

Tens of thousands of new homes in greenfield areas to get automatic planning permission

Ministers quietly expand scope of 'planning in principle' power from brownfield sites to areas earmarked for development in local plans

By [Christopher Hope](#), Chief Political Correspondent
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Tens of thousands of new homes in greenfield areas in England will be given automatic planning permission amid fears that communities will have inappropriate developments forced on them.

Ministers have quietly given developers the right to be granted "planning in principle" in areas that are earmarked for new housing schemes.

Rural campaigners said the new powers will restrict the rights of council planning officers to ensure that the design, density, size and location of homes is in keeping with local areas.

Shaun Spiers, chief executive of the Campaign to protect Rural England, said: "The country needs more house building, but the way to achieve this is through well-planned developments that win public consent. Imposing development without local democratic oversight is a recipe for discord.

"Poor quality, unplanned development may boost the profits of the big builders, but it will do very little to address the housing crisis."

Ministers have quietly expanded the scope of this "planning in principle" power in recent weeks from brownfield sites to areas earmarked for development in local plans.

Just three weeks ago David Cameron, the Prime Minister, said that the new "planning in principle" changes would apply to brownfield sites like former car parks and industrial areas.

However Government documents said the new power will apply to "housing identified in local plans and neighbourhood plans" which include greenfield areas.

They said that 'planning in principle' will give "upfront certainty" for developers on the location, use and size of the new development.

Councils will be able to vet unspecified "technical" details on developments, but will be denied the outright ability to block housing schemes they consider inappropriate.

One document states: "The Government proposes to legislate to enable the Secretary of State to grant 'permission in principle' via a development order to land that is allocated for development in locally produced plans and registers."

Whitehall forecasts say the new plans could be used to give approvals to homes on 7,000 building sites a year.

Whitehall documents published alongside the Bill say: "The total number of developments annually that could benefit from permission in principle will grow as plans and registers come on stream and make site allocations."

Countryside campaigners attacked the reforms, saying the Government was wrong not to try to see if they worked in a green paper first and blaming developers for not building enough homes.

Mr Spiers said: "The Government seems obsessed with the idea that the planning system is holding back house building. It is not.

"The number of planning permissions has increased massively, developers hold huge and growing land banks, yet fewer houses are being built.

"Permission in principle for greenfield development will not cause more houses to be built, but there is a serious risk that it will result in poor quality, low density developments that will increase public antagonism to house building.

"It also risks undermining the Government's excellent focus on brownfield development and neighbourhood planning."

John Healey, the shadow Housing minister, said: "The Government is badly failing to hit its housebuilding targets, and the sweeping new powers in this Bill should ring alarm bells about Ministers getting ready to override local communities and give developers a free hand."

Brandon Lewis, the Housing Minister, said: "Our planning reforms have put an end to the top-down system of the past that pitted neighbours against developers, and instead put power back in the hands of local people.

"The Housing Bill means permission would be granted in principle where land has been identified for housebuilding in local and neighbourhood plans and on brownfield land – but developers will still need to submit details of what they plan to build and how it will look for approval before they can put spades in the ground.

"And with over 80 per cent of councils having published a local plan, and over 100 communities having developed neighbourhood plans, it means millions of people will have a direct say over how their area is developed."