

danger of losing their identity. We need sustainable and realistic housing targets and regeneration decided by planning, not developers. If we had those things, we would be able to preserve the green and beautiful countryside of which Leeds used to be so proud in calling itself the green city. I ask my hon. Friend the [Minister \(/glossary/?gl=35\)](#) to help me and my constituents stop the destruction and prevent, as Briony Spandler put it so well, our green belt from being turned into grey belt.

Link to this speech

[In context \(/whall/?id=2015-02-03a.49.1#g53.0\)](#)

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[Hansard source \(http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm150203/halltext/150203h0002.htm#150203h0002.htm_spnew12\)](#)



Brandon Lewis

Minister of State (Communities and Local Government)

[\(/mp/?m=40286\)](#)

4:16 pm, 3rd February 2015 [\(/whall/?id=2015-02-03a.49.1#g53.1\)](#)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate my hon. Friend [Stuart Andrew \(/mp/?m=40489\)](#) on securing this debate and outlining some key issues for his [constituency \(/glossary/?gl=169\)](#). I know that he has fought hard on them; he has lobbied me heavily and invited me to his constituency. I was pleased to meet some of the residents whom he mentioned.

I appreciate my hon. Friend's concerns about the high housing requirement in the Leeds core strategy. I know that the issue is of considerable importance to him and the local communities that he represents, and it is a subject that we have met to discuss. I am acutely conscious of the impact that planning decisions have on local communities and our wider overall environment, as well as on the investment and growth that our economy needs. That is especially true of housing. It is important not only that we deliver the houses that this country so desperately needs but that they are designed to a high quality and, as hon. Friends have outlined, put in the right places.

As my hon. Friend will appreciate, given Ministers' quasi-judicial role in the planning system, I cannot comment on specific proposals or plans. None the less, he has raised some important issues relating to the Government's approach and reforms, and to what is going on locally in Leeds. An up-to-date local plan, prepared through extensive public consultation, sets the framework in which decisions are taken, whether locally by the planning authority or at appeal.

I am aware of my hon. Friend's concerns about the level of development planned for in Leeds city council's local plan. Plan making is always challenging, as it involves difficult decisions about how an area is likely

to, should and can develop in the future. Local authorities rightly have the power to make such decisions. My hon. Friend [Jason McCartney \(/mp/?m=40181\)](#) said—if I remember his words correctly—that his local Labour council is just not listening. Fortunately for our democratic system, residents can do something about that when the time comes. Local plans do far more than set housing numbers; they establish areas that it is necessary to protect and set out how development will be supported by appropriate infrastructure.

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[In context \(/whall/?id=2015-02-03a.49.1#g53.1\)](#)

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Alec Shelbrooke

Conservative, Elmet and Rothwell

(/mp/?m=40245)

One problem faced by my [constituency \(/glossary/?g=169\)](#) is that the Labour-run council has decided to play games. Rather than putting the 5,000 houses required in just one area, where they can be built with proper infrastructure, it is giving us death by a thousand cuts by building only 200 or 300 houses in each village. Each village will eventually join up, but absolutely no infrastructure will have been added. I urge the [Minister \(/glossary/?g=35\)](#) to look closely at that. If councils are allowed to get away with that, our communities and infrastructure will be absolutely destroyed.

Link to this speech

[In context \(/whall/?id=2015-02-03a.49.1#g54.0\)](#)

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Brandon Lewis

Minister of State (Communities and Local Government)

(/mp/?m=40286)

I hear what my hon. Friend is saying, and that is one of the reasons why I am keen to move forward and get areas to do more work and develop more neighbourhood plans. Those plans have been admirably championed by my hon. Friends, because they enable local communities to make decisions about infrastructure. Infrastructure is potentially an environmental constraint, and local authorities should look at it to ensure that their housing delivery is appropriate when considering the local plan and planning applications. I will return to that point in a moment.

The national planning policy framework is clear that the purpose of planning is to deliver sustainable development, not development at any cost or anywhere. The framework was introduced after the abolition of the unpopular, top-down regional strategies. It sets out a clear approach to enable local planning authorities to determine the overall housing requirement for their area. Although I appreciate that the housing need in Leeds is still high, Leeds city council's plans aim to deliver 3,660 homes by 2017, in comparison to the regional strategy's target of 4,300.

I fully appreciate the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey about the housing data on which the Leeds core strategy is based. As he rightly said, the first step is for local planning authorities to prepare a strategic housing market assessment to assess their full housing needs, and to work with neighbouring authorities where housing market areas cross administrative boundaries. That assessment should be based on facts and unbiased evidence, and it should be unfettered by policy. It should also identify the scale and mix of housing and the range of tenures that the local population is likely to need over the plan period.

I fully acknowledge the concern that Leeds city council based its assessment on the 2008 household projection figures, rather than the lower 2012 projections, which were based on the 2011 census findings. Furthermore, on examination, the inspector recognised that concern and others expressed about the council's approach, so they inserted a requirement for the local authority to monitor evidence regarding housing need. They agreed to a lower housing requirement for the first years of the

plan—the number will be stepped up in later years—to enable people to keep an eye on the plan. My Department will publish updated household projection figures shortly, which may influence future housing need.

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Stuart Andrew

Conservative, Pudsey

[\(/mp/?m=40489\)](#)

That is true, but the figure is going up to 4,500 new houses a year in years 3, 4 and 5. There is real concern that at that point, developers may have put in planning applications that will release those sites, but it will be too late. Does the [Minister \(/glossary/?gl=35\)](#) agree that we need an early review of the housing targets in Leeds?

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[In context \(/whall/?id=2015-02-03a.49.1#g55.0\)](#)

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Brandon Lewis

Minister of State (Communities and Local Government)

[\(/mp/?m=40286\)](#)

It is difficult for me to comment on a particular local plan. More generally, if there is clear evidence that things are changing in an area, it would be appropriate and sensible for the local authority to conduct an early review. That is as far as I can go.

As my hon. Friend said, identifying housing need is only the first step of the process. Once the need has been assessed, the local planning authority must prepare a strategic housing land availability assessment to establish realistic assumptions about the availability, suitability and likely economic viability of the land to meet the identified housing need over the plan period. It is expected to take into account the policies of the framework, including the environmental constraints.

National policy is clear that planning must take into account the different roles and characters of areas, and recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside. Policy also states that to promote sustainable development in rural areas, houses should be located where they will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. As my hon. Friend and others have said, and as I know from my visit to his [constituency \(/glossary/?gl=169\)](#), much of the countryside is rightly loved and cherished by local communities.

The green belt is a legitimate constraint on development. It is listed as an environmental constraint within the national planning policy framework. That answers my hon. Friend's question about whether a housing target is a special circumstance for developing on the green belt. The Government attach the highest importance to protecting our green belt. The new guidance that we published in October re-

emphasises that importance. We are clear that green belt boundaries should be established in local plans and should be altered only in exceptional circumstances, using the local plan process of proper consultation and independent examination. If Leeds city council undertakes a green belt review, it will need to present robust evidence to the planning inspector and not come unstuck at examination for not doing the proper background work, as did Ashfield district council and Solihull metropolitan borough council.

Our protection of the green belt also extends to planning decisions. Most types of new buildings are inappropriate for green belt land and are, by definition, harmful to it. Such developments should not be approved

except in special circumstances. Each planning case has unique facts and a unique context, and it must be determined on its own merits, so we cannot create a list of special circumstances. However, our planning guidance makes it clear that unmet housing need, including need for Traveller sites, is unlikely to outweigh harm to the green belt.

I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friends that timely and robust infrastructure provision is vital to delivering sustainable development. Local authorities must focus on that issue. Furthermore, the cumulative impact of development and the need for infrastructure to support development are material considerations in deciding whether individual applications for development are appropriate.

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[In context \(/whall/?id=2015-02-03a.49.1#g55.1\)](#)

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Alec Shelbrooke

Conservative, Elmet and Rothwell

[\(/mp/?m=40245\)](#)

My hon. Friend the [Minister \(/glossary/?gl=35\)](#) has expressed the problems that my [constituency \(/glossary/?gl=169\)](#) faces in a nutshell. Effectively, by looking at green fields rather than the green belt, Leeds city council is going to double the size of every village in my constituency and join them up. We need a special circumstance to allow us to redistribute the green belt around those villages to maintain their unique identity. That is where Leeds city council is failing.

Link to this speech

[In context \(/whall/?id=2015-02-03a.49.1#g56.0\)](#)

[Individually \(/whall/?id=2015-02-03a.56.0\)](#)

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Brandon Lewis

Minister of State (Communities and Local Government)

[\(/mp/?m=40286\)](#)

My hon. Friend puts it succinctly, and I am sure that his residents will be hanging on those words. Leeds city council has a duty to do what is right for its area, and it should be listening to its residents to ensure that it protects the special environment where they live and which they enjoy.

When I am out visiting communities and speaking to constituents, I hear widespread support for the need to provide more housing. That sentiment has been expressed in this debate. However, that support is often swiftly followed by concerns about where the houses will be built, and understandably so. We love our countryside. The Government have therefore handed local councils the responsibility for planning to meet the local needs, but meeting our housing goals cannot justify approving the wrong development in the wrong location.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey and my other hon. Friends have expressed their frustration about the fact that Leeds city council is reviewing green belt boundaries to meet local housing needs. I am sure that my hon. Friend and his constituents will continue to make strong representations to the council and will express their views about where new housing should be, as the site allocations document is prepared. I know that my hon. Friends will do that loudly, clearly and correctly.

The Government expect councils to utilise brownfield sites, and we aim for 90% of those sites to be developed by 2020. We are putting in hundreds of millions of pounds to fund their development. We are making it clear to councils that we expect them to develop brownfield sites first and protect our country's green belt.

Link to this speech

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