally sustainable outcomes.

To achieve that? Simply put, a planning system charged with making the necessary land available, but, as planning was originally conceived by Ebenezer Howard, doing so in ways that are environmentally, socially and—most importantly if a step change in delivery is to happen—*politically* acceptable too.

Over the last decade I think there has been a huge evolution in attitudes. More people understand that the housing need is there, not surprisingly if it is their own children, the children of the middle classes even, that are priced out. At the same time, government has made huge strides in setting out the case for, and the NPPF adopting clear policies for, meeting need and good planning. But—and it is a big but—that has only rarely made development more acceptable, because people’s experience often, and their fear almost always, is that the development they get is the very development they least want. The need is recognised more and more, but still the debate about development often fails to move beyond pressure that it should be “there”, not “here”.

A vocal case is made that it is not a failure of planning at all. After all, most planning applications are approved, they say. There is a backlog of 400,000 unbuilt permissions, they say. The lack is access to finance post-2008, they say. It’s about hoarding—land hoarded by greedy developers, empty homes hoarded by greedy speculators, council houses hoarded by the undeserving, cash hoarded by the banks.

But think about it. 400,000 extant permissions? That is less than two years’ supply, in an industry that needs more than that in the pipeline just to maintain a steady development flow and viable businesses. That is why the big boys bought the medium builders for their land banks. And that is before we consider those permissions stalled because they are unviable, or in the wrong place, or just plain held up by the myriad hurdles that come between permission and delivery.

Access to finance? Even in the pre-2008 boom years the housing industry never got close to delivering the numbers we need. Between 1997 and 2007, the boom years, on average we delivered just 148,000 new homes each year. I have no doubt that we need a new model of development investment, based on long-term returns, but that will have to be in partnership with a very different approach to planning that is equally long-term, an approach I will come on to.

Empty homes? I looked at the figures for my 2008 review. Strip away those awaiting redevelopment. Those caught up in probate. Those in places of such low demand they have no value. What you have left

is tiny numbers. Unsurprisingly so. Why would people keep homes empty for no reason given the value in selling or renting?

So, to the nub: Is the NPPF man enough for the job?

It is far from all bad news. The NPPF is underpinned by recognising, identifying, evidencing objectively assessed needs—and engaging local authorities in a way that empowers and, more importantly, *requires* proactive delivery and an emphasis on place shaping and meeting strategic needs by finding the best local solutions.

The NPPF’s offer to communities is to empower them as place shapers, but not rationers. At its heart is meeting local housing and economic needs—the essential starting point of the NPPF—founded on evidenced need, evidenced land supply, evidenced delivery.

It is also at root about planning as it was conceived, creating great places and best local solutions to meet these objectively assessed and evidenced needs, not planning as tick-box regulatory control and rationing. In this context, I am still often challenged to explain how the NPPF “requirements to deliver” jell with “localism”.

There is a view about amongst some MPs and councillors that localism means that councils are empowered to ignore any government’s wish for “sustainable development” and, where there is opposition to development, to minimise it all over again. Were this true, the NPPF would be disastrously wrong both for millions of people in housing need and for the economy. It would ignore a fundamental duty of any civilised state, of any government, to ensure no-one need be without a decent roof over their head, a home to call their own. Fortunately, it is not true.

It is true that since the Coalition Government’s formation “localism” has been a key element of its response to the public opposition to “top-down” requirements for development. By stripping out regional-level housing numbers, the Government’s “localism” approach asks for need to be identified and understood at a local level: figures will not be handed down from on high, and solutions are locally shaped. Indeed this goes one step further—the empowerment of communities through neighbourhood planning (in tune with another recommendation I made back in 2008, that parishes should be empowered to plan their own housing to meet local needs). There are now over 700 neighbourhood plans in preparation.

However, the evidence needs to be sound—the local authority is the driving force, but it has to evidence its numbers against local needs, and the NPPF is rightly clear that requirement cannot be ducked. Even more fundamentally, the NPPF asks for *urgent delivery* to meet this need.

So local authorities and neighbourhoods are empowered to find their own solutions, but they cannot wish the issues away. If they do fail to provide the evidence or fail to identify the means to deliver against need, then the presumption in favour of sustainable development kicks in. Localism provides the opportunity for communities to identify and decide how to tackle local needs, but it does not allow them to ignore these needs.

The absolute key to this delivery is, of course, the local plan and how the principles of the NPPF are followed through, or the degree to which local authorities slip back.

Here I want to turn to the vital role of the new guidance to support the NPPF. What we set out to do in the review was put flesh on the bones: add to the NPPF’s “what” with guidance “hows” and “whens” in equally clear terms. Not to change or add to policy, but *to support it* and to give it clarity.

Let me take a crucial and, already for some, controversial example. The National Planning Policy Framework already says:

“Plans should take account of market signals, such as land prices and housing affordability, and set out a clear strategy for allocating sufficient land which is suitable for development in their area, taking account of the needs of the residential and business communities.”

The new guidance puts meat on these bones and sets out how local authorities should plan for new supply. It is made clear the starting point is the DCLG's household projections and the census data. Departure from this is possible, but the reasoning for that must itself be evidenced.

Beyond this, planning authorities will need to look at local house prices and rents, employment growth, land prices and the appetite for self-build when they draw up their plans. Two key extracts from the new guidance on future supply are worth quoting.

First:

“Prices or rents rising faster than the national/local average may well indicate particular market undersupply relative to demand.”

This is followed up by:

“In areas where an upward adjustment is required, plan makers should set this adjustment at a level that is reasonable. The more significant the affordability constraints (as reflected in rising prices and rents, and worsening affordability ratio) and the stronger other indicators of high demand (e.g. the differential between land prices), the larger the improvement in affordability needed and, therefore, the larger the additional supply response should be.”

Simply put, this means that rising unaffordability compared to national or “local” averages evidences a need for a boost in supply—subject, I stress, to the next question, which is how can that be sustainably delivered. It means that local authorities will need to have a clearer understanding of the housing and land markets in their area and plan for additional supply if the market is over-heating. It does not go as far as setting a target ratio of house prices to incomes (as the *Sun* newspaper wrongly said it did) but it is a clear challenge to all local planners that in a country where far too many can no longer afford a home, we need to increase the number of homes or at the least put a brake on rising unaffordability.

So assessments of housing need to be robust and have to be based on a full understanding of the local housing market, and follow the methodology set out in the guidance unless there is good evidenced reason not to. Of course this *will* put pressure on some local authorities, in the South East in particular. Local authorities with the largest ratio of house prices to incomes will have to look how to make greater provision for new homes than those with lower ratios.

It is true that not all local authorities *can* accommodate these needs. The NPPF does not take evidence of need and say deliver it come what may. It is about sustainable development, not any development. The capacity for delivery matters too. This is where the other key element of the NPPF has to kick in; the duty to cooperate.

The NPPF was already clear that in assessing whether the Local Plan is “effective”, the Inspector will assess whether it is deliverable within the timescale set by the local plan and if it demonstrates effective joint working to meet cross-boundary strategic priorities. If a local plan is found unsound at the examination the Inspector will recommend that it is not adopted. Again, the new guidance adds critical flesh to these bones.

You will want to—need to—read it all, but here now are a few key paragraphs in the new Duty to Co-operate guidance.

It asks: ‘What outcomes are expected from the duty to cooperate?’

And the answer?

“Cooperation between local planning authorities, county councils and other public bodies should produce effective policies on strategic cross boundary matters. Inspectors testing compliance with the duty at examination will assess the outcomes of cooperation and not just whether local planning authorities have approached others.”

And then later on in this key section (read at a little greater length if I may):

“The National Planning Policy Framework (paragraph 182) requires local planning authorities to take a strategic approach in their Local Plans. Local Plans should be based on a strategy which seeks to meet objectively assessed development and infrastructure requirements, including unmet requirements from neighbouring local planning authorities where it is reasonable to do so and consistent with achieving sustainable development.

Therefore if a local planning authority preparing a Local Plan provides robust evidence of an unmet requirement, such as unmet housing need, other local planning authorities in the housing market area will be required to consider the implications, including the need to review their housing policies.”

Nor is this a distant ambition, the guidance emphasising the legal duty that:

“Local planning authorities must give details of what action they have taken to comply with the duty in the local planning authority Monitoring Reports at least once a year. This should include details of the actions they have taken to respond constructively to requests for cooperation.”

So the Duty to Co-operate is ongoing, and by law is annually reported. If the Inspector accepts one local authority cannot meet its own needs due to clearly evidenced local constraints, that identifies an unmet need that then falls to surrounding local authorities to meet—and they need to show in their annual reports how they are responding to this.

The NPPF does not ignore the limits to sustainable development in some parts of the country, but if it was left at that, we would by definition under deliver against needs. The “duty to cooperate” means that tightly constrained local authorities will have to speak to their less constrained neighbours and plan accordingly, and those neighbours will have to respond. The point is that no single authority can evade their duties because they all have a part to play and if this does not happen, cumulatively we will fail to meet the very real housing needs of millions of people. Moreover, this should not only happen when a plan is in preparation: planning is a continuous process, and that is what the guidance makes clear in terms of how the duty to co-operate should be delivered.

Of course, local authorities who want to avoid development sufficient to address these needs will still argue that their areas are too popular and that if they built across the entire district it would still not bring prices down. They will also argue the green belt will be put at risk by the new guidance. That they may meet their own needs, but cannot be expected to meet the needs of others. Some will believe this. Some will be right. Some mistaken. Some will simply secretly prefer to avoid responsibility for difficult local decisions, and rely on the Inspector and the Secretary of State to take the difficult decisions. Either way, the guardianship of ensuring that local planning authorities meet this core requirement of the NPPF, meeting needs, falls first to the Planning Inspectorate.

How do I think the Inspectorate is doing?

Notwithstanding the introduction of the NPPF, Regional Strategies were the legal starting point for local plans to be in conformity with until they were revoked. So despite the NPPF, at first Inspectors followed the law by sticking to these figures (albeit flagging in some cases that local plans would need early revision). However, those who assumed this meant it would remain business as usual as the RSSs were abolished are being proved mistaken. Recent indications are that PINS are taking the obligations of the NPPF extremely seriously, and with the RSSs gone, now we will really see the full impact of the NPPF. I probably do not need to point out to this audience that the legal challenge period over the abolition of the RSSs has now passed.

I think there is little doubt the new guidance, in shining a light on what the NPPF requires and fleshing it out, will give additional clarity to the Planning Inspectorate when examining the soundness of local

plans and the response to local housing needs. However, the story does not end there. The greatest test of the NPPF is still around the corner. The toughest cases are likely to be those that come late, because very often they have had to be dragged every step of the way. Maybe it is an unfair generality, but increasingly the reason that plans are not yet in place is more than likely that the local authority has been reluctant to face up to its responsibility to deliver, and perhaps is still hoping that it will never really have to.

As we approach the general election, they wonder, and I wonder, will the Government stick to its guns, backing PINS, giving spine to the NPPF? Already the political challenges can be seen, as the presumption kicks in in the absence of local plans, as local decisions are overturned on appeal, as local plans are rejected by Inspectors with a call for significantly more housing in communities that want little or none. Every day the general election ticks closer is a day that Ministers stand more clearly in the ultimate decision-taking role. Just look at the number of MPs challenging Nick Boles in the Commons adjournment debate on planning just before the parliamentary summer recess.

It is also hardly controversial to suggest that some local politicians might be very happy to see appeals overturn their decisions, knowing it is the right decision in planning terms but that they can tell their constituents that “we voted against it; it’s the nasty Inspectorate that made the decision”.

The sternest test for NPPF and for a Government committed to the NPPF is what happens to those local planning authorities proposing plans with massive under provision over the next year. This is not just tricky territory for those in government. Will the opposition stand by its support for housing, or take the political opportunity to just say no?

One thing is for sure. A lot of local bets are being placed by local politicians that any government will lose its nerve at election time. However, that simply points to a fundamental truth—the NPPF alone is not enough, political will is necessary too—locally, and ultimately nationally.

So can we change this political calculus, or at least give it a shove? The sheer scale of the problem helps, when middle-class families cannot see how their children will ever afford a decent home, politics does shift, but barely. I do not see many politicians clamouring for a lot more housing yet, not at any rate in their own back yard.

I do though, have a modest proposal. Not quite so far reaching as Swift’s “Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People From Being a Burthen to Their Parents”, which suggested eating them. Though that would certainly cut housing demand, and would be one way to get them out of your house I suppose. Nonetheless my more modest proposal may surprise you given what I have said so far. I believe we need to recognise the NIMBYs have a point. We need to say so, and we need to do something about it.

Sequential development, building on the next field, endlessly adding to existing communities, directs development to the very bits of environment most precious to people; at the end of their garden, the gateways to the town, the fields they most treasure precisely because they are on their doorstep. Adding endless new estates encircling communities, often without services or jobs, without so much as a cafe or a shop, is a guaranteed recipe for generating ever greater opposition to new homes, and is not the most sustainable development solution.

Worse, the economics of rationed land supply means the key competitive advantage for developers is to be able to acquire land by offering more for it, which is made possible by smaller, cheaper, denser units. This process only marginally aids increased housing numbers through ratcheting up density, but this benefit is more than outweighed by also so degrading quality that it also ratchets up resistance to new development.

In short, far too often people are getting exactly the thing they fear. The result is that supporting development becomes ever more politically toxic. No wonder people oppose development. No wonder politicians do too. Demonising them as NIMBYs is to miss the point. In the long run, every awful development, and every broken promise about quality, makes the next development even more strongly resisted.

So the idea I want to focus on finally, to leave you with, is to propose we positively embrace the NIMBYs. Hug them, even. Propose to protect historic communities from being ringed by bland unattractive housing estates and business and retail parks, or overshadowed by towering mansion blocks, whilst still delivering the housing and economic growth the country desperately needs and the NPPF requires—and to do so more, not less, sustainably, by creating new communities instead. This is how we stop an endless fight over each next housing development on the green spaces on the edge of our historic towns. This is how to end the irony that in the name of sustainability we build over the very environment most important to people: the environment we live in, and beside?

I have already explained why the answer does not lie in empty homes, unbuilt permissions, or mortgage subsidies. It cannot; they don't address the scale of the shortage. We cannot address the concerns of the NIMBYs by wisening away the need for a great deal more homes, even if they wish we would.

However, we can strike a deal. It is in the very roots of planning, its first principles, its very DNA. It is by creating great places that do not step on so many people's toes so crushingly. Agreeing to create great new towns and villages to deliver much of the development we need whilst protecting the great historic places that already exist—not from all development (I am not suggesting there is no room for change or growth in these communities) but from encircling and diminishing them with the scale of housing we actually need.

In the NPPF local authorities are invited to examine “larger scale development[s] ... that follow the principles of Garden Cities” as an option for delivery to meet local housing needs. This concept, these “garden city principles”, are all about attractive, well-planned and integrated new communities to deliver the housing and economic development we need in ways that are far more attractive and sustainable than endless new housing estates around every market town.

Back in the earlier Taylor Review, “Living Working Countryside”, I said this:

“By putting together the value unlocked by thousands of new homes, and planning it as a community with a sense of place, it is possible to deliver the infrastructure, the shops, the pubs, cafes, schools, health centres, leisure facilities, multifunctional green spaces, business premises and mixed housing, that makes a community....In contrast, piecemeal developments of a few hundred houses will likely leave local authorities trying to piece together the bare minimum of infrastructure, without the funds or the land to do it well. A likely outcome of this is that a greater proportion of any public facilities or infrastructure required becomes a public cost, rather than a privately financed outcome of development.”

Sure, there will be opposition to any proposal, but I am convinced that they offer a better long-term option than imposing on all our historic communities 1,001 small housing developments. Each of which destroy someone's backyard. Many of which too often add to an ill-planned sprawling complex of estates without local shops, pubs, workplaces or attractive community centres, and which collectively have failed to deliver either the housing people need, or the vibrant neighbourhoods people crave.

I know we have been there before. I bear the scars too. I chair an eco-town board. I know this Government has promised but not yet delivered a Garden Cities prospectus, feeding cynicism that nothing will really change. However, whether new-town or eco-town or garden community, there is a reason this thought keeps repeating itself. There is a reason that more and more local authorities are pursuing this option. There is a reason the St. Austell eco-community proposals, unlike any other proposed local development of any scale I am aware of in Cornwall, commands 4:1 support.

Ultimately the NPPF will have meaning through being made real. Some see that as just a numbers game, but I think it is about cracking the politics too. To cut a deal with the NIMBYs. To protect and enhance the spaces most important to them, creating 21st century Hyde Parks and Hampstead Heaths and the 21st century Kensingtons and Chelseas and Garden Suburbs that are enabled by sustainable new communities

and neighbourhoods. The Letchworths and Bournevilles. The villages and neighbourhoods rich and poor that make London such a great city to live in. The market towns that are so popular. Communities are, in my view, the best way to deliver sustainable development, not housing estates. When NIMBYs complain, they are powerful precisely because far too often development has been bad. It is time to say so, and to offer something altogether better. Then we can really shift the political debate, raise the quality, and deliver the numbers. Then, and only then, can the NPPF, or more specifically great planning, crack the housing crisis.