

Response to consultation on proposed changes to national planning policy

Introduction

1. The Campaign for National Parks is the independent national voice for the 13 National Parks in England and Wales. Our mission is to inspire everyone to enjoy and look after National Parks – the nation’s green treasures. We have been campaigning for 80 years to ensure that our National Parks are beautiful, inspirational places that are relevant, valued and protected for all. Our response has been endorsed by all the National Park Societies in England.
2. The high quality environment in National Parks makes them attractive places to live. Based on 2011 Census data we know all the National Parks have an increasingly ageing population. This is partly because they are seen as attractive places to relocate for those who are retired. We also know that second home ownership is an issue in National Parks. Consequently, average house prices in National Parks are already significantly higher than the average house price in their respective region. The premium for a property in a National Park varies from 27% to 90% but in five of the 10 National Parks it is over 60%¹.
3. The current approach to housing delivery in National Parks, as set out in Local Plans, ensures that the limited development opportunities available mainly cater for local needs rather than meet the high demand for market housing. Several of the measures proposed in this consultation would undermine this long-standing approach and could lead to significant numbers of completely inappropriate housing developments in National Parks. Given that current policies restrict development in these areas, and that houses can be sold at a premium, developers are likely to be keen to build new housing in National Parks. They are also likely to want to do this quickly in order to maximise their profits, as the price premium is unlikely to be maintained if the proposals in this consultation are adopted and the additional planning protections which make National Parks such attractive places to live are removed.
4. We are concerned that the Government has not fully considered the wider implications of the proposed changes and we do not support several of the measures proposed. We believe that there is a strong case for exempting National Parks from some of the proposals as we explain in our response to individual questions below.
5. A further concern is that many of the proposals would lead to increased housing development in areas that may affect the setting of National Parks, i.e. in areas just outside their boundaries. It is essential that planning authorities in areas neighbouring National Parks are made fully aware of their statutory duty² to take account of the potential effect of their decisions and activities on National Parks.

¹ Valuing England’s National Parks, Cumulus Consultants Ltd and ICF GHK report for National Parks England 2013

² This is in section 11A(2) of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 as amended by Section 62(2) of the Environment Act 1995. It is often referred to as ‘the S62 duty’.

This requirement also covers activities undertaken outside National Park boundaries which may affect land within them.

6. Our response focuses on National Parks as that is what our charitable purposes relate to but most of the issues we have covered would also apply to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).

Q1. Do you have any comments or suggestions about the proposal to amend the definition of affordable housing in national planning policy to include a wider range of low cost homes?

7. We do not support the proposal to amend the definition of affordable housing in national planning policy to include products such as discount market sales, particularly where such homes are not subject to 'in perpetuity' restrictions. Most NPAs already have policies that support lower cost housing and the local occupancy of new dwellings. Changing the definition of affordable housing would undermine these policies and the statutory duty of National Park Authorities (NPAs) to seek to foster the social and economic wellbeing of communities living within the National Park. The local occupancy restrictions ensure that properties are more affordable for those in housing need and make it easier for local people to work and live in areas which would otherwise be unaffordable.
8. Including 'starter homes' within the definition of affordable housing could have a negative impact on the delivery of other forms of low costs homes, which may be more important for the social and economic wellbeing of communities in National Parks. Given the price premium and the demand for holiday homes in National Parks, starter homes in these areas are likely to be unaffordable for most people working locally even with the initial discount and are highly likely to be sold as second homes or holiday rental properties at the end of the initial five year period.
9. NPAs have a strong track record of supporting the delivery of affordable housing as part of small scale housing schemes and it is particularly important that they are able to continue this success. This means that they need to be free to allocate land for, and create planning policies to ensure the delivery of, the most appropriate form of affordable housing for their area and must not be required to consider 'starter homes' as 'affordable housing'. There is a very limited pool of suitable sites for new housing in National Parks and allocating these for starter homes will reduce the availability of sites for other forms of affordable housing which would be more appropriate for meeting local needs.

Q2. Do you have any views on the implications of the proposed change to the definition of affordable housing on people with protected characteristics as defined in the Equalities Act 2010? What evidence do you have on this matter?

10. Although an equalities statement reviewing the impact on different groups of people was published alongside the consultation document, there is no evidence that the Government has undertaken any assessment of the impact that the proposals will have in different types of area. This is a serious omission given that the focus of the consultation is on delivering new homes and many of the proposed changes could undermine existing measures aimed at providing

homes, particularly affordable homes, for those who need them most in National Parks and other rural areas.

11. As set out in our response to Q1, the proposed change to the definition of affordable housing could lead to an increase in the number of starter homes at the expense of the provision of other types of affordable housing which is more appropriate for meeting local needs. This is likely to have a negative impact on the delivery of the types of affordable housing most needed by those on low incomes in National Parks.

Q3. Do you agree with the Government's definition of commuter hub? If not, what changes do you consider are required?

12. We do not agree with the Government's definition of commuter hub. This definition includes any rail station that has, or *could have in the future*, a service of at least every 15 minutes during normal commuting hours (our emphasis). In theory, virtually all rail stations *could have* a service of this frequency, meaning that this policy would allow dense housing development around small rural rail stations in designated landscapes.
13. There may be some locations with rail stations in National Parks where such development would be appropriate and it should be for individual NPAs to identify these in their local plans. However, there are likely to be many other locations where such development would be completely inappropriate and would have unacceptable environmental impacts, for example, where the existing settlement is very small and has few shops and other local services. Given the current restrictions on setting maximum parking standards, there would be nothing to prevent high levels of car ownership in such developments. So not only would they have unacceptable landscape and visual impacts, but they would also result in significant amounts of additional traffic on roads that are unlikely to have been designed for this.
14. We believe that there is a strong case for exempting National Parks from this proposal. This would be in line with existing policies in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which emphasise the special status that these areas should be afforded in planning policies and decisions and make it clear that they have the highest status of protection.

Q7. Do you consider that it would be beneficial to strengthen policy on development of brownfield land for housing? If not, why not and are there any unintended impacts that we should take into account?

15. We support the appropriate re-use of brownfield sites but we do not consider that it would be beneficial to strengthen policy on development of brownfield land for housing in the context of trying to achieve sustainable development in National Parks. NPAs' local plans already support the development of brownfield land for a range of uses, including housing, where appropriate. However, NPAs must remain free to choose the most appropriate use for the re-development of brownfield land to suit local circumstances if they are to meet their statutory duty to seek to foster the economic and social wellbeing of local communities.

16. Some brownfield sites in National Parks may be more suited to business and employment use and it is important that NPAs are able to continue to support re-development for such uses which would not be possible if there was a presumption in favour of housing in preference to other uses.

Q8. Do you consider that it would be beneficial to strengthen policy on development of small sites for housing? If not, why not? How could the change impact on the calculation of local planning authorities' 5-year land supply?

17. We are very concerned about this proposal as it is effectively introducing a presumption in favour of development on sites of fewer than 10 housing units if they are within or immediately adjacent to existing settlement boundaries. While we recognise the benefit small numbers of new homes can deliver in rural locations, including improving the viability of small communities, it is essential that this type of development is guided by Local Plans so inappropriate sites are not developed.

18. There is currently no requirement in the NPPF for planning authorities to use settlement boundaries so not all NPAs have adopted them. Where they are used, for example, by the New Forest NPA, this is often because there are particularly sensitive sites immediately adjacent to the settlement boundary which need to be protected from development. This proposal would, therefore, completely undermine the existing use of settlement boundaries to protect areas where development would be inappropriate. Over time, it could also lead to a significant amount of additional development in National Parks as settlements gradually expand in size.

19. A further issue is that this proposal would undermine the existing policy on rural exception sites and will do nothing to deliver affordable homes to help meet local housing need. We therefore believe that there is a strong case for exempting National Parks from this proposal.

Q9. Do you agree with the Government proposal to define a small site as a site of less than 10 units? If not, what other definition do you consider is appropriate, and why?

20. In many National Parks, the majority of housing development sites are for 10 or fewer units. Larger housing developments are often unacceptable in National Parks as they have much greater visual and landscape impacts. We do not agree with the proposal to define a small site as a site of less than 10 units as this does not reflect these factors and takes no account of the differing local circumstances in National Parks. We do not believe it is appropriate to impose a national definition of a small site.

Q14. Do you consider that the starter homes exception site policy should be extended to unviable or underused retail, leisure and non-residential institutional brownfield land?

21. We do not consider that the starter homes exception site policy should be extended to unviable or underused retail, leisure and non-residential institutional brownfield land. It is essential that careful consideration is given to the most

appropriate use of the limited land available for re-development in National Parks and that employment land is protected if these areas are to remain living, working landscapes. This is particularly important given the significant pressure for new housing in National Parks which we have highlighted above.

22. We are concerned at the suggestion in paragraph 37 of the consultation document that planning authorities would be required to provide a significant amount of evidence to justify retaining unviable or underused land for employment use. This proposal is unacceptable and could have serious financial consequences for NPAs. At present, some NPAs have a presumption against, for example, converting the last shop in the village to residential use and the onus is on the applicant to prove a lack of viability. This proposal would reverse the existing situation by putting the onus on planning authorities to prove viability. We do not believe that such evidence should be necessary to justify the retention of existing employment sites in National Parks given the other arguments in favour of this.
23. There is also a risk that the introduction of such a policy could lead to existing employment or commercial uses being deliberately run down to allow the land they occupy to be redeveloped for housing.

Q15. Do you support the proposal to strengthen the starter homes exception site policy? If not, why not?

24. We do not support the proposal to strengthen starter homes exception site policy. Rural exception sites were originally created to allow exceptions to normal planning policy so that affordable homes could be built to meet local housing need. As we have explained above, starter homes are unlikely to be affordable to those in housing need in National Parks so allowing starter homes on rural exception sites is contrary to the purpose of exception sites.

Q17. Should rural exception sites be used to deliver starter homes in rural areas? If so, should local planning authorities have the flexibility to require local connection tests?

25. As we have set out in our response to Q15, we do not believe that rural exception sites should be used to deliver starter homes as this will do nothing to meet local housing need. Allowing the limited number of exception sites available to be used for starter homes will further restrict NPAs' ability to deliver the kind of affordable housing needed to meet local need. It is precisely because exception sites have been used to address identified local housing need that many landowners have been willing to release land for housing and communities have been willing to accept new housing developments.
26. If rural exception sites are to be used to deliver starter homes in National Parks, it is essential that local planning authorities have the flexibility to require local connection tests and that such a requirement remains with the property 'in perpetuity'. Allowing the owners of starter homes to sell their properties on the open market after five years means that many of these properties may end up as holiday or second homes and will certainly no longer be affordable to those struggling to get on the housing ladder in the local area. This will further

undermine policies aimed at addressing local housing need in National Parks. In addition, the requirement for a local connection to remain in perpetuity should also apply to council and housing association tenants.

Q18. Are there any other policy approaches to delivering starter homes in rural areas that you would support?

27. The Government should enable local planning authorities to control the size of starter homes where it is clear that this would help address locally identified housing needs. A number of NPAs already use restrictions on the size of new housing to moderate the value of housing, meet need and help make it more affordable and these policies should be able to continue to apply.

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