

Letter sent by CPRE's *Crispin Truman* to *The Times* on August 24

***Planning reforms are an attack on local democracy***

At the start of the month Robert Jenrick, the housing secretary, announced changes to the planning system that look to enact the most radical reforms since the end of the Second World War. It is now clear that a key policy of the new system could remove the right of residents and constituents to have a say on developments, effectively halving democratic input in the planning process.

Tremors are rumbling across the country as the realisation dawns that local democracy is under attack. Tectonic plates are shifting in the way we build homes, schools, hospitals, parks and all the other places that are essential for healthy, vibrant communities and green space, in rural and urban areas.

At CPRE, the countryside charity, our ear is to the ground. A survey with our network of 50 local groups to gauge initial reactions to the reforms shows unanimous concern at the loss of local democracy and the risk to our countryside, but that it is not too late to make sure communities are at the heart of decision-making about their environment.

Our litmus tests for these reforms will be: do they provide better quality housing that is genuinely affordable and zero carbon? Will we be able to build healthier places with public transport, ready access to plentiful green space and vibrant and connected communities? Will they protect and enhance our precious countryside for future generations? Will there be robust legal guarantees for public involvement in both policies and development projects?

Planners can deliver these if we give them a chance and if local authorities and communities are given more power. However, planning has become a convenient bogeyman for a government intent on deregulation that will deliver even greater developer profits.

The best way to deliver the places that we need, at the pace we need them, is to (i) make it easier for councils to get local plans in place, and then to hold developers to those plans; and (ii) invest in more of the affordable homes that are needed locally. The government has a golden opportunity to reform the planning system and to put people and nature at its heart.

Let's learn the lessons of the lockdown and reform planning by making sure that communities have more of a say over what happens in their area, while treating the climate, nature and housing emergencies as the emergencies that they are. Anything less would be the opposite of levelling up or building back better.