

Stroud Valleys and Vale (Planning)

14 May 2014



Neil Carmichael (Stroud, Conservative)

I particularly welcome you as Chair, Mr Davies. It is the first time I have served under your chairmanship. I did not realise that you were on the **Panel of Chairs**, so I congratulate you on that. I am also pleased to note that my hon. Friend the **Minister** is here. He has already been to my **constituency** and we had a successful public meeting, which had the particular characteristic of attracting almost national attention. At that meeting, we raised several issues and I thought it would be helpful, in such a debate, to ensure that all those issues and all the answers to various relevant questions were put on record.

The Stroud valleys and vale is a particular beautiful part of England. I guess that most **Members of Parliament** could say that about their constituency, but I can say it without fear of contradiction. The five valleys and the vale amount to a spectacular area of incredible beauty. It is a place where a lot of people want to live. Furthermore, it is a place that many developers want to develop. It is therefore all the more important that we have a local plan. The pressure on development, both because it is a nice place to live and because of its particular characteristics, is intense. For that reason, I am particularly disappointed that the Labour-led Stroud district council has so far failed to produce a plan that

is in force. The last plan effectively terminated in 2011, and we desperately need a plan now. I know that there is a plan with the **Department for Communities and Local Government** that is going through the appropriate checks—I hope that it will be given the green light—but in the meantime, we have a huge problem with developers literally circling parts of Stroud and the valleys, identifying possible sites for development. The pressure is huge, for the reasons I have outlined.

The other problem is that with 51 parish and town councils, we have a huge number of different communities, and they feel that they are effectively under siege. Those that are being encircled by developers do not know where to turn next for support, advice or encouragement. I want to speak for all those communities in this debate. I am very much on their side in protecting the characteristics, their livelihoods and the ways in which those villages and communities have developed.

It is with that in mind that I want to talk about certain planning applications. I will mention six to illustrate the point, but I could talk about a lot more. There are various applications on Baxter's fields, below Summer street in Stroud. The wide range of communities in that location are very much aware of the impact that that development would have on them. There is an application on Rodborough fields, which is famous for historical reasons. Although the application might be appealed, previous to a decision by Stroud district council, it is still a concern. Mankley field is perhaps the most prominent application. **The Minister** might recall it, because it was the focus of the debate at the public meeting. The development would effectively join two villages together, which would cause some difficulties for both communities—not because they do not like each other, but because they want each other to thrive as separate identifiable communities.

There are applications on Woodside lane in King's Stanley, which is another issue related to Mankley field, and on land off Shakespeare road in Dursley, which is a particularly beautiful place, because of the topography. It is part of my constituency, and there are views that people like to have. As they say, a view cannot be bought, but we can protect the characteristics of towns and villages. That is a case in point with that application in Dursley. The Horsley development elongates a beautiful village, but threatens its natural beauty and offends a large number of existing residents. All those planning applications and others raise a number of issues. Where Stroud district council, led by the Labour party, has gone wrong is in putting too much focus on dispersal, and those applications illustrate that point. They are dispersed all over the place, which is a significant difficulty for our residents.

There is also a problem with housing numbers, which I will go into in some detail. The [Localism Act](#) 2011 and the various other documents that have been circulating have always emphasised that projections for housing numbers and land supply have got to be evidence-based. It is no use just plucking figures out of some national statistics arena. The developer needs to demonstrate to the local community that it has thought about the evidence. Stroud has a large number of manufacturing and engineering firms—they account for 24% of existing employment—and my view is that that kind of economic fact needs to be factored into any projections on housing numbers.

Travelling to work is also important, because planning is not only about building houses, but ensuring that people can get out and about. That is why I have focused not only on housing, but on infrastructure. It is why I think it might be worth while to move the Stonehouse railway station slightly north, so that it can access two railway lines, one of which would enable people from Stonehouse and neighbouring villages to get to Bristol without going via Gloucester

or Swindon. I throw that into the mix because it is important that the overall local plan and how we think about plans take into account employment, infrastructure links, travelling to work and everything else that would necessarily be connected with planning. I am not satisfied that the Labour-led Stroud district council has done all those things. We want the local plan to be in place, because any plan is better than no plan, and that will be the mantra until a plan arrives.

I have four specific questions for the Minister. First, how much reliance can we place on the prematurity issue in connection with local plans that are in the process of being agreed and implemented? That is the key issue for many residents of my constituency. They know that a plan is being considered, but while it is being considered, it is not in force. We have all these developers wanting to develop in areas where that plan would not want to see development taking place. We need to know in clear reassuring terms what the prematurity issues are and how we ensure that we can give comfort to residents in the valley and vale. We raised that issue at the public meeting and we got an answer, but I would like that to be on record today through this debate.

Secondly, what latent powers do previous plans have? Stroud district council had a plan until 2011. That is relevant, because any hope for residents in that respect would be good, and it is another strand that is well worth exploring.

An interesting issue, which to my surprise was raised at the public meeting, is that of housing numbers and how they relate to existing planning permissions that may not have been fulfilled. One would logically assume that any existing planning permission that has not yet been implemented would be considered in the total housing numbers as suggested by the council. We need evidence that Stroud district council has been told that that is indeed the case—a

confirmation that guidance is clear about this matter—because there was certainly a lack of clarity at the public meeting, with at least one councillor expressing doubt about the matter and a number of residents also expressing doubt about it at that meeting and subsequently. The total number of houses to be built ought to include planning permissions that have already been given, and we need clarification on that.

My last point is one that I have been talking about for three years: neighbourhood plans, because they are a powerful instrument for local communities to use. As I have already said, we have 51 town and parish councils in my area, so potentially we could have 51 neighbourhood plans. We will not get 51; we have about a dozen in formulation, at one stage or another, and that is absolutely excellent news. However, we would have more if more people simply understood what a neighbourhood plan is. It is a statutory document; it effectively gives planning capacity to town and parish councils; and, of course, it is something that any planning inspector would have to consult if there was an appeal about an issue in a locality.

I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed the value of having a neighbourhood plan to the communities that want to have some control over their emerging environment, their planning system and their areas as a whole. That should be control exercised in the right way, which is democratically, in terms of all the issues that I have mentioned, and in the sense of meeting obligations to neighbouring councils, and so forth. Nevertheless, local communities should have control, so neighbourhood plans should be saluted and we need to understand their value.

I also want to make it clearer to my constituents that going through the process of getting a neighbourhood plan is much easier than first meets the eye and that it will, of course, be supported by the Department as

appropriate, in terms of providing not only guidance, but possibly funding. I say that because I know that the Department has already created a fund to provide finance to support neighbourhood plans. However, I would like some increased clarity about that issue.

Those are my four key questions, but I have one more. One of the issues about new developments is that, of course, they need infrastructure. Infrastructure comes in the form of roads and, of course, in the form of a load of other issues to do with water. However, one element of infrastructure that is really important, and increasingly so, is broadband. It would be good to have a discussion about how, in future, we might ensure that new developments are properly provided with this absolutely critical infrastructure, which is not easy to see, because most of it is underground, but is necessary for people to use. We already have one or two areas in my constituency where broadband is proving to be a testing issue, because

the infrastructure is not necessarily in place. **BT** is working extraordinarily hard, but some developers have not always paved the way for broadband's ultimate success and I need to put that on the record.

In summary, the Stroud valleys and vale comprises five valleys and one vale. All of it is absolutely beautiful, with thriving communities who want to look after themselves. They are alert to the need for new housing, but want to ensure that they have more control over that housing, through both a local plan developed by Stroud district council and—hopefully—neighbourhood plans. That package would be ideal for Stroud. I just want to ensure that we can get from the point where we are now—with no local plan—to the point where we have a local plan, and I also want to ensure that damage can be limited during that time.

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



Nicholas Boles (Grantham and Stamford, Conservative)

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 **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.

The key moment is when a local plan that does not have any substantial unresolved objections to it is submitted to the planning inspector for examination. At that point, the plan's weight can start to be substantial in decisions on particularly large applications. I know that my hon. Friend will be quick to work out whether that provision might apply to his local plan, and if so how. Nevertheless, that is what the guidance says: it is at the point of submission to the planning inspector for examination that a plan can start having significant weight, if there are no substantial unresolved objections to it.

It is probably worth mentioning that prematurity also applies to neighbourhood plans. I was very pleased to hear from my hon. Friend that there are a number of communities in his constituency that are undertaking neighbourhood planning. The provision on neighbourhood plans is similar to that on local plans.

When a neighbourhood plan has been submitted to a local authority for it to conduct what is called the local authority publicity period, which is a period of formal consultation that it undertakes before an examination, that is the point at which a neighbourhood plan— even in draft—can start to have significant weight in decisions.

My hon. Friend's second question was about previous plans. Although I cannot comment on the particulars of Stroud's previous plans, until they are replaced by another plan, previous plans and their policies are generally a material consideration in any decision. It is common sense, however, that the older those plans become the more likely it is that the policies and provisions within them become out of date and therefore are likely to have less impact and weight in decisions. Plans do, in a sense, have a half-life, and it is important eventually to update them, review them or replace them with an entirely new plan if local policies and plans are to have a leading role in decisions on applications in local areas.

My hon. Friend's third question related to an important point about the status in the local plan, in particular the five-year land supply, of sites that already have planning permission, but which have not yet been implemented and where buildings have not yet been constructed. In order that the policy position is crystal clear, I will read what the national planning policy framework states:

"Sites with planning permission should be considered deliverable until permission expires, unless there is clear evidence that schemes will not be implemented within five years, for example they will not be viable, there is no longer a demand for the type of units or sites have long term phasing plans."

I hope that that makes it clear that unless there is good reason to believe that a site is no longer viable, or there is no longer demand for the type of unit that it would provide, or its plan for construction stretches

beyond the five-year period, a site that already has planning permission but where nothing has happened counts towards the five-year land supply. I hope that that position is clear and that everyone in my hon. Friend's constituency understands that the requirement is to provide new sites to make up the total and not to find

sites to replace those that already have planning permission and are still viable and likely to be delivered within five years.

Finally, my hon. Friend asked about neighbourhood planning, and it is welcome that so many communities in his area are considering it. I am pleased to say that, around the country, it is a brush fire that is beginning to gather some steam—I am not sure whether brush fires do gather steam, but I think my point is understood. More than 1,000 communities in England are working on neighbourhood plans. There have been 14 referendums on neighbourhood plans, all of which have received a yes vote, usually with substantial majorities in favour. They have probably been the single most successful extension of democratic participation in governing processes of the past few years, and they have succeeded because people feel strongly about the future of the places in which they live. If people are offered the chance to have an influence on that, even if they are not necessarily able to stop everything that they might want to stop, they will nevertheless seize the chance to ensure that development is the best that it possibly can be, is in the right places, is of the right character and improves the community for everyone, rather than just for those involved in development.

It is welcome that communities are getting involved. Although they may face some immediate, short-term battles over particular proposals, I encourage them to look beyond those battles—even if they sometimes lose, whether because a plan is not in place or for

other reasons—and to focus on not only the next five years, but the next 15 years, which is the normal life of a neighbourhood plan. They will be able to shape those 15 years directly if they work on putting a neighbourhood plan in place, getting it through a referendum and getting it adopted. For the first time ever in the planning system, a neighbourhood document has equal statutory force alongside a local plan.

I am happy to confirm that the **Department for Communities and Local Government** provides quite substantial support, both financial and through expert officials, not only for a community undertaking a neighbourhood plan, which will have a support contract led by Locality and grants of up to £7,000, but also for local authorities, because they have to work closely with neighbourhood plan areas and organise examinations and referendums. To be clear, there is no reason why a local authority should not actively promote, engage and welcome as many communities that want to produce neighbourhood plans as possible. There is also no reason why any parish council or neighbourhood forum should not embrace the scheme and avail itself of the support offered by the Government. Over the next 10 years, we are keen that literally thousands of communities undertake neighbourhood plans and really take control of the planning process.

I hope that I have answered my hon. Friend's main questions and that the story of planning and plan-making in Stroud and its beautiful valleys and vale will involve people feeling that they are controlling the future of their community. All communities need to accept some growth and need more housing. As my hon. Friend said, all communities need to expand, develop and embrace the future. However, decisions on such matters should be made by local people. From listening to my hon. Friend, it is clear that no one is more expert in the

economic and social geography of Stroud, its valleys and its vale. I hope that the local authority will listen to him when making its plans and that the people of Stroud feel that they could not have a better champion of their future interests.