

New planning laws threaten village life

Village life is under threat with moves to relax planning laws to pave the way for the largest development of "affordable" rural homes in a generation, it was warned last night.

By Tom Whitehead
Published: 6:15PM GMT 04 Jan 2009

Up to 16,000 villages small towns, villages and hamlets across England could be affected in a "fundamental shake-up" of rural planning policy.

Protecting the greenbelt will no longer be the key consideration as ministers prepare to sweep aside planning controls as part of the Government's pledge to build three million new homes by 2020.



Housing development plans could threaten the traditions of many villages and hamlets, countryside protection groups have warned Photo: JUSTIN LEIGHTON

Farmers and other landowners will even be given incentives to sell land to developers and councils will be told to earmark new sites in every village and community where locals are struggling to afford homes.

The reforms are expected to be announced later this month after sources said housing secretary Margaret Beckett is ready to back a Government-commissioned report last year that was fiercely critical of "restrictive" planning policies in the countryside.

But countryside protection groups have warned any significant relaxation of planning curbs is unlikely to lead to sensitive development.

The 26-home hamlet of Carrick is threatened with being swamped by a 1,000-house development as part of plans to build 6,600 new homes near Truro, Cornwall.

Villager Sue Adams, 44, a midwife, said: "We are going to be destroying everything that is beautiful and unique about this village."

More than six million people in Britain live in rural communities with populations of less than 3,000.

Planning authorities in such areas rarely allow new properties to be built.

But a report into housing shortages in the English countryside by Matthew Taylor, a Liberal Democrat MP, last year warned such policies were turning many into exclusive enclaves of the rich and retired while locals couldn't afford to buy homes.

He said councils should be encouraged to use existing powers to grant exceptional permission to build affordable housing in villages. The homes would have covenants so they could be sold only to local workers and their prices would be capped so they would remain affordable.

Mrs Beckett is understood to have held a private meeting with Mr Taylor before Christmas at which she expressed strong support for his recommendations.

A Whitehall source said: "We are ready to act on the thrust of Taylor's recommendations. Our view is that he is on the money.

"Of course it will be controversial but it's not something we have cooked up. It's something people in the countryside have long been calling for."

Other measures expected are a demand to create a generation of new communities on the outskirts of market towns, similar to Poundbury, the Prince of Wales's "model village".

In market towns, local authorities will also be urged to consider sacrificing green fields to give newly built properties bigger gardens.

Last July, the Tories warned ministers could use controversial planning legislation to force through eco-town schemes.