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## All the ways Labour is silencing resistance to a 'concrete countryside'

Starmer wants to speed up housebuilding by stripping neighbourhoods of their say



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Joe Wright

Senior Money Writer

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Giving residents a voice on the future of housebuilding in their towns and villages was a tool Labour “wanted to see much more of” when in opposition.

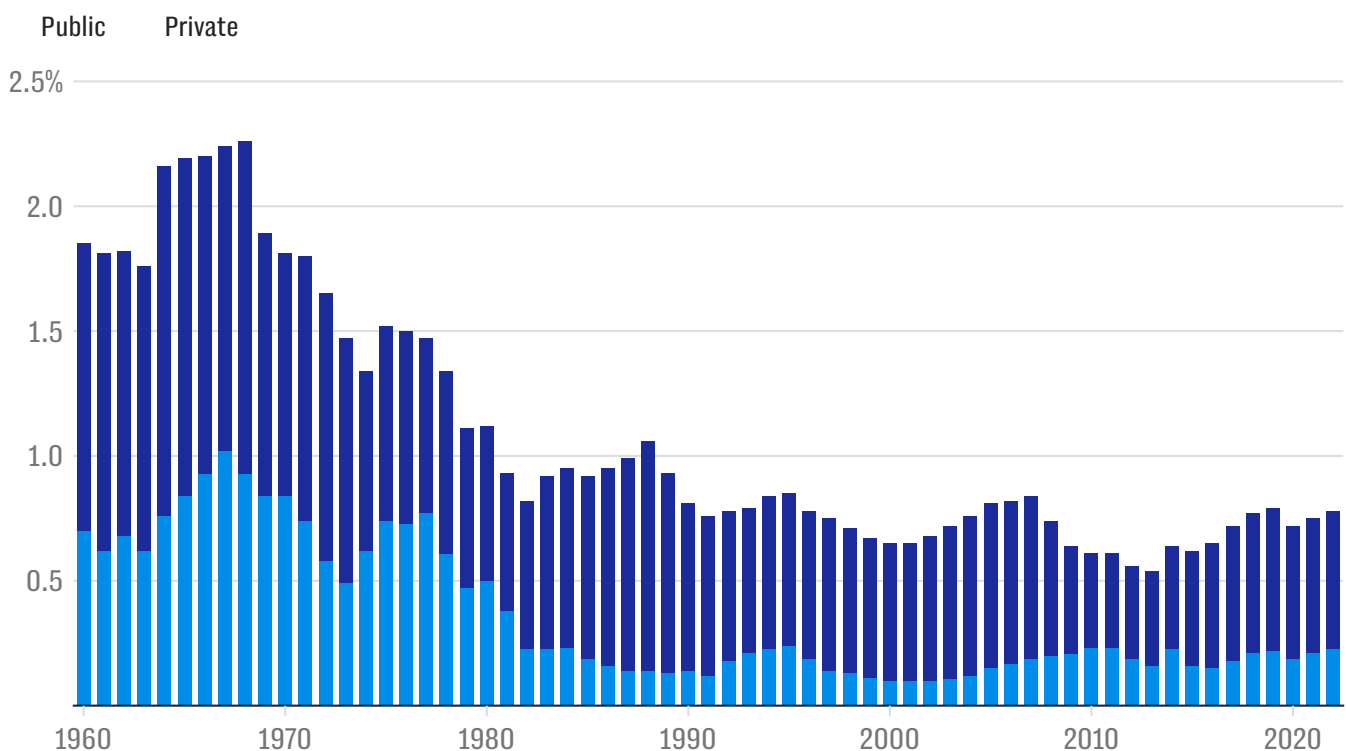
Yet fast-forward to today, and Sir Keir Starmer has been accused of silencing locals, [vilifying Nimbys](#) and hoarding power in Whitehall.

Since taking the keys to Number 10, the Prime Minister has unveiled plans to strip down the powers of council planning committees – where locals can publicly speak out against applications.

Under new rules, developments which meet predetermined criteria on design quality and location will be waved through by officials instead.

### Labour wants to ramp up housebuilding to 1970s levels

New homes as a percentage of overall housing stock



Source: Centre for Cities

Sir Keir, who has warned council leaders that he will not hesitate to step in and overrule their decisions, has also been accused of stoking a culture warfare with Nimbys.

The acronym stands for “Not in My Back Yard” and refers to people who expect that, as local residents, they should have some say in the character of their area.

In describing [housebuilding opponents](#) as “blockers”, he said they were “suffocating the aspirations of working families and obscuring the future of our country”.

Proposals to water down the voice of communities are in stark contrast to language previously used by senior Labour ministers, including the Prime Minister himself.

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Speaking in 2020, he said: “We would give local government a much bigger say over investment and services – not through plans devised by someone in an office on Whitehall, but ones created and rooted in communities, so that they truly serve the people.

“We would give councillors, communities and people on the front line in our public services a bigger say over the decisions that affect them.”

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## The action Cabinet ‘Nimbys’ took

Cabinet member	Year	What was being proposed?	Where?	Outcome
Angela Rayner	2017 and 2019	200 new homes	Tameside	Plan approved
Darren Jones	2020	Two extra storeys being built on top of a block of flats	Bristol	Plan was abandoned
David Lammy	2020	196 new luxury flats	Tottenham	Plan was abandoned
Hilary Benn	2019	17-storey tower comprising more than 150 homes	Leeds	Rejected but similar plans now going ahead
Jo Stevens	2017	New flats near live music and nightlife venues and a 29-storey block of flats	Cardiff	Womanby Street plan withdrawn Guildford Crescent plan going ahead
Lisa Nandy	2016	Thousands of new homes	Wigan	Plan approved
Liz Kendall	2023	Concrete over	Leicester West	Plan approved

Matthew Pennycook, the current housing minister, said in 2023 that “meaningful public participation in the planning system is essential”, and that Labour “want to see much more of it”.

In 2019, Rachel Reeves stressed how she was [“very disappointed”](#) by a lack of public consultation on plans to build dozens of new council houses in her Leeds constituency.

Meanwhile, current environment secretary, Steve Reed, told the Commons in 2021 that “the answer cannot be to carve local communities out of a say over their own neighbourhoods”.

He said: “Local communities need a say over planning and development – a say that the (then Tory) Government are intent, unfortunately, on taking away from them.

“Regeneration cannot be something that is done to communities; it must be done with them.”

## Labour ‘hoard power at the centre’

But with its new Planning and Infrastructure Bill, Labour is bidding to “hoard” power within central government, according to Damian Green, a former Cabinet minister.

The ex-Tory MP, who is now a trustee of Kent’s Campaign to Protect Rural England branch, said: “It’s clear that when they are out of power Labour favour giving power to local people.

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“When they are in power they hoard it at the centre.”

Law changes proposed in the Bill, which had its second reading last week, include the introduction of a national scheme of delegation.

It will determine which planning applications should be decided on by officers and which should go to a public committee. The changes are expected to see fewer applications discussed in public in an effort to speed up the housebuilding timeline.

## How delegation works in local councils

At most local councils, the percentage of decisions delegated to officers is over 90pc. Factors that influence whether matters are referred to public committees are:

1. The level of interest from local residents
2. Whether the application is contentious and accords with the council's own policies
3. The impact a development will have on the local community
4. Probity issues where the council could be perceived as being biased if the application is delegated to officers
5. Where there is a variation in opinion between the council and other key consultees or community organisations

Source: Local Government Association

Richard Tice, Reform UK's deputy leader, said: "Proposed developments must bring communities with them, not be forced upon them. Taking away public participation is not the solution and will only fuel the lack of trust the public already has towards politics and politicians even further."

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His thoughts are echoed by the Local Government Association (LGA) which has "serious reservations" over the plans, while Kevin Hollinrake, the shadow housing secretary, said the changes will "silence" residents.

"The Conservatives built one million homes in the last parliament without needing to silence local consent," he said.

“Labour’s planning changes risk concreting over the countryside and destroying Britain’s beautiful villages.”

## Neighbours to be ‘kept in the dark’

A litany of further planning reforms have been drawn up by the Government, with the shake-up representing the biggest loosening of development rules in decades.

Fergus Charlton, a planning partner at law firm Michelmores, said the proposals mean “it is a good time to be a developer promoting an unpopular scheme”.

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Under the plans, neighbours could be [kept in the dark about major infrastructure projects](#) such as roads and solar farms. This is because the Government wants to drop the need to consult with affected locals at an early stage of a planning process.

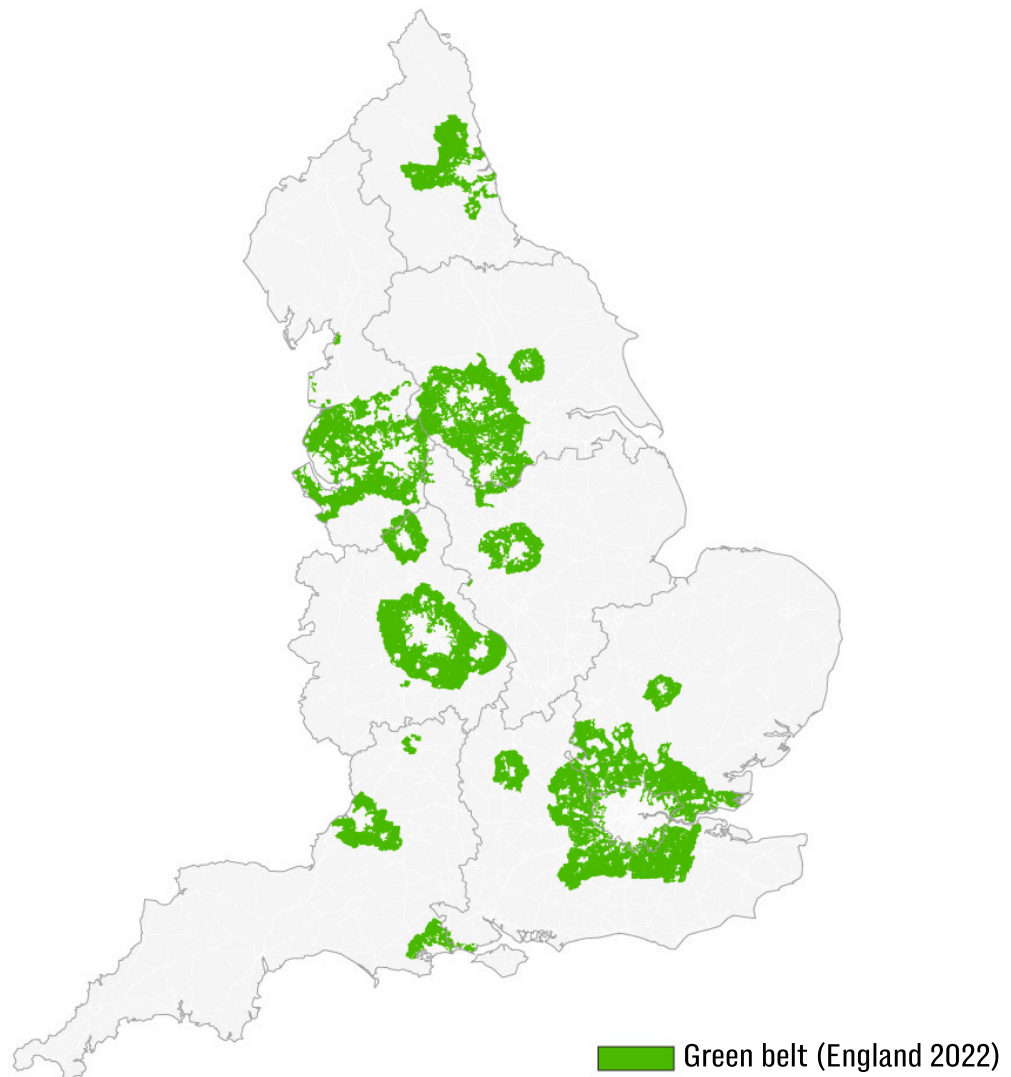
A further shake-up to planning rules will make it easier to build homes around railway stations on the edge of towns – even if land is on the green belt.

Villages in the green belt are also to be stripped of protections against excessive development, with Angela Rayner removing the block on “unrestricted sprawl” around rural settlements.



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## Labour remains committed to building on the green belt



Meanwhile, a host of statutory bodies that currently have the right to be consulted in planning disputes – including Sport England, Theatres Trust and The Gardens Trust – will have their role removed.

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Ecology surveys to mitigate the impact on Britain's dwindling wildlife will no longer be mandatory, with Chancellor Rachel Reeves telling developers that they need not worry about "bats and newts".

Labour believes mandatory ecology surveys and mitigation measures are "burdensome, costly and uncertain", [slowing up Britain's housebuilding potential](#).

Farmers and landowners will also be forced to sell fields for less than their potential value if they are seized by authorities to build new homes or hospitals.

Under the Government's proposals, councils will be given greater powers to acquire land through compulsory purchase orders and to pay only its current value, rather than what it could be worth if developed, as in the current system.

## **Undermining democratic process**

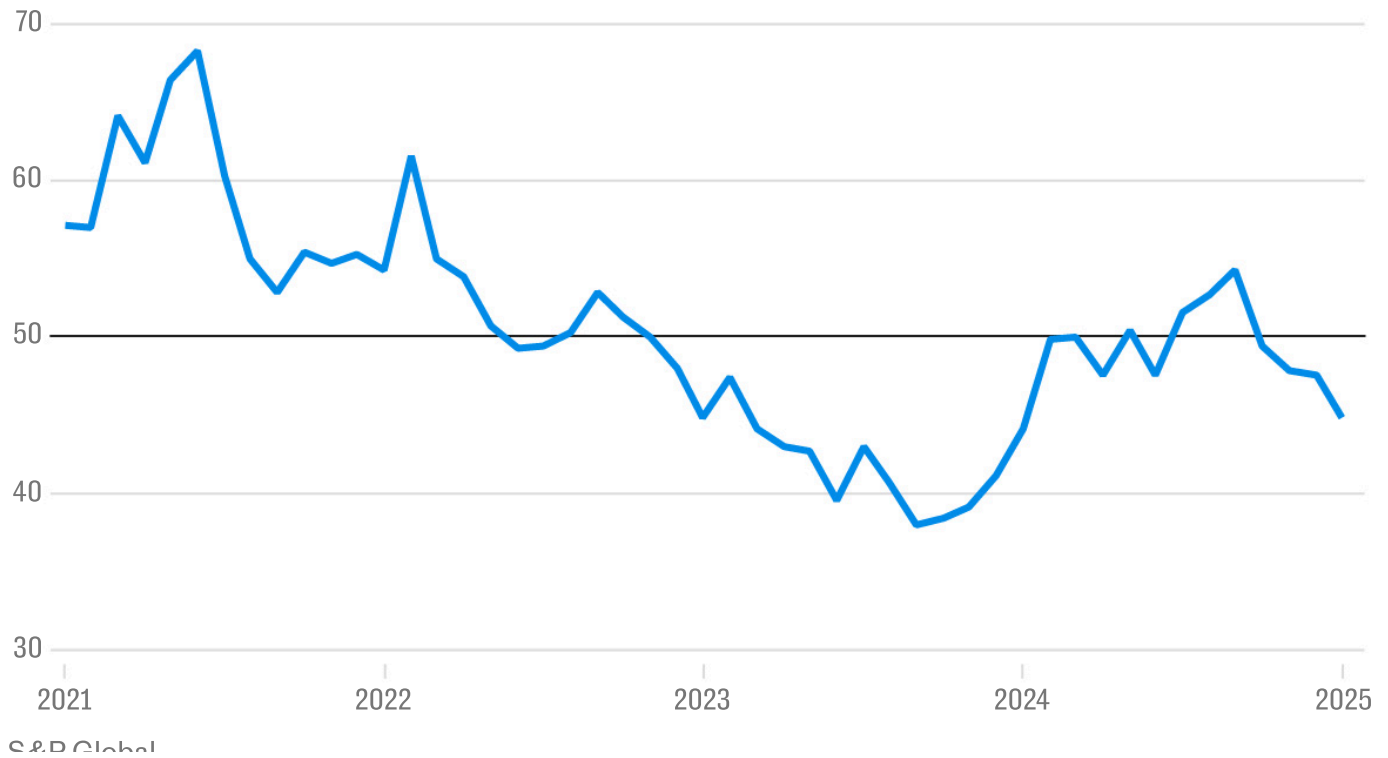
The Government said its reforms will "speed up planning decisions and remove unnecessary blockers and challenges".

Angela Rayner, the Housing Secretary, said there was "no time to waste" in delivering the manifesto pledge to build 1.5 million homes by 2029.

It comes as residential construction activity slumped for the fifth month in a row in February, according to the S&P Global UK construction purchasing managers index (PMI).

## Residential building is plummeting

Construction PMI activity index, sa, >50 = growth m/m



Aside from the pandemic, last month heralded the fastest rate of decline since early 2009 for residential housebuilding.

Mr Pennycook said: “Our landmark Planning and Infrastructure Bill will fundamentally change how we build things in this country.

“By streamlining the delivery of new homes and critical infrastructure, it will help tackle the housing crisis and raise living standards in every part of the country.”

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While questioned by the opposition benches and local councils, [Labour's planning reforms](#) are welcomed by property lawyers and developers.

Daniel Austin, of finance firm ASK Partners, said: “Planning decisions will always be sensitive, but we’ve reached a crisis. Taking decisive control is no longer an option, it’s an imperative.”

Harry Fenner, of Navana Property Group, added: “It shouldn’t come down to councils’ voices and opinions. There should be clear rules and guidelines and, if they are met, planning is granted.”

In contrast, Pamela Chesterman, of law firm Irwin Mitchell, argued that “it’s difficult to see how this will bring about better communities”.

“This change arguably undermines the democratic process,” she added.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government said: “Democratic, local engagement with how homes are built will continue to be supported and the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will improve local decision-making by making sure councillors can focus on the biggest developments in their area.

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“This will speed up decisions and ensure they are being taken at the right level so we can get Britain building again.”