

IS LOCALISM STILL ALIVE?

Only 9 months ago, in January 2012, Prime Minister David Cameron said in his interview with John Craven on 8 January:

'I care deeply about our countryside and our environment and I would no more put that at risk than I would put at risk my own family.'

I think our reforms will make it easier for communities to say 'we are not going to have the big plonking housing estate landing next to the village but we would like the 10, 20, 30 extra houses and would like them to be built in this way, we'd like them for local people...'

Under our plans, villages and towns will be able to designate new green spaces in their local plans that they want to keep, that is a protection they don't necessarily have now.'

Last week, however, the Prime Minister stressed that the Government was now going to, 'cut through the bureaucracy,' and, 'that starts with getting the planners off our backs.'

Planning is, therefore, blamed for causing a blockage in the process of increasing the flow of development of new and existing housing stock, which is now being seen as an increasingly important means of helping to stimulate economic recovery. Increasingly there are questions about the need for George Osborne to relax the planning rules, giving a clue to who is actually managing the Government approach to planning.

In the five months since the introduction of the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) earlier this year, 2,000 more building schemes per month have been approved than in the previous 5 months. Analysis by the Local Government Association shows that in England and Wales there are now 400,000 approved schemes on which work has yet to start. The average time taken to start building once permission has been given is now over two years and still rising. This raises the question of whether it is really the lack of housing or more likely the lack of mortgages and liquidity that is the most urgent problem to address.

In addition to measures which could weaken protection for green belt areas and place even more countryside at risk there are also plans to relax the planning rules on a temporary basis for various home improvement schemes, especially single-storey extensions and conservatories. Once again, however, it is more likely to be the availability of funding for such projects that will dictate the pace of development rather than the existing rules and relatively moderate fees.

So what will this all mean for the residents of Hart District? A Face-It spokesperson said, 'The position is far from clear yet and, although there have been some key announcements of policy wishes, there should be a period of consultation before the announcements can be

underpinned by legislation. It is now clear that the Government seems to be taking a central approach to planning and giving much less emphasis to Localism. These new initiatives make it even more important for the process of preparing the Local Plan and Core Strategy to be completed in a timely manner, fully and correctly reflecting the consultation inputs and needs of local residents. A Core Strategy (with an adopted Local Plan) will remain essential to help ensure that Hart has the development it needs and in the places it decides. The greatest worries are that the new initiatives could lead to vital infrastructure requirements and the need to build affordable housing being intentionally overlooked in future assessments of the viability of development proposals. These measures would increase the profitability of development schemes whilst reducing any benefits for the residents and would do nothing to improve the availability of mortgage funding. They could also provide even more unaffordable housing, with inadequate transport, schooling and health infrastructure support.'

The spokesperson added: 'In Face-It, we will be looking to continue to work with Hart District Council and Parish Councils to ensure that the Local Plan and Parish or Neighbourhood Plans reflect the views and wishes of the local community and to seek needed development that is truly sustainable, which protects the separate identities and environments of local settlements and which provides the essential infrastructure so urgently required.'