Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Click here to watch Sarah speak

I am proud to represent a constituency that extends from the hill farms of Dartmoor to the coast, encompassing some of the loveliest areas of outstanding natural beauty. I am proud, too, to say that we are very much open for business, despite the recent battering from the storms.

I am fortunate to have lived and worked in rural Dartmoor for 21 years. I have no conflict of interest in this debate, but I have real concerns about the unintended consequences if we proceed with permitted development rights without the need for planning permission to convert up to three dwellings or to replace existing farm buildings across rural Dartmoor and areas of outstanding natural beauty. I commend the Minister for his comments and entirely agree about the need to address the inter-generational unfairness that exists within housing. We should allow people to aspire to affordable housing. I absolutely agree that we need to build more homes, but we need to build homes that people can afford to live in. That is my concern.

Permitted development rights would allow buildings of up to 150 square metres—nearly twice the guideline amount for affordable housing—so we will see development of larger properties. Within AONBs and the national parks the measure will affect all 10 national parks. I fear that that will lead to the creation of more second homes and luxury homes, rather than the affordable housing that we need to breathe life into our rural communities. I hope that the Minister will also look at the unintended consequences. As he will know, one of the chief ways to lever in exception sites is deployed when landowners know that there is no other mechanism to obtain planning permission. That is a genuine concern, and we have already seen a chilling effect on land prices and the availability of affordable land for development.

There is a further concern. The historic farmstead survey of Dartmoor looks at pre-1914 farmsteads, of which there are 1,100 across Dartmoor. Each of those has three to four outbuildings. Clearly, not all of those would be suitable for development, but it is estimated that around 2,000 would be suitable for conversion, and that is within Dartmoor alone. That does not include the 1,500 to 2,000 properties that are non-heritage buildings. So we are potentially looking at up to 4,000 properties, each of which could be converted to three dwellings. On top of that is all the accompanying infrastructure in terms of driveways and parking.

There is a real concern in our national parks about the impact that such development could have on our landscapes, but even more important is what will happen when we lose 4,000 farm buildings from the moor. If there are 4,000 fewer farm buildings, there is less agriculture on the moor. Having lived for two decades on Dartmoor, I have seen the changes that there have been to grazing. If cattle and sheep are lost from moorland, there is a degradation from heather towards gorse. It is important that we keep farming on the moor. In lower lying areas, we are already seeing more pony paddocks and we are losing the unique environment that is part of the reason why tourists come to Dartmoor in the first place. The landscape that we see across the moor is critical to our environment.
Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con):

As the name of my constituency suggests, half of it falls within the South Downs national park, the newest one to be created. Was not the whole purpose of creating national parks that protection of the landscape should have primacy wherever there is a conflict with economic development? We are at risk of losing that if we allow the creation of a suburbia within the national parks and inappropriate development, new haciendas and gin palaces, instead of maintaining the character of the parks and the landscape, which was precisely why they were created.

Dr Wollaston:

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We do not want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg—the very reason why people come to Dartmoor. The creation of the national parks was described as the people's charter for fresh air. These are crucially important landscapes for us to protect. Overdevelopment would destroy that. This is not about saying that we should stop all development within national parks. All of us recognise the need to support hill farmers. They may be asset rich but they survive on very low cash flows.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con):

I broadly agree with my hon. Friend's argument that we do not want to see overdevelopment in our national parks, or major development of any kind, but does she agree that some of our national park authorities have been over-negative in the past in not allowing reasonable and sympathetic development, which perhaps would persuade the Minister, who I know is listening very carefully to my every word, that we do not need a sledgehammer to crack a nut and there is some compromise to be had here?

Dr Wollaston:

I entirely agree. A lot of this is about streamlining the processes. But I know that the national parks want to support affordable housing. Within the national park the average house price is in excess of Â£270,000. That is nine times the median income, and 16 times the lower quartile income, so we do need development.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con):

I have some experience of this scenario in the Snowdonia national park. Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the buildings she refers to are unsuitable for agriculture these days, and if we just leave them, they will deteriorate over time and will not be of any attraction to tourists either?

Dr Wollaston:

hon. Friend adds to the point that we are not asking to see no development across our national parks, but rather for them to have discretion on a case-by-case basis. Absolutely, they must support farmers. We want farmers to have the ability to diversify, but we do not want a wholesale shift towards development, with farmers losing agriculture and moving entirely towards running holiday businesses and letting properties. It is a matter of degree. Yes, I would like to join him in encouraging national parks to support development, but to do so in a sustainable way that recognises the importance of keeping agriculture and sustaining our most precious and fragile ecosystems across the country for all our national parks. That applies not only to national parks, but to areas of outstanding natural beauty.
Dr Wollaston: With regard to areas of outstanding natural beauty, I would like to mention some points that have been raised with me by a local councillor in the village of South Pool in my constituency.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con):

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing an Adjournment debate on such an important topic. Does she share my concern that removing such buildings from agricultural use means taking away a route for young entrants into farming and preventing them from engaging in the farming community?

Dr Wollaston:

I thank my hon. Friend for making that extremely important point. We need to attract young farmers into farming, and not only to lowland farms, but to hill farms.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):

I, too, congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing the matter before the House for consideration. I represent Strangford, a constituency in Northern Ireland that is just as beautiful as her own—perhaps a little more beautiful, in my opinion—and also an area of outstanding natural beauty. Strict planning controls laid down by the Northern Ireland Assembly enable farmers to build their dwellings but at the same time retain the countryside. Does she feel that that example in Northern Ireland could be followed here on the UK mainland?

Dr Wollaston:

I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, reiterating what many hon. Members have said. This is not about saying that there should be no development; it is about allowing controlled development on a case-by-case basis, rather than having an automatic permitted development right, which I think could lead to something altogether different and entirely unintended by the Minister.

Councillor Elizabeth Bennett, a parish councillor in South Pool, has made an important point about the effect on localism, which I know the Minister feels very passionate about. He has made the point that localism does not mean that we should see no development at all, because communities have to take responsibility for supplying housing for local people. It is about deciding where and how that takes place. The current arrangements deny parish councils the ability to comment on planning proposals.

Councillor Elizabeth Bennett also raised the concern about communities such as South Pool never being able to attain access to exception sites because they are not on a bus route and do not have the amenities of a village school. Nevertheless, those communities are desperately short of housing for local people. In fact, South Pool has some of the highest property values in the country. The ratios between earnings and property value are in excess of 10, so any access to local housing is entirely beyond the means of local people. Will the Minister look at extending that access so that projects such as the wonderful village housing initiative can be encouraged to bring in more exception sites within areas of outstanding natural beauty.

This is not about asking for no development; it is about asking for the right development,
and for homes that people actually live in. I would not wish the Minister to think that I am saying that all second homes are bad. As he knows, many second home owners become permanent residents within a few years. They bring in a huge amount of income to local communities, particularly when they let out their properties when they are not using them. However, it is a matter of degree and scale, and he will know that there are many parts of our AONBs and national parks where the balance has shifted too far in the direction of second home owners. That can lead to dormitory communities where the lights are hardly ever on, except in season and at the weekends.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): Much of the debate so far has been about Dartmoor, half of which is in my constituency, so I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the opportunity to contribute. I agree with her that we do not want some kind of blanket arrangement that would allow absolutely every application to convert a barn into a residential dwelling. We need to cherry-pick the right options, as she has suggested. What changes to the current planning arrangements, as exercised by Dartmoor national park, for example, does she think would introduce that flexibility in the appropriate manner?

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour from Dartmoor for making that point. The change I would like to see would give our national parks and AONBs the ability to opt out of the arrangements as they stand in allowing automatic permitted development rights. I would like a change in the wording so that they have more powers to lever in land for affordable housing developments, because that is what we crucially need for our communities. My hon. Friend will know about the effect whereby we lose young people and families from rural communities, which might mean that we cannot find nurses who will work in a community hospital or, on the coast, we find that there are not enough people to man the lifeboats.

It is really important that young people and families are able to live, work and volunteer within our local communities. I would love to see whether the Minister can bring in any measures to make that easier so that we can genuinely get affordable housing rather than asking for a change to no housing. We must recognise that our national parks and AONBs need our protection; they do not need unrestricted permitted development rights. I hope that the Minister will give some encouragement to the national parks and all those who love them that there will be a change to the wording.

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend. His final point is very pertinent, but I do not share his cynicism, because I know that the Minister is absolutely committed to the important aspiration for people to be able to have access to housing. Having lived on Dartmoor for a long time and seen the pressures that people are under, I feel that there are genuinely some unintended consequences that I hope he will encourage us to address.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise that people in my constituency use Dartmoor very regularly and do not want to see it deteriorate at all? Conservation at the national park is a great asset to the local community.

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. This is not just about people who live within national parks and AONBs but those who use them and feel passionately about their importance and the need to conserve this very precious landscape.

It would really help us all to hear the Minister's comments on the many wonderful projects that are out there encouraging affordable housing. I know that he has visited Don Lang of the Land Society. I am very encouraged to hear today's comments by the Secretary of State about how we can bring down costs for self-builders. It would be helpful if the Minister were
able to elaborate on that. I hope that he is able to provide the reassurance we are all seeking that we will not see unrestrained building across our national parks but, rightly, the building of affordable housing that sustains living communities and brings young people and families back into our national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty.

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Dr Wollaston: One point that has not been covered is that some derelict buildings play an important role in sustaining wildlife in national parks. I hope that the Minister will also say whether, if permitted development rights are allowed for such areas, there could be a mechanism whereby exception sites are pulled in. Although I recognise that there will be some second homes, we must do something about affordable housing—that is the housing that is crucially needed in our national parks.

Hansard