

ConservativeHome in partnership with Shelter and CPRE

How can we win community support for housebuilding?

Speakers: Mark Wallace, Executive Editor, ConservativeHome (Chair); Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government; Toby Lloyd, Head of Housing Development, Shelter; Tom Fyons, Director of Campaigns and Policy, CPRE; Anne Ashworth, The Times, Bricks and Mortar;

Tom Fyons: At the moment only 5% of people think that the Government is doing a good job in terms of housing. Most common reasons for opposing developments are pressures on infrastructure and loss of green space – people far more likely to oppose housing development than support it, and the biggest area of opposition is in the South East. In terms of winning support, communities are angry that the country side isn't being protected, so we need to use the right land. Fyons says the CPRE welcomes the brown field register and wants there to be a change in approach "constraints" such as the greenbelt – he says this should be viewed as an environmental asset as opposed to a building constraint. Fryons also says we need to look at affordability as well as housing targets, and rural affordable housing is very important. We need to rebalance the interests between housing buyers and builders, which means resetting the planning system with more focus on sustainable development.

Anne Ashworth begins by talking about the way in which people are generally very opposed to anything new being built in their areas. She says this is very contradictory because they then complain the government won't build enough homes, but part of the reason for this is local opposition to new builds and this limits the ability of young people to get on the housing ladder. Ashworth also criticises the fear that people have of building on the green belt, and says that considering how much green belt land there is, it seems illogical that absolutely none of it should be used. She explains that many local communities oppose development when they discover that the housebuilder has built fewer affordable homes than promised. There is also a question of aesthetics and quality as well – many new builds have defects which force home owners to move out, and no one seems to be responsible. These bad experiences tarnish people's views of home building. She finishes by talking about Help to Buy and says the Government needs to ask for more from housing industry in return for its extension, which has given the industry a huge boom when they are already making record profits.

Toby Lloyd agrees with the points of the first two speakers. Criticises the lack of house building and asks why bad homes are still being built. He says what people want is common sense: they want something which is attractive, well built, and which supports local infrastructure. He says this shouldn't be impossible. Explains the work that Shelter is doing and says it is not the fault of the planning system, land is not like other goods: it is scarce which means we need a planning system. Lloyd says the situation we have now is the consequence of leaving land to a speculative model which isn't built to deliver to the public interest. Developers estimate the total cost of a scheme, which informs what they bid for the land, and during this process they try and reduce costs to such an extent that before even built, the houses will be unattractive, poor quality and expensive. Need developers who are building for community benefit, and the land to be sold at a reasonable cost. This is the key, but can't expect private sector to do this on its own. Need to give planning authorities money and power to do the job properly, so need real leadership on the issue.

Sajid Javid talks about successive government's failure to supply houses in the last 25 years, and that means that the affordability ratio is completely unsustainable. He says there's no magic answer to the problem, but discusses the steps taken in the housing white paper. There was a focus on releasing land where there was genuine demand, and increasing the speed of delivery – in the last year there were 370,000 planning permissions for homes granted, but delivery was only around 200,000. Developers take too long to build homes after planning permission is given. Javid also says we need to diversify the market in terms of developers, small and medium developers are lacking throughout the country. He talks about the time it will take for things to change, and that these improvements will take time to work through the market. So the government needs to help - Help to Buy is one way that government is doing this, and there also a need to focus efforts on the rental market. He reiterates that housing is the biggest social challenge facing the government and if there hasn't been significant change by the next election then it opens the door to Corbyn entering Downing Street.