

Builders use loophole to flood villages with concrete

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VILLAGES in beauty spots are "under attack" from property speculators exploiting new planning guidelines, according to MPs and campaigners. Canny developers have found a way to secure approval for controversial housing schemes opposed by local residents by appealing to national inspectors. They are targeting greenfield sites in areas where councils have failed to publish their own plans for new housing — allowing the government's national Planning Inspectorate to step in and fast-track

developments. Plans for hundreds of new homes in sensitive areas are being noddled through despite fierce objections from residents.

The Tory MP Nadhim Zahawi described the behaviour of some land speculators as "rapacious" — accusing them of playing the system to "concrete over villages". He singled out one company — the Gladman group — for particular criticism. The firm, which has a turnover of more than £200m, specialises in helping landowners get planning permission to build houses on their fields, taking a cut from a huge rise in the

value of the land once consent has been secured.

Zahawi said: "Companies like Gladman are rapacious in their behaviour and are profiteering... Very clearly what they are doing is going to the most expensive parts of the shires, and looking for greenfield sites in areas where the local council does not have a core strategy in place. These areas then have inappropriate developments inappropriately forced down their throats." Under the coalition's planning framework, councils are required to have a "core strategy" for housing as well as a five-year supply of land for new homes. If they do not have these in place, developers

whose applications are overturned by the local authority can appeal to national inspectors, who are far more likely to waive the proposal through.

The Gladman group has submitted planning applications for at least 40 sites, including land in Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Essex and Buckinghamshire. Its website boasts of its track record in securing consent quickly, saying "think 14 months not 10 years". In the small village of Tysoe, Warwickshire, the firm is seeking consent for 75 homes on a meadow. Mark Sewell,

chairman of the parish council, criticised ministers for leaving the village open to this "speculative development".

"This is a major problem and falls squarely at the door of the politicians. They need to block the loophole because as it stands the shires are under attack," he said.

Twenty miles away in Welford-on-Avon, Gladman has applied for outline planning permission for 95 homes on a greenfield site on the outskirts of the village. Simon Carter, chairman of the parish council, said the development would increase the size of the village by 20% and place a burden on the

infrastructure. "This is pure opportunism by this company," he said.

The planning minister, Nick Boles — nicknamed "Builder Boles" because of his determination to increase house-building — urged local authorities to speed up their own plans to stop speculators developing sites people wanted to protect.

David Gladman, a director at Gladman group, said: "It is the high need for homes and the sensible, sustainable locations which we select that have resulted in planning committees and appeals inspectors approving over 90% of our numerous applications."