

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Nick Boles): Another day and another debate on planning. Such debates are a constant pleasure for me—if not for you, Mr Davies—and I am only sorry that this day will not conclude with a further debate on planning in your own constituency.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) on securing the debate, and I take this opportunity to thank him for having invited me to come to his constituency recently. I can confirm what he said about his area. Stroud, which I had never previously visited, is a stunningly beautiful place, with some of the most beautiful landscapes in England, and he has a huge privilege to represent a very special corner of our countryside.

I recognise that there are difficult issues in my hon. Friend's constituency, as in so many, regarding the process of putting in place a local plan. He is, of course, right that the public meeting that he organised and invited me to attend was quite lively and saw a vigorous debate. Unfortunately, the national media were inclined to focus on what was perhaps one of the less edifying parts of that debate, because what was so interesting about it for me was the intensity with which people wanted to understand how the planning system worked, what considerations could be taken into account and what they could do—with the support of their MP—to take full advantage of the opportunities for neighbourhood planning and the like. I found it to be an immensely constructive meeting and I hope that his constituents also did, in the main.

I know that my hon. Friend will understand that because the local plan for his area is now in examination I cannot talk about any particular aspect of it, but I hope that I can give general answers to his questions and that those general answers will be of relevance to the local plan for his area and indeed to his questions about neighbourhood planning.

First, my hon. Friend asked about the issue of prematurity, and he is right to recall that someone also asked about it at the public meeting. The question really is this: when can a plan that has not yet been found sound and formally adopted have substantial weight in a decision? I am glad to say that we have recently published the new planning guidance on a website, which is easy for everybody to access and is hopefully written in relatively plain English—by planners' standards, at least. That guidance makes it clear that a local plan gathers weight through the process. There is not a black and white picture, whereby the plan has absolutely no value in decisions until it has reached its conclusion and been adopted. The plan can gain weight.