

SPEECH by BOB NEILL MP

**Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Department for Communities and Local Government**

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Good afternoon and many thanks for inviting me. I'm delighted that so many of you are here. I know that this is a **unique cross-sector forum**, with representatives from the planning profession, the private sector, voluntary bodies, and local government. A model coalition in fact! Perhaps you can give me some tips...

What I'm here to do is to offer a **positive challenge** to all of you. What we all have in common is a desire to ensure planning is at the forefront of delivering the sorts of places and communities where people want to live. What I want to talk about today is the **Government's vision** for how we can achieve that goal. Yes we think the system needs to change. But it needs your help and your buy-in to do it.

You'll doubtless have many questions but **I'd like to focus on three areas**. Firstly, you won't be surprised to hear, I want to say something about **what we mean by localism** and a decentralised approach to planning.

Secondly I'd like to talk about **what that means for the people working in planning** – how we see the roles not just of planners, but developers, local authority representatives, and third sector partners, in delivering that vision.

And thirdly I'd like to outline some of the **next steps** we plan to take so you have an idea of our programme ahead.

Localism

Some of you may have heard the Secretary of State talk about his three priorities: localism, localism, and localism. But what does this mean for planning?

I want to be clear: **we believe in planning**. Planning is absolutely critical to achieving the goals that we all want: sustainable communities well served by infrastructure, that are attractive, characterful, and where people want to live.

And **planning has its roots in a democratic system** that engages local communities. You were there at the beginning!

But in our view **the system has lost its way**. It is too centralised, too bureaucratic, and too top-down. By forcing development on local people who – often rightly – see no benefits for them, it intensifies opposition to much needed development.

We want to see local plans that truly reflect local opinion. We want to see an end to the imposition of top-down regional targets by unaccountable quangos and bureaucrats who do not have to report back to those whose lives are directly affected by their decisions.

Instead we want to see communities coming together **to take responsibility** for meeting their own housing ambitions and solving their own local challenges in a way that makes sense for them.

And in return, **they will be offered new incentives** that ensure they see the benefits of the development they welcome.

Some people say this means local authorities will duck difficult decisions. Or that they can't work together to solve bigger problems. I think that indicates a worrying paternalism and a lack of trust in local democracy. **We believe local authorities have both the mandate and the ability to get together to solve their challenges themselves** – and it is for them to decide how to do so.

So that's what localism means for planning.

The second area I need to discuss with you is:

What does this mean for the planners?

I know some of you will be worried that this means an end to professional planning as we know it. I don't agree.

What I do think it means is a **challenge** to planners – and councillors, and developers, and everyone trying to influence planning - to embrace a new role.

This is about giving communities real power and real influence. It means simplifying not just the language of planning policy and guidance, but the policy itself.

It means being absolutely **transparent** about what is in the local plan, why it is there, and how it will benefit the community.

It means working with communities to develop proposals for their neighbourhoods, not consulting them on 'options' that you have prepared earlier.

Above all it means the plan is more important, not less. This is your opportunity, as planners, to work with communities and **see your vision realised**, not superseded by targets imposed by people who don't know your local area.

Under such a system planners are the professionals who help local people get the places that they want and ensure their ambitions are delivered.

You make things happen – you always have - but too often you haven't been welcomed because the system is too adversarial and too bureaucratic for people to understand or support what has been proposed.

Under our proposals you need to be communicators, facilitators, advisors and deliverers. To me that is what planning is about. Yes, you are experts. But you need to be experts working with communities, translating their visions into action.

Finally I said I would set out our **next steps**.

We have already acted to change the policy on back gardens. We thought it was wrong that national government could say this approach was right everywhere.

If local people and their local representatives want to support development this way, they can.

That's what localism is all about.

But they should not be forced to accept it if it is not how they want their neighbourhoods to develop.

So what's next on our list? The Secretary of State has already written to local authorities to make clear our commitment to revoking Regional Strategies. We will do so at the earliest possible opportunity.

We have said in the Queen's Speech that we will introduce a localism bill to take forward our decentralising ambitions – not just those for local planning, but, crucially, restoring democratic accountability to decisions on major infrastructure.

The Government has ambitious plans to reform planning policy and publish a simple and consolidated framework covering all forms of development, including national infrastructure.

The national policy framework will include national economic, environmental and social priorities and will be presented to Parliament. National planning policy extends to over 1,000 pages alone. These reforms will give a greater say to people, communities and councils through a faster and more democratically accountable planning system.

Conclusion

Planning is one of the things that matters most to local communities. We want them to have a system they can be proud of and feel represents their wishes. And with your help we can make it happen.

Thank you.