



Sustainable development in a pickle

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In this topical soapbox Philip challenges the assumption that new development around villages cannot be 'green' and argues that true sustainability requires more, not less development for many rural communities. He argues that the planning system as it stands is worse than useless as a tool for delivering truly sustainable development, and that the whole system needs to look again at what sustainability really requires.

Following the publication of Communities Secretary Eric Pickles' proposals for liberalising the planning system, a chorus of the Green Great and the Good has sprung up to attack the proposal to promote planning policies that incorporate a 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' (whatever that might mean). Green luminaries such as Jonathan Porritt are quite rightly questioning the Government's definition of 'sustainable'.

The terms 'sustainable' and 'affordable' are being furiously bandied about by both sides. But listening to the discussions, I despair of either side having thought honestly about what those terms really mean. They join 'zero-carbon' in the collection of meaningless Government words and phrases trotted out by a succession of Ministerial Talking Heads.

In the name of sustainability, high profile champions of the environment, including the National Trust, George Monbiot, The Council for the Protection of Rural England and many others decry the prospect that developers will 'concrete over the countryside' and call for the presumption against developing 'the countryside' to be retained. The National Trust are rallying their troops against the anticipated developers' onslaught on our green fields and Sir Roy Strong is quoting Browning and singing Jerusalem in the Daily Telegraph.

The current presumption against development seems to be very rigidly enforced. In my experience, planning officers will move heaven and earth to try and stop any development in rural areas, imposing draconian conditions on consents and in some cases even pouncing on minor technicalities relating to trivial planning conditions, in order to reverse an expired consent that has previously been granted. They use village boundaries like a straightjacket.

Yet just how 'sustainable' are the green corsets that the planners have spent decades erecting around our towns and villages and that these voices are defending? Should we really be continuing to support the planners' meddling in rural development, and their misguided attempts at social engineering, using planning policies to prevent villages from expanding as they so obviously did in times gone by? When did grass become so precious?

Sustainable development for local authorities seems to mean concentrating all our commercial and retail employers and housing development around the large towns and cities (where a lot of us do not want to live) while preventing any developments in villages and rural areas where many of us would like to live and work.

It seems that if one has to use a car to get to and from your home that is not considered to be sustainable. But by that logic, shouldn't many of our villages and hamlets be evacuated forthwith? Many have already been turned into ghost villages by planning policies.

If green campaigners and rural councils think they can continue to use planning policies to force us all to live in towns and cities while preserving our villages in aspic, they are sadly mistaken. What seems to have happened is that house prices in villages have soared, as the lack of new development means demand far outstrips supply, and the only people who can afford to move there are rich and ageing NIMBYs who don't care about the loss of their local services because for now, they can afford to drive everywhere or use taxis.

As a result, far from being 'conserved', our villages have been strangled, ironically in the name of conservation and sustainability, so that their local schools, shops, post offices, pubs and public services become no longer viable. This has been exacerbated by increased personal mobility over the last few decades, which has diluted the demand for all these local services from our immediate village neighbourhoods.

The incumbent, comfortable, wealthy, rural NIMBYs have now enlisted the support of conservation bodies to frighten us into thinking that all our precious green spaces are at constant risk of being concreted over. This clearly is "nihilistic and selfish" nonsense based on 'we are all right Jack in our rural idyll and the great unwashed can stay in the towns and cities where they belong'. They moan like hell when the local village pub, shop or post office closes, but then object to any new development that might just mean that they could have remained viable. These smug rural owner

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occupiers remind me of the Marx Brothers' film *Horse Feathers* in which Groucho sings "whatever it is, I'm against it".

If the conservation groups are really concerned about sustainability, they should see that in rural settlements, social and environmental sustainability go hand in hand, and often require more, not less, development. How sustainable, in any sense of the word, is a settlement where, thanks to a complete lack of new development, the local services have all shrivelled and died and where there is no public transport either so everyone, wealthy or not, has to drive or be driven to shop, to school, to see the doctor, or to go for a drink?

Building well-designed and genuinely sustainable new homes in villages could help with all of this and might also help ease the upward price pressure for buying or renting (though there are many other factors affecting these costs, of course). It should also be noted that allowing almost unrestricted residential development in the countryside in countries like Ireland and Spain has not prevented their economies from nose-diving into recession.

I am certainly not arguing for giving *carte blanche* to the volume housebuilders to disfigure our communities with their usual offerings. I think we are sadly all too familiar with their hideous developments of unimaginative, featureless boxes faced with cheap and nasty materials with no relevance to their architectural context. The ubiquity of ghastly developments from the sixties to the present day shows that planners cannot be trusted to control the quality of our built environment. In fact, it is the fear of a repeat of the sixties and seventies building boom that is fuelling most of the opposition to the proposed planning reforms. A toxic combination of Architects' fixation with modernism and developers' greed gave us some of the worst buildings in the developed world outside Eastern Europe. Housing in particular was piled high and flogged cheap because energy costs were relatively low and property value escalations were just a distant nightmare to come. Many of the noughties-style housing developments by the major housebuilders are still under construction, having scrambled for consent prior to the upgrading of the energy-saving standards in the Building Regulations in October 2010, so they are not even built to the current woefully inadequate energy standards. They will stand for a century leaking their fossil-fuelled heat into the sky, until there is no more gas coming down the pipes.

They are a shameful testament to our misguided Government's concept of "sustainable development". No development, in city, town, village or open countryside, can call itself sustainable if the buildings require so much energy to run that they beggar both the occupants and the planet. The Code for Sustainable Homes was supposed to address this issue for new housing, but unless higher standards are enforced, it will just remain a code.

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While mortgage repayments may have eased for now, energy costs are spiralling ever upwards. Surely we should only permit any new developments if they meet very stringent sustainability standards, especially in respect of energy use and waste disposal.

We must achieve standards of insulation and air-tightness way beyond the current requirements if we are to have any chance of reducing our total energy consumption by buildings, or if the occupants are to have any chance of affording their future energy bills.

For housing, my definitions of 'sustainable' and 'affordable' are completely different from those used by Government and Local Authorities, as they are predicated on quality of life, their impact on the environment and the ability of the occupants to pay the energy bills over the lifetime of the building, rather than short-term developer profit and equity gains.

A small estate of terraced houses for rent is currently being built in Houghton-le-Spring by Gentoo to Passivhaus standards and at current prices, the anticipated ANNUAL bills for heating and hot water are estimated to be around £70 (ref 1) . According to the website Moneysupermarket.com, that is around 5% of the current average fuel bill of £1350. Passivhaus, for example, is what I call genuine 'affordable housing'.

There are parts of Germany that now insist that ALL new buildings must meet Passivhaus standards for energy use. Over 30,000 houses have been built to this standard in Germany and Austria over the last 20 years. We in the UK are so far behind the rest of Europe and Scandinavia in energy conservation in building, mainly because of vociferous lobbying by vested interests in the energy supply and construction industries. This will have to change or all but the very wealthy will end up in dire fuel poverty within the next ten years.

Real low-energy homes, such as those built to Passivhaus standards, use very little energy and so place limited demands on the services infrastructure, wherever they are built. Yet there is absolutely nothing in current Local Authority planning policies or Government policies that encourages genuinely affordable and sustainable development by the use of energy-efficient building techniques.

What is worse is that the Government refuses to provide any incentives to build real "sustainable and affordable" homes, choosing instead to squander money, for example on the "Green Deal" which barely scratches the surface of the problem, and by schemes encouraging people to generate more energy, rather than to use less of it. The Feed-in Tariff and Renewable Heat Incentive just encourage wealthy home owners to stick some eco-bling on their roof, or under their lawn, to get some subsidised heat or electricity at the expense of the rest of us.

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The FiT, the RHI and the Green Deal are all Government con-tricks to make us think that something is happening to combat climate change. In terms of our future energy demands for buildings, these measures are like piddling in the sea to increase the size of the waves. And the 'green corsets' in the countryside are another con-trick to make us think the rural way of life is being safeguarded and preserved while villages crumble and die one by one.

If planning policies were drawn up to insist that all new developments will only be permitted if they meet very high standards of design and energy use and if they add to, rather than detract from, architectural enrichment and social and community sustainability, common sense would finally have arrived in the planning departments. I won't be holding my breath.

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Ref 1

http://www.zerocarbonhub.org/examplepdfs/Gentoo%20P023_2011131_105914828.pdf

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