

Planning properties

Representatives from the public, private and charity sectors came together at the latest Insider Property Leaders' Forum to discuss how planning changes could affect Yorkshire's housing market and the potential for green belt reform

The squeeze on housing supply is being felt across the Yorkshire region by housebuilders and potential buyers across local authority boundaries.

Developers are looking at the ways in which they can maximise the use of available land and gain a reasonable return, while councils are combatting opposition from residents and political figures to further development.

Changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) were introduced in April and have received mixed receptions from planners and developers. The proposals are up for consultation until 10 May.

John Brooks, director and head of planning agency Indigo's Leeds office, opened the discussion by focusing on the new framework's benefits.

"There are a lot of positives to be drawn from the NPPF, but there are a

few contradictions from the government in the national picture they are promoting and the decisions made at a national level."

Brooks' research suggested that the West and South Yorkshire green belt accounts for 350,000 hectares of land. By releasing 1 per cent of that for development, 62,000 houses could be built.

"I don't think any government would want to take on [the challenge the green belt presents] and local politicians are not going to support green belt developments. If you're promoting a site on a green field, even if there's demand, it will be difficult to get proposals through."

Amanda Beresford, partner and head of planning at law firm Shulmans, added: "Green belt protection rules have been in place for many years and work well. The issue is whether we should change green belt boundaries. The NPPF doesn't look at a strategic view in which that can be done locally or nationally.

"There isn't any mechanism for producing a legal development plan to reconsider boundaries, which have been in place since the 1950s, and whether they are still appropriate."

David Shepherd is service director for economic regeneration at Barnsley Council, which is set to release 2.5 per cent of its green belt land for redevelopment. He said: "We have had vast tracts of industrial land that cannot be redeveloped into brownfield so we have had to release some.

"The green belt discussion is not consistent across the country or even Yorkshire. There will be good reasons why other authorities don't want to release green belt land and we've done a lot of work to understand what our Yorkshire neighbours are doing."

Tim Hill, chief planning officer for Leeds City Council, countered him: "The green belt is a national political

Standing: Shaun O'Brien, Mike Denby, Jonathan Isles, Amanda Beresford, Will Martin, John Brooks
Seated: Sean Berry, Naz Parkar, David Shepherd, Tim Hill



issue, not necessarily a local issue. The NPPF and the new housing methodology feels like it's aimed at the problems of the south east, not councils in the north that are working to meet the needs of its residents.

"It feels like the emphasis on housing is now in a vacuum and it's just about numbers, decoupled from narratives about the economic growth of an area and sustainable placemaking. You get solutions such as building higher and with more density, but without an explicit emphasis on redeveloping brownfield land first."

Coalfields Regeneration Trust is a charity working to improve quality of life in Britain's former mining communities. The charity has a property building division which has started work on a £1m residential development on Washington Road, in the Goldthorpe area of Barnsley.

Shaun O'Brien, property investment and development director at Coalfields Regeneration Trust, said: "You've got barriers to city centre living and, while the temptation is to go higher and more dense, you have the initial demolition and remediation costs which put the cost of construction up.

"On the edges of towns it can be easier to deliver the housing but you might not get the density."

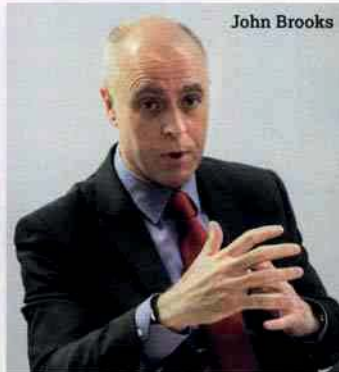
Naz Parkar is director of housing at Kirklees Metropolitan Council, which includes Huddersfield, Dewsbury and Cleckheaton. The council has been working on its Local Plan, a long term strategy for its housing, and an estimated 11,000 houses from its housing target of 31,000 are set to be built in green belt areas.

He said: "There needs to be a recognition that in places like Leeds, developers are more likely to take on brownfield sites because there's more value in it. Particularly around areas such as the South Bank, where development work has exponentially accelerated over the last few years.

"In Huddersfield and Dewsbury we've got to work a lot harder to attract a developer that might invest in a major build-to-rent scheme, even though it would be a great part of the residential offer in our town centres."

Jonathan Isles, managing director of Dacres Commercial, a commercial property agent and valuer based in Leeds, added insight from a land buyer's perspective.

"There is an assumption that green



John Brooks



Shaun O'Brien and Will Martin



David Shepherd

belt is of uniform quality, but particularly around the urban fringes it can have been trespassed, tipped and be of poor agricultural quality. The idea that all green belt is a silvern, wonderful rural setting isn't the case.

"For all the great work being done in urban areas, it's not satisfying the demand for family housing which is where volume housebuilders are concentrating their efforts."

Sean Berry, head of technical at Avant Homes, has noticed a shortage of land supply in Yorkshire. The housebuilder has acquired sites across Yorkshire and has plans for hundreds of properties to be brought forward in the coming year.

"There is, in our opinion, a shortage of land supply in the areas where aspirational people want to live," Berry said. "So that is a problem for us. In the area where I

live the developments might only be 30 to 40 years old but people are already in opposition to further development, despite the need for more affordable housing.

"We want to develop and give family and affordable housing in areas where there's a demand."

Wakefield Council has established its own house building company, Bridge Homes, to bring tricky sites back into use as affordable homes. The council is creating homes for the area, while building its funds as well.

Mike Denby, economic development service manager at the council, said: "The company was only set up two years ago, and we're already on our third site and have a ten-site plan in the works.

"We've used a commercial model. It's worked for us having made profit to go back to the council and getting high-quality homes built."

Some policies listed on the NPPF have caused a stir. One is designed to crack down on developers that do not begin work on sites within a two-year timeframe.

Will Martin, senior planning manager at St Modwen, a property company which specialises in the regeneration of brownfield and urban land, added: "I think councils have to be pragmatic. We often take forward large redevelopment proposals that can have brownfield ramifications, or might even be tenanted for the next two or three years.

"If the government was to ask how many homes we could deliver in the coming two years on a site like that, we'd have to say that there wouldn't be any. It can be harder on difficult city centre sites, but on a green belt site, developers can give a delivery trajectory that could be very accurately measured and predicted."

Beresford added: "There's a myth around land banking, where there's a lot more issues around the cost of building materials and labour and the need for further skills."

Hill agreed: "The perception is that land banking is an issue, and there are issues around land, and even land owners' expectations of land value.

"This adds to the government's problem. If you want to release land from landowners, you have to make it easy for Homes England, local authorities or whoever, to compulsorily buy that land for whatever is deemed to be a fair value." ■