

Response to the Barker Review of Planning
February 2007

Key points:

- Sustainable development means emphasis must be given to social and environmental aims as well as economic growth.
- A presumption in favour of development could lead to a return of sprawl and countryside blight.
- The case has not been made for reduction of green belt land.
- Major infrastructure projects must not be at the expense of more innovative developments, and must be subject to democratic scrutiny.

The Ramblers' Association interest in the planning system

We are Britain's biggest walking charity. We've been working for over 70 years to promote walking and to improve conditions for everyone who walks in England, Scotland and Wales. Protection and enhancement of the countryside has always been one of our key charitable aims, and we understand this to include making urban centres an attractive alternative to greenfield exploitation.

We believe it is possible to have a sensible planning system that encourages development and growth without threatening the countryside and the green spaces that surround urban areas. This is in agreement with the concept of 'sustainable development', defined in PPS1 as the core principle behind the planning system.

Our network of volunteers in 500 groups and areas regularly participate in the public planning process, responding to proposals that may affect the countryside in which they walk. Such activists represent a considerable knowledge base and their ability to engage effectively, giving voice to wider local feeling, with the planning system is a key factor in ensuring its legitimacy.

The Barker Review of Planning

We welcome the chance to respond to the Barker Review of Planning, and hope that the representations made by ourselves and likeminded agencies will be taken into account in development of the forthcoming Planning White Paper.

Any reforms to the planning system must be in line with, or even more ambitious than, current government policy towards tackling climate change, which poses the biggest long-term threat to the countryside. One of the strongest themes in the Review is allowing the market, economic, and commercial imperatives greater influence than social and environmental objectives within the planning system. An imbalance between these factors could risk contributing to, rather than tackling, what the Stern Review identified as "the greatest ... market failure ever seen".

The Ramblers' Association makes the following comments on particular recommendations contained in the Barker Review:

Recommendation 1 (Presumption in favour of development)

The concept of a plan-led system would seem to be undermined by a 'presumption in favour of development', even in the limited circumstances the Review suggests. Plans must go through a wide-ranging development process and be subject to public debate and review. These should be the basis for growth and community building within their area, if truly sustainable development is to be achieved.

Recommendation 9 (Green Belts)

While the creation of enhanced access to quality open spaces is always welcome, this does not have to be at the expense of the quantity of open space available. Easy access to the outdoors is especially important to those living in urban areas, for whom it can be the most effective form of exercise and recreation. The continuous nature of the green belt, reaching into towns through green corridors, is of benefit to both people and wildlife.

If the phenomenon of 'jumping the green belt' is really as widespread as the Review implies, this suggests that there is a wider problem of affordable homes not being available within relevant urban centres or a lack of control over housing being built in rural areas outside green belts. Unexpected sprawl is a failure of the planning system – one which should be solved by more rigorous control, not by caving in to development pressure. We do not believe the case has been made for any reduction in existing green belt land.

Recommendation 10 (Major Infrastructure Projects)

Major infrastructure projects are understood to include energy, transport, waste and water proposals. The process of identifying a 'national need' for such projects must be open to democratic scrutiny. Any system that makes it easier to construct new roads and large power stations (in some cases industrial-scale wind farms) is likely to discourage investment in alternative public transport (including walking) and localised/decentralised electricity generation – both of which are seen as key methods of reducing carbon emissions.

We are concerned that an Independent Planning Commission will reduce democratic accountability and the right of those most affected by a development to be heard. Public involvement, and evidence that this involvement has an impact, is crucial in building confidence behind major developments and ensuring adverse impacts are mitigated to the greatest possible extent.

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