

SECOND LEADER

## Development Hell

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are not naturally beautiful if built on

Pease Pottage is a Sussex village that presents two faces to the world. Close to Crawley, Gatwick and the M23, it is a gateway to jobs, transport links and modernity. At the same time, thanks to an enviable position on the edge of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, it should be protected from development in all but "exceptional circumstances".

This protection has proved feeble. In a test case with implications for much of the country, a supposedly exceptional need for more housing has trumped natural beauty. If a recent local planning decision stands, a rural area near Pease Pottage will soon be cleared for 600 new homes, a hospice and a school. So far Sajid Javid, the communities secretary, has not used his power to call in the planning application for special scrutiny. He has pronounced himself satisfied that the decision can be taken at the local level.

Mr Javid should take a closer look. This newspaper bows to no one in its conviction that the government needs to work harder to free up land for more homes, more quickly, to fix a ruinously distorted housing market and enable more

people to become homeowners. That is why in certain circumstances we have endorsed building on green belt land near cities.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are different. It is hard to see the point in having them if they are built on when alternatives are available. The national planning policy framework states that "great weight" should be given to conserving their landscape and scenic beauty. Officials say the government is "clear" that this means refusing planning permission for AONBs except in those "exceptional circumstances".

This glosses over three awkward realities. First, the Conservatives' purported clarity on rural planning is clear as mud. They have come out for the principle of conservation in their manifesto, only to outsource to overstretched and underfunded local councils the problem of when that principle applies in practice. Second, the "exceptional circumstances" rule is in danger of being weakened by a presumption in favour of development that Whitehall has handed down without specifying whether it applies to AONBs. Third, as the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)

has argued and as many in government agree, brownfield development should be prioritised over greenfield, but too often is not.

The High Weald is not the only AONB due or likely to be built on. In July, permission was given for 60 new homes in Milton-under-Wychwood in the Cotswolds because of an "exceptional" need for more housing. The same rationale was given by the developer in a pending application for 119 houses in Hungerford in the North Wessex Downs AONB.

No one disputes that the need for new housing can be as acute in rural areas as in inner cities. The concern is that local councils are being required to produce ambitious housing plans without corresponding extra powers to take on commercial and residential stakeholders in areas that are already built-up. The "exceptional circumstances" rule then makes building on AONBs the path of least resistance. The government wants a million new homes by 2020. The CPRE has established that they could all be built on brownfield sites. These may be marginally costlier to develop, but they are not irreplaceable.

ARTICLE (PAGE 5)

## Protected beauty spots are sacrificed to build houses

**Ben Webster** Environment Editor

A loophole in planning rules is allowing developers to build housing estates in England's finest countryside.

Ministers are waving through applications for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) despite promising to protect them.

The High Weald in Sussex, the North Wessex Downs and the Cotswolds are among the protected areas being built on.

Six hundred homes, a hospice and a school were approved last month near Pease Pottage in the High Weald despite objections from Natural England, the government's advisory body on protecting the natural environment.

Campaigners said that the rules were being swept aside in the rush to meet housing targets. Ministers are threatening councils with a "presumption" in favour of development unless they allocate enough land.

The National Planning Policy Framework states that "great weight

should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty" in AONBs. Significant developments in these areas should be refused planning permission "except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated they are in the public interest".

The Campaign to Protect Rural England said that the "exceptional circumstances" condition was being progressively weakened by decisions which gave demand for more homes greater priority than protecting ancient landscape. A spokeswoman said that the Pease Pottage decision could set a worrying precedent. She said: "AONBs should have the highest level of planning protection, but it is being undermined by pressure on councils to meet unrealistic housing targets.

"While we recognise the need for affordable housing in rural areas, this should be decided through a plan-led approach that respects our nationally recognised landscapes and reflects the ambitions of local people. It is our duty to protect these wonderful places for

future generations." Mid Sussex District Council approved the Pease Pottage development after planning officers advised that it would help meet local housing targets and create jobs during construction. Sajid Javid, the communities secretary, refused to use his powers to call in the application, saying he was "satisfied [it] should be determined at a local level".

A decision in July to allow 60 homes in Milton-under-Wychwood in Oxfordshire, part of the protected area in the Cotswolds, was also justified under the "exceptional circumstance" of the need for housing. An application has been submitted for 119 houses in Hungerford, in the North Wessex Downs AONB, with the developer claiming that the estate meets the "exceptional circumstances" condition.

A spokesman for the Department for Communities and Local Government said: "It is for elected local councils to decide where new homes should and shouldn't go."

Leading article, page 31