



Objectors Pieter Montyn, Carolyn Cobbold, Louise Goldsmith and Libby Alexander in a field identified for development PHOTOGRAPH: MARTIN GODWIN/GUARDIAN

'We are constantly being labelled as selfish and nimbyish, but local democracy is in danger' Libby Alexander Save Our South Coast Alliance

### 'A betrayal of localism' Housebuilding proposals hit a wall in rural England

Robert Booth Social affairs correspondent In the lane beside the 12th-century church in Earnley, West Sussex, Robert Carey spotted a flattened toad. "There's a picture of what's happening to local residents," he said. "Squashed." Boris Johnson's proposals for the English planning system - widely seen as tipping the balance of power in favour of developers and away from local objectors - have gone down badly in this corner of the Conservative heartlands. Voters like Carey fear not just a loss of local power, which is already angering some local Tory politicians, but the

threat of "rural sprawl" creating new landscapes of unbroken low-density development through the shires. It means, one local objector said, the "suburbanisation" of the countryside. It took less than 24 hours for the threat to become real after the planning white paper was published. An application landed the next day with the parish council from an emboldened developer to build 100 homes on a stubby wheat field on the edge of Earnley. It is exactly the sort of site that could be zoned for "growth" under the government's new planning system, giving builders automatic outline planning permission, as long as the designs broadly meet a pre-agreed local plan.

Steve Culpitt, the managing director of the site's developer, Seaward Properties, was understandably happy with the new policy, which he said "pulls the rug from beneath" opposition. "The major problem with all these sites is the objectors," he said. "You always hear from them but never the supporters." But if the scheme goes ahead, the flint cottages of Earnley will merge with the modern housing estates of the neighbouring beach settlement of East Wittering. It is not a unique scenario. East Wittering is ringed with fields where housebuilders, including Barratt Homes, have plans for 1,450 homes, which could all be built under the new zoning system. It would increase the settlement's size by 60%. Opponents - such as Robert Carey - fear they could be almost powerless to prevent it if the white paper becomes law. Another rebellion is brewing 20 minutes east along the already busy A27. Four days after the planning proposals were launched, Britain's largest housebuilder, Persimmon, lodged an application to erect 475

homes over wheat fields that would blend the settlements of Ferring and Goring-by-Sea. "If and when this new planning regime comes into force this will be vulnerable," said Ed Miller, the secretary of Ferring Conservation Group, who described the proposals as "an absolute attack on local government and local democracy". Last week Miller filled out his consultation response calling the plans "a betrayal of localism" and "authoritarian". The local MP, Peter Bottomley, has previously alerted Boris Johnson to the development, warning that people must not be deprived of "the green lungs between them". Yet despite the concerns, the planning white paper is an attempt to tackle serious problems. It is billed as supporting the prime minister's drive to "build, build, build" Britain's way out of the Covid-19 recession while filling a gaping hole in housing production. The English housing stock grew by 241,000 homes in 2018-19 but 340,000 homes are needed annually over the next decade, according to research commissioned by the National Housing Federation. More are needed in West Sussex than in most other areas of the country, with 51,000 new households expected to be created in the next 15 years, according to Office for National Statistics projections - a 14% increase. In Brighton and Hove, 3,800 people are homeless, according

'Oh good lord! [The development plans] would destroy everything this pub stands for' Martin Silcocks Pub landlord



to a 2019 analysis by Shelter, the housing charity. "Thanks to our planning system, we have nowhere near enough homes in the right places," said Johnson in his foreword to the planning white paper. The time had come, he said, to "tear it down and start again". The paper proposes that instead of each application being decided through an individual democratic process, councils will be asked to draw up plans lasting years, dividing land into zones for development and protection. Outline approval would be automatic in "growth" zones and there would be a statutory presumption in favour of development in "renewal" zones. Local voices must be heard when the local plan is drawn up, the policy states, but how this plays out remains to be seen. Once the plan is fixed, the only say local people will have is over detail of developments, so-called reserved matters. There would be protection for greenbelt and areas of outstanding natural beauty, but the new system looks certain to tilt the battlefield in

favour of developers such as Barratt Homes. Its chief executive, David Thomas, said he welcomed "any proposals to speed up the planning system and provide transparency and certainty for both communities and housebuilders". The CPRE, the campaigning countryside charity, sees the proposals in more dramatic terms. "Policies that have allowed major housebuilders to trample over the wishes of local people will be reinforced with binding land release targets and reduced affordable housing contributions," said Crispin Truman, its chief executive. "Developers will be able to build what they want, where they want and for the most part when they want." Either way, a planning liberalisation that takes back control from local voters could create an electoral headache for the government. Cllr Louise Goldsmith, until last year the Conservative leader of West Sussex county council, said local voters in the Tory strongholds were "very hacked off" with the plans. Alongside refuse collection and potholes, planning is often the issue on which local voters are most likely to regularly engage. "People want a greater say, but this is greater centralisation," said Goldsmith. "It worries every councillor because we want a happy community doing things in their community, but if they feel they are being done to ... that's quite a dangerous thing to happen." One voter the Conservatives might lose is Martin Silcocks, the landlord of the Thatched Tavern pub - a 16th-century inn overlooking a maize field where developers are poised to apply to build 226 homes. "Oh good lord!" he said when he saw the plans. "It would destroy everything this pub stands for." That includes his customers' uninterrupted view of the sunset. Silcocks used to vote Ukip. He switched back to the Conservatives in 2019 but is not happy with Boris Johnson. His daughter and her young family are looking for a home, but they do not expect the new houses to be within financial reach.

Another Tory in a rebellious mood is Libby Alexander, part of the Save Our South Coast Alliance, who felt the planning liberalisations would create expensive housing that was not needed and fail to deliver the cheaper accommodation that is in short supply. "We are constantly being labelled as selfish, and nimbyish when all we are doing is pointing out the obvious," she said, complaining that "local democracy is in danger of being slowly shut down". She and her fellow campaigners fear new homes will be taken by elderly incomers rather than the local priced-out families. They will be at flood risk, will displace prime agricultural land and transform a rural landscape that is a key lure for tourists, a vital part of the local economy, they add. "If Boris just shut up and did nothing but help developers build affordable housing, that's all we need in this country," she said. "This is a Conservative speaking, but I am fed up with what is going on."