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Clive Betts MP
Chairman
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Thank you for your letter of 22 April about the launch of the planning guidance website. This resource was developed following the recommendations of the External Review of Planning Practice Guidance, led by Lord Taylor of Goss Moor, which we had previously consulted on. In finalising the guidance we took into account the comments received in response to that consultation, as well as those made following the launch of the Beta test version of the site in August last year (which attracted over 600 responses). We will be publishing a summary of the responses received during the Beta phase by the summer.

One of the advantages of the new online resource is that it can be kept up-to-date far more easily than the array of out-dated documents that it has replaced – and indeed the website has a feedback facility that will allow users to submit comments on a continuing basis. This will allow the guidance to be updated as appropriate.

You ask about our policy on the Green Belt. We do not wish to see the National Planning Policy Framework being subject to constant revision, but there will be occasions when we need to clarify our policy intentions to help ensure that the Framework is being interpreted correctly. The ‘very special circumstances’ test that applies to the approval of inappropriate development in the Green Belt has always been a high bar, and in my statement I was simply making clear the approach that should already have been pursued where unmet housing needs and the Green Belt coexist.

Turning to changes of use, I can confirm that the permitted development right introduced on 6 April 2014, to allow changes from retail to residential, does not have an exemption scheme. Our approach in this case has instead been to include a prior approval requirement that allows local planning authorities to consider the potential impact of specific proposals in considering whether to grant prior approval; taking into account the need to maintain adequate provision of services in the local area and the sustainability of key shopping areas.

In relation to the change of use from retail to banks, we felt that an upper limit of floor space would be inconsistent with other permitted development rights within the ‘A’ use class. In addition, by limiting the change of use to a deposit taker, there is a natural limit on the likely size of any premises to which this new flexibility is likely to apply.
The aim of the reform to allow agricultural buildings to change to residential use in certain circumstances is to make it easier for redundant or under-utilised structures to be put to effective new use. This will allow more homes to be provided in rural areas. We do not want to inhibit its use by restricting the type of occupation, limiting the relaxation only to the provision of affordable housing or requiring an affordable housing contribution. The right is limited to three dwellings on any agricultural unit, and on small sites such as this affordable housing contributions can render sites unviable. Other mechanisms, such as rural exceptions sites, will continue to make an important contribution to meeting affordable housing requirements in rural communities.

NICK BOLES MP