

27 September 2023

Barn conversion proposals threaten National Parks

Friends of the Dales **strongly opposes proposals to relax planning rules** for the conversion of existing agricultural buildings, especially barns, in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. With its hundreds of field barns making a unique contribution to the special and historic landscapes of the national park, these proposals would inevitably negatively impact sustainability objectives and have an adverse impact on the Yorkshire Dales, on the verge of the 70th year of designation as a national park. Our view is that these proposals would overturn years of good policy making in the Dales, do little to conserve these unique features of Dales cultural heritage, and undermine efforts to restrict barn conversions to creating housing for local people.

We are a co-signatory with 13 others to a letter from Campaign for National Parks to Rt Hon Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. This letter sets out the strong concerns to these proposals to remove planning protections in Protected Landscapes.

Letter to Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities,

“We were deeply disappointed to learn of the Government’s plans to extend the permitted development rights for converting agricultural and other rural buildings to residential use to Protected Landscapes (National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs)). There is a long-established practice of not applying certain permitted development rights in these areas in line with national planning policy which emphasises the importance of protecting these areas from inappropriate development.

We campaigned to secure the exemption for National Parks and AONBs and welcomed this exemption when the rights for barn conversions were first introduced in 2014. The case for not applying these and other rights in these areas is even stronger now than it was then. Indeed, the Glover Review of Designated Landscapes, which you commissioned when at Defra, called for a review of the current system of Permitted Development Rights with a view to potentially identifying further rights to be added to the exemptions list. What Government is proposing now is directly contrary to this and would have disastrous consequences across Protected Landscapes.

National Parks and AONBs are living landscapes which must adapt over time. There is clear evidence that the planning policies which apply in these areas enable progress while ensuring additional protections apply and they do a difficult job well. Where there is a need for the appropriate change of use of existing buildings, for example where this can provide much needed affordable housing or ensure the future upkeep of traditional buildings, such changes must be carefully managed and monitored to ensure that they are not harming the unique character of an area. National Parks and AONBs are our finest landscapes with the highest level of protection and even small changes can have a disproportionate impact in these areas.

The need to limit the use of certain rights in Protected Landscapes to ensure that development is of an appropriate scale is acknowledged in the same consultation which proposes removing the exemptions for barn conversions. But yet the Government is proposing to apply new rights in Protected Landscapes which

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will make it easier to convert a wide range of rural buildings including those used for forestry and equestrian purposes as well as increasing the number of dwellings allowed per conversion.

If these changes go ahead, they will lead to a free-for-all on the development of new, isolated residential units in unsustainable locations without the supporting infrastructure and could add significant pressures in terms of water pollution and traffic. Where once there was a field barn standing isolated in a hay meadow, there will be a pocket of suburbia, and this will be repeated throughout the landscape, creating sprawl and spoiling everyone's enjoyment of nature, open space and tranquility.

Allowing this to go ahead will also completely undermine the Government's aim that Protected Landscapes should play an important role in recovering nature and contributing towards meeting the international commitment to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (the 30x30 target). We have been working hard to secure amendments to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill which would deliver key recommendations from the Glover Review aimed at maximising the potential for Protected Landscapes to contribute to nature recovery and the 30x30 target. Your government has already acknowledged the need for these crucial amendments in its response to the Glover Review but has, so far, failed to take advantage of the legislative opportunities available to secure the necessary changes.

Now, not only is the government failing to deliver long-promised new protections for our most precious landscapes, but you are also proposing changes which will critically weaken the existing protections.

Reducing the long-established planning protections that currently apply in Protected Landscapes will do nothing to drive economic growth. Last year, we were reassured that the government listened and responded to similar concerns about relaxing planning regulations in Protected Landscapes by not taking forward Investment Zones in these areas. Your predecessor, Rt Hon Simon Clarke MP, assured us that there would be no downgrading of the strong and long-established protections for National Parks and AONBs.

We very much hope that you will also be able to provide us with an early assurance of your commitment to retaining the exemptions from permitted development rights for converting barns and other types of agricultural buildings which currently apply in Protected Landscapes."

Yours sincerely,

Dr Rose O'Neill, Chief Executive, Campaign for National Parks

Les Sturch, Vice Chair, CPRE Peak District and South Yorkshire

John Ward, Chairman, Friends of the New Forest

Kate O'Sullivan, Chair, The Exmoor Society

David Sawyer, Chair, Friends of the South Downs

Bruce McLeod, Chair, Friends of the Dales

Tom Usher, CEO, Dartmoor Preservation Association

Michael Hill, CEO, Friends of the Lake District

Adrian Leaman, Chair, North Yorkshire Moors Association

Paul Rice, Chairman, The Broads Society

Paul Davies, CEO, British Mountaineering Council

Kate Ashbrook, General Secretary, The Open Spaces Society

Roger Mortlock, CEO, CPRE, The Countryside Charity

Ross Maloney, CEO, The Ramblers Association