



# YOUR TUNBRIDGE WELLS

CHANCELLOR ANNOUNCES CHANGE TO PLANNING REGULATIONS

## Fears new development rules may spoil our town

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**THE** council's grasp on development in the borough could be put in jeopardy courtesy of new planning rules, experts have warned.

A senior local government officer in Tunbridge Wells said the "devil will be in the detail" after the Chancellor used the Budget to announce a new presumption in favour of development that looks likely to weaken town halls in their negotiations with developers.

Meanwhile, Protect Kent, the county's branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), said the changes were going to make it easier for the countryside to come under real threat.

The current planning system was labelled a "chronic obstacle" to economic growth by George Osborne in his recent Budget.

Louise Phillips, planning policy manager at Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, said the planning process can be frustratingly lengthy, but much of this was down to measures aimed at making sure local people were involved.

"There is a heavy evidence requirement to support policies and a requirement for continuous public involvement," she said.

"This is what planners have to do, which takes a long time and people get frustrated but if you put those reasons to them they do not necessarily disagree."

Under the new rules there will be a 12-month cap on the time the planning process takes, including appeals.

Asked if the current system has affected economic growth in Tunbridge Wells, she said: "I think planning can seem quite slow, but I think it's also important to recognise that many of the things people like about Tunbridge Wells is that it is grounded in architecture and heritage.

"It is down to striking a balance between this and economic growth and development."

She added it was not always the planning system that stops development and growth.

"The old cinema site in the town centre, for example, has planning consent," she said. "It is not the system that has prevented it, but the economic downturn has had an affect."

Protect Kent had concerns about the new presumption in favour of 'sustainable development' and the fact it appears at odds with the Government's policies-wide promise of more community involvement.

Deputy director Sean Furey said: "We are very concerned about what the Chancellor was saying about seeing the planning system as an enemy to economic development.

"That is so not the case. The planning system is there for a very good reason and ripping it up will have all sorts of unintended consequences.

"One of the interesting things is the split in

Government policy – that this flies in the face of what they have previously been saying about localism and giving people more of a say. But the Chancellor wants to allow anything to be built as long as it helps growth and jobs."

This was also a sticking point for Mrs Phillips.

"Some of the concerns [about protecting green areas] are linked to the presumption in favour of development and the devil will be in the detail about how it is going to work," she said. "We've had to test our plan with the sustainability criteria and it defines what we think is sustainable for the borough," she said. "Developers are not going to say their schemes are not sustainable.

### Localism

"Given we already have a presumption in favour of our development, this suggests something more, which could weaken the council's ability to decide on that."

Mrs Phillips said problems could arise over people's understanding of localism.

The Government has given councils guidance on 'neighbourhood plans' that give communities the right to bring forward more development.

"If the council finds itself having to give things the automatic go ahead, I'm sure residents will have concerns and will clash with the Government or the council," she said.

She added: "I think it could be an issue if people have understood localism to be a chance to say what they want, but I do not think there is enough information to say what their choices will be. If their choice is only for more development then I think some people will be disappointed."

Protect Kent's Mr Furey questioned where the Government's 'Budget for growth' left its promise to be the greenest administration ever.

"Where does localism fit into this and green government promises? It is really all about tackling the deficit and bringing down public sector costs.

"It seems to be saying that to stop unemployment rising, the private sector needs to be freed up to create harmful developments, but what about the regulations that protect the environment?"

He said that while it was important to protect the green belt as the Government has promised, the new rules will push the pressure for development elsewhere and onto other environmentally sensitive areas.

Mr Furey said that investment should be focused on brown field sites and revitalising high streets, particularly in areas of east Kent such as Thanet.

"It comes down to what was very sensibly said when regeneration started out in Ashford – 'mend before you extend'. It is important to sort out the core problems first."