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Subject:

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FT LETTER SUBMISSION: 'COUNCILS TO LOSE VETO ON HOUSING PLANS' -
FINANCIAL TIMES - NOVEMBER 18 2025

Categories: Comments Received

Dear Editor

Undemocratic planning practices do not good government make - nor parish communities ['Councils to lose veto on housing plans', FT, Nov 18].

Yours sincerely

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Move comes as ministers seek to reach goal of 1.5mn new homes in England

JIM PICKETT — LONDON
JENNIFER WILLIAMS — MANCHESTER
Councils' power to block large-scale housing projects has already been criticised as anti-democratic by Steve Reed, housing and communities secretary, who will announce today that local authorities will be prevented from refusing planning permission for housing schemes with more than 150 homes. They will instead have to refer the decision to ministers. Reed, who has accused councillors of blocking the past 10 years, will issue a legally binding instruction to councils to notify him of any development of more than 150 homes that the authority plans to block.

These projects would be "called in", with an independent planning inspector examining the scheme before the secretary of state makes a final decision.

Under existing rules, councils need to tell the housing secretary only when they intend to approve certain projects, giving the minister a chance to try to overturn the scheme.

Reed told the Financial Times that urgent measures were needed to help boost housebuilding to hit Labour's ambitious target of 1.5mn new homes by the end of this parliament. "Look at the number of consents that have been granted over recent years, and that has declined. In Greater London, a third of boroughs have had no new starts over the last year," he said. "There is clearly not enough development going on."

Ministers are also set to change planning guidance so housing schemes near well-connected train stations will gain

approval by default if they meet certain rules. The government has also launched a consultation into removing Sport England, The Gardens Trust and Theatres Trust from the list of organisations that by law have to be consulted on planning applications.

The Home Builders Federation, which represents many housebuilders, said the change in rules on schemes of more than 150 homes would accelerate development. "It will help ensure more larger sites come forward and prevent unnecessary delays to sites appropriate for development," the trade body said.

But the Local Government Association, which speaks for councils, said that the plans would undermine local democracy, citing authorities' approval of nine in 10 planning applications. "Councils know their communities best and should remain at the heart of the planning process. The democratic role of councillors in decision-making is the backbone of the English planning system, and this should not be diminished," the LGA said.

The government is already sidelining councillors in other ways: for example, unelected planning officers will be responsible for smaller developments instead of committees of elected councillors, under a proposed "scheme of delegation".

Asked whether the government was taking a sledgehammer to local democracy, Reed said councillors would still have input on planning decisions, not least by drawing up the "local plans" that govern where and how development should occur.

While ministers are sticking to their 1.5mn new homes target, there has been no clear surge in delivery since the general election in July last year. But Reed said the number of homes built in the third quarter of this year was up 8 per cent on the same period in 2024, according to figures from the National House Building Council.

Ministers had been hoping to soon win royal assent for their planning and infrastructure bill aimed at helping to accelerate building activity.

The bill should cut planning permission times for large infrastructure schemes and curtail opponents' ability to launch multiple judicial reviews.

In March, the Office for Budget Responsibility revised upwards its GDP growth estimates as a result of Labour's previous changes to planning rules.

Reed said the local watchdog should "score" the planning bill in its latest forecasts, even though the legislation will now not receive royal assent before the budget on November 26.

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