

Don't block new rural homes, David Cameron tells Tories

Conservatives should stop opposing countryside planning reforms because changes will help children get ahead in life, says Prime Minister



David Cameron talks to first time buyers Kayleigh Groom and Chris Day at a new housing estate last month Photo: PETER NICHOLLS

By Peter Dominiczak, Political Correspondent

10:00PM GMT 18 Nov 2013

Countryside Tories should stop opposing the Coalition's controversial planning reforms because the changes will allow their children to get ahead in life, David Cameron has suggested.

The Prime Minister said that the changes to the planning system will allow people to "achieve their dream of home ownership".

The boost in the number of housing developments beginning as a result of the new planning rules will help to create a "socially mobile opportunity society", Mr Cameron added.

His comments came after he last week said that he agreed with comments made by Sir John Major, the former Prime Minister, who warned that there has been a "collapse in social mobility" in Britain.

Mr Cameron's remarks will anger countryside campaigners, who say that the changes have led to unwanted development on some of Britain's most precious rural landscapes.

The planning rules, brought in last year, introduced a new "presumption of sustainable development" to force through more housing proposals.

Councils which fail to adopt local plans setting out where building can take place are at risk from developers.

Opponents have warned that the Coalition's changes have led to "poor quality developments" being "plonked down on green fields" despite local opposition.

The Prime Minister appeared to dismiss the concerns of rural Tories across England who believe that green belt and green field sites are coming under increasing threat because of the reforms.

Asked what he would say to Tory voters who will refuse to vote for the Conservatives because of their concerns over planning, Mr Cameron said: "I think that planning reform is important.

"It's important that we build more houses because the average age of the first-time buyer has crept into the 30s and I believe in a socially mobile opportunity society where people can achieve their dream of home ownership."

Mr Cameron indicated that if campaigners look at the new rules "in the round", they will see that they benefit Britain.

"I think that when you look at our planning reforms in the round you will see that [with] the arrival of local plans, the arrival of neighbourhood planning you're actually going to see more local choice and discretion," Mr Cameron added. "But I think the planning system was in need of reform."

The Campaign to Protect Rural England on Monday night said that Mr Cameron should "take off his rose-tinted spectacles and see what is really happening to [the countryside].

Shaun Spiers, the group's chief executive, said: "House building is slowly increasing because the market is picking up, but the only difference planning liberalisation has made is that houses that would have been built in towns and cities, aiding urban regeneration, are now sprawling into the countryside instead.

"David Cameron needs to take off his rose-tinted spectacles and see what is really happening to it – not local choice and discretion, but far too many poor quality developments plonked down on green fields in the teeth of opposition from local people."

Mr Spiers said that the Prime Minister must "get a grip of his Government's planning reforms before more countryside is lost unnecessarily".

Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister, on Monday said that he is "very alert to how strongly" people feel about the new planning guidelines.

He claimed that the Government has "entrenched and maintained the protection for development on the green belt".

Mr Clegg said: "We have to build more homes but we mustn't of course throw the baby out with the

bathwater as far as the green belt is concerned and where we can, always exploit the opportunity to build more homes on brown field sites.”

Nick Boles, the planning minister, has previously admitted that reforms to the planning system could cost the Conservatives votes at the next election.

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