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Regional Spatial Strategy (South West)

11 am

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): The regional spatial strategy for the south-west is an issue of prime importance for not only my constituents but those of many hon. Members here today, who I suspect were brought here by the title of the debate, rather than the prospect of my oratory—[Hon. Members: “No!”]—although I am open to correction on that point.

We discussed the draft RSS for the south-west in this very Chamber in January, and the previous but one Housing Minister, who is now the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, assured us that the Secretary of State’s comments on the panel’s report would be available in the spring. We anticipated that that would perhaps be around Easter and that there would then be three months of rigorous parliamentary scrutiny of this fundamental and very detailed document, but the weeks and months went by and “spring” turned out to be 22 July. In other words, the Secretary of State’s conclusions were issued to us on the final day on which the House sat, and a 13-week consultation period commenced with 11 weeks of parliamentary recess. I put it to the Minister that that does not show respect for the parliamentary process.

Today’s debate could provide the only opportunity that all hon. Members from the south-west have to express their views in Parliament on the RSS. Although many of the issues are matters for our colleagues in local government, there are clearly issues of regional and national strategic importance that we, as representatives of our communities, should be able to speak our minds about, but the Government have made that exceptionally difficult for us. Were it not for the generosity of Mr. Speaker, we would not even be having this debate today. That is totally unacceptable.

That sums up the problem with the RSS: it is incredibly top-down. Earlier this year, the Department for Communities and Local Government produced a report called—I ask hon. Members please not to laugh—“Communities in control: real people, real power”. If we had read out that title at any of the five public meetings I have had on the issue in my constituency, there would have been a hollow laugh, because there is no sense that real people have real power in this process. It is an entirely top-down process.

There is a consultation. We are approaching the end of it. To respond on the official form in the official language, people can go to the website. I have been encouraging many of my constituents to go to the website to say what they think. One of them said:

“I thought you’d like to know about the difficulties I have experienced registering on the GOSW”—

Government office for the south-west—

“website today and trying to download the...documents. At every stage, I have received error messages and have only succeeded in registering through sheer persistence although I have so far failed to record any comments (I will keep trying). If I were a conspiracy theorist...”

A second constituent said:

“I have tried to object to the proposals as I feel very strongly about it, however by logging onto the system it won't allow me to get onto that area without registering. This I have tried to do and it won't work therefore I can't object!!”

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I do not suppose for a second that this is deliberate, but it is exceptionally difficult to use the online process. I registered myself this morning. I had a look online and managed to register, but the barriers to people registering their comments are enormous, which is part of the problem.

The issue is not just the technology. Another constituent said:

“I'm afraid I have failed hopelessly to respond on-line to the Government's document...As an ordinary council tax payer and person, I have found the website almost impossible to comprehend and navigate and I feel that if government was serious in intending to consult with the electorate, it should ensure that the means to do so were easily understood and accomplished by all.”

That is from an extremely sophisticated constituent of mine who gives me very erudite comment on policy issues and who has just given up because the process is too difficult, so how valid will the consultation be?

I had a look on the website this morning to see how many people had commented on what I call my area, which is known poetically as housing market area 1. It used to be called Avon; it is now the west of England. Out of a population of more than 1 million people, a grand total of 18 people have registered comments, the most recent of which was on 25 September. One of my constituents, Ron Morton, who chairs the Shortwood green belt campaign, rang the Government office for the south-west and asked, “Why are there no more comments since 25 September?” He was told that the official consultation website is not currently being updated with participant submissions, because “Gary is on holiday.” [*Laughter.*] There is a serious point here. He has asked me to put to the Minister the following question: can the Minister extend the consultation period, this time by a period at least equal to Gary's holiday, because given the crucial timing of Gary's absence, the backlog of comments on his return is likely to be substantial?

We could have a process whereby nobody saw anybody else's comments, but we do not have that. We have a process that should allow us to see what other people have said—but we cannot, because the website has not been updated for weeks. I say, “Either do it properly or don't do it at all, but don't faff around.” The entire process

has been described as a Whitehall farce, and I have to agree. If we want people to respond, we should make it easy and make it doable, instead of putting all those barriers in their way.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said. Would he add that people are not entirely sure what they are being consulted about? Is it the original proposals? Is it the panel recommendations? Is it what the Secretary of State has said? I have spoken to very senior people involved in the process and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that they do not know what is going on.

Steve Webb: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Let me give an example from my own constituency. The draft RSS that came from the regional assembly had no specific proposals at all for the Yate and Chipping Sodbury area. The panel talked about 5,000 houses in that area. Yate town council asked to give evidence to the panel and was refused, but at the end of the process a big proposal was made for its area, on which it could not feed in because it did not know it was coming. We

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cannot comment on that. We had a debate in January, and the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) secured a debate on the issue subsequently. In that debate, this Minister said that he could not respond at that point, which was in the spring, because the process was quasi-judicial and so he could not comment. He could not comment on the panel. Now we have the revisions—in the Yate case, we are talking about a figure of 3,000, not 5,000. Do we agree that 5,000 down to 3,000 is good news, or do we say that 3,000 is wrong because the panel was wrong? Are we allowed to comment on that, because we are commenting on the proposed changes, not the number that it first thought of? It is a complete farce. Nobody knows the answer to that question.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on a very powerful, amusing and interesting speech, which we are looking forward to hearing more of; I will not take up too much of his time. Has he any idea of the cost to the taxpayer of this farce? Should the Government not come clean with the country and say that they will abandon the whole regional spatial strategy? I am not sure whether the spatial strategy is on planet Earth or somewhere else in the stratosphere.

Steve Webb: Yes, I suppose we might say it is more of an outer spatial strategy. I have no problem with thinking strategically at regional level, provided that the process is democratic, engages people and starts with local communities, rather than being imposed from on high. That is my principal objection. The strategy needs to be regional, not national, but what have the Government done between the panel report and the Secretary of State's version? They have stripped out some of the bits that make it different. The south-west wanted to go further and faster on renewable energy. That has been taken out. The south-west wanted to go further and faster on sustainable building. That has been taken out. Is this a regional strategy, or is it a national strategy imposed on the region? The regional assembly put it like this:

“Regional distinctiveness should be one of the hall-marks of a regional spatial strategy”—

one would think that was a statement of the blindingly obvious—

“and its policy should reflect the regionally unique circumstances and aspirations in each region, not merely repeat national policy.”

I hope that the Minister will respond to our comments and explain why some of the regional distinctiveness has been taken out of the document. What is the point of asking the region to come up with a document and then saying, “Oh, sorry, you can’t do different things in your region from other regions”? That does not make sense.

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that that raises fundamental questions about the Government’s definition of consultation? Is it simply an evidence-gathering session that can be ignored if it goes counter to their views, or is it genuinely a process whereby the views of local areas can feed into shaping the overall process?

Steve Webb: My hon. Friend is right. We have held five public meetings in my constituency about the issue, and 700-plus people have come to them. At the start of every one, I have had to say, “I know what you’re

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thinking—responding to a consultation is a waste of time because nobody is listening.” I hope that the Minister will assure us that the comments that we make today and that go on the website do have a chance of changing something. If he simply comes up with 3 million, or whatever the number is, and just tells us all to get on with it, I wonder whether we would be able to change anything. Frankly, however, if we were all to give up, it would be a recipe for cynicism. That is why I have been determined to fight it.

I shall focus on the specific issue of housing numbers. The document covers much more, but that is the principal concern. I considered what the last but one Housing Minister, now Chief Secretary to the Treasury, said in response to our debate in January. If I were to summarise her 10-minute speech, it would be, “You are all a bunch of nimbys: go away.” That, essentially, was the line she took. That, however, may be in the Minister’s draft speech, so I shall suggest a slightly more refined version.

We are not saying—I am not saying—no to more houses. South Gloucestershire is not an area of nimbys: over the past 20 years, it has taken 27,000 extra houses, including the biggest housing estate in Europe—Bradley Stoke. In the used currency, we are now being asked for another four Bradley Stokes. That is on top of what we already have.

In 2006, the then all-party cabinet of South Gloucestershire council asked, “What do we need? What can we cope with? What is sustainable? What will the infrastructure bear?” The council came up with 21,000 for the next 20 years. It was not nought. The council was not denying the need for affordable housing.

If the Minister’s officials have been busy, they will know that twice in this Chamber I have demanded more affordable housing to meet local needs in South Gloucestershire. It is not no to new housing; it is yes to sustainable, affordable

housing to meet local needs. However, what is proposed goes way beyond that. South Gloucestershire council said yes to 21,000, on top of the 27,000 over the previous 20 years. The draft regional spatial strategy agreed by the regional assembly came up with 23,000, which encroached on the green belt. We objected to that, but it was in the same ballpark. The panel suggested 30,800; and the Secretary of State said 32,800, which was half as many again. The issue is the margin between what the local people believe is sustainable—a number that would meet local needs—and a vast extra development.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I reassure him that the point he makes about his constituents not being nimbys is echoed on the other side of the Bristol in my area of north Somerset. I see my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), in his seat; I am sure that he will make the same point. No one locally is arguing for no extra houses. The problem is that the houses being foisted on us are above what is sustainable, above what local people will sign up to, and far in advance of what local infrastructure, local transport and local community services will stand.

Steve Webb: That is exactly right. People ask me how the need for these houses arises. The report shows that they are needed not only for local people. It supposes a
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massive influx, principally from other parts of the United Kingdom. It is not about immigration from outside the UK; it is overwhelmingly immigration from the rest of the country. In some parts of the country, some houses are being demolished because no one wants to live on certain estates. In our area, there is an attempt to cram in houses. Authorities see a field and think “Housing estate.” That is the state of the unbalanced economic growth taking place in our country.

People sometimes ask me where I believe the jobs and the houses should go. I certainly believe that 21,000 should go in South Gloucestershire, but what about the excess? If the economy was not so unbalanced—if the United Kingdom was not like a big see-saw, tilting towards the bottom—we might have a more measured housing policy. At present, it is about trying to cram extra people in and not about local need. It seems like predict and provide—just as with the roads and the airports. We have had more houses and more jobs: let us have more houses and more jobs—and more houses, and more jobs: in 2026, another 20,000 for the next 20 years. Is there any limit? Will we have reached it when we hit another 21,000?

I shall focus on only two or three specific issues, as I know that many other hon. Members wish to speak. The first is that of the green belt.

Last year, the Prime Minister was very reassuring—honestly. He said that he would “robustly defend” the green belt. We all sleep better in our beds at night knowing that the Prime Minister will robustly defend the green belt. Sure enough, on page 75 of the document we read:

“The general extent of the Bristol and Bath Green Belt will be maintained”.

We are greatly reassured by that—until we read the next phrase, which contains the words:

“subject to the following alterations: Removal of the green belt to accommodate urban extensions at Areas of Search 1A, IB, 1C, ID, IF and 1G”.

The only reason that 1E is not in the list is because it is not in the green belt. The document says that the green belt will be kept except when it gets in the way: the green belt is fine except that we want to get rid of it.

Many of my constituents say that the green belt is vital, especially in areas that have seen rapid development and urbanisation. Once that principle is breached, however, the area will never be the same again. It is vital for quality of life—for mental, physical and spiritual well-being—and not only for those who live in the countryside. It is particularly important for those who live in the towns and cities. It is not about country dwellers throwing up the barriers and saying, “Leave our green spaces alone.” People who live in Bristol want to keep the Bristol green belt; it is not only those who live in the countryside. If the proposal goes ahead, communities such as the village of Shortwood in my constituency, which is in the green belt, would simply be wiped off the map by a sprawling housing estate.

I discovered this morning—in a document of this size, there is always something new to discover—that the housing density for what are called urban extensions, which we know as fields, is 50 dwellings per hectare. That means going up, and not only sideways. There is

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obviously a trade-off. We do not want completely to cover all the fields. However, the document means high density housing going up, which will have an even more conspicuous impact on the landscape, and specifically so in the green belt areas. The green belt is a fundamental issue of principle.

I ask the Minister a key question, of which I have given him notice. If any of our local authorities zone all those areas for housing, which will be expected of them, will the developers be able to say, “You have created space for 32,000 houses. The first house we build will be put on the prime bit of green belt, which we have never been allowed to touch before”? Or will they be able to say, “Hang on a minute. There are lots of other brownfield sites and urban areas that you should use first”? I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us at least that once the areas are zoned a local authority will not lose on appeal if it says no to a green belt development simply because of a failure to apply a sequential approach.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. Is he aware that, in the examination in public, the panel’s report stated that brownfield and greenfield sites were

“two separate but complementary streams of supply which should not be sequentially phased”?

My hon. Friend—and, I suspect, many other hon. Members—wants the Minister to allow local authorities the power to have them sequentially phased.

Steve Webb: Absolutely. I have no doubt that if any semblance of local democracy is to be left in the process, local authorities should be able to prioritise sites. That is not a no to housing; it is saying that local people—those who know the local area best—should be able to say that a site is less damaging and should be taken first. That is fundamental.

Planning policy guidance note 2, which issues guidance to local authorities, states:

“Once the general extent of a Green Belt has been approved it should be altered only in exceptional circumstances. If such an alteration is proposed”—

in this case by a local authority—

“the Secretary of State will wish to be satisfied that the authority has considered opportunities for development within the urban areas contained by and beyond the Green Belt.”

If a council wants to undermine the green belt, it has to satisfy the Secretary of State that it is an exceptional case. Through the Minister, I ask the Secretary of State whether she can satisfy us that such a case would be exceptional—that there are exceptional circumstances for eroding our green belt. I have not yet seen such circumstances demonstrated.

The second key issue, about which many hon. Members will want to chip in, is infrastructure. What is poetically known as area of search 1C—it is to the east of Bristol in my constituency—is about green belt. Area search 1E, the area around Yate and Chipping Sodbury, is about infrastructure. Originally, there were no specific houses, then 5,000 and then 3,000. It seems like the phrase on “Who wants to be a millionaire”—“But I don’t want to give you that.” The numbers seem to come from nowhere—just an extra 5,000 houses.

Those communities already have congested roads, and infrequent train services with people being left on platforms because they cannot all cram on to the trains.

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That is happening now, so one can imagine what would happen if we built those houses. There is land for them. No one is saying there is nowhere to put them—we could fit them in. However, we are talking about an area with a high level of car ownership, and a high level of commuting into central Bristol and the surrounding area. The previous version of the regional spatial strategy included specific infrastructure projects. They have been taken out and all we have left is wishful thinking about improving public transport infrastructure.

Stephen Williams (Bristol, West) (LD): My hon. Friend will know that there is already gridlock in the morning peak at the M4-M5 interchange and at the junction of the M32 and the A38, with people trying to leave Bristol to work in the employment areas in Aztec West and Bradley Stoke and people from South Gloucestershire, Bath and north-east Somerset trying to get into the city centre. The proposal will simply make matters worse.

Steve Webb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—the area is already incredibly congested.

I am sure that the Minister will respond by saying that somebody will improve public transport. The company was not sure whether it could provide extra trains in the morning. I asked whether it could double the number of morning peak journeys from Yate to Bristol and how many people it could actually get into Bristol. The company said it could carry only 140 more people. There will be 3,000 houses, but only 140 more people could be accommodated on journeys. The other 3,000 or so commuters—there will be some jobs in the area, but most people will commute—will not be going on trains, and buses are infrequent and expensive. Of course the Minister could do more, but has anybody really done the math, as Americans would say, to match the two numbers? It is not good enough to say, “We will build 3,000 houses and improve public transport.” The roads out of Yate cannot be widened without knocking down houses. It is not a question of doing something that one is determined to do—physically, there simply is no room. Who is going to listen when we say no? Infrastructure is critical.

Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell) (LD): The points that my hon. Friend made about capacity design and infrastructure are also a lesson on the need to move away from estate-by-estate, developer-led investment, which provides houses but not the work spaces and community infrastructure that create a living, working community. Do we not need investors and councils to shape communities that work? That way, we would not have everybody commuting to Bristol, but a place where people live and work as a community. One problem with the RSS is that it does not deliver a solution to the problem of shaping communities that work.

Steve Webb: I echo the need for communities that work and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work on rural housing. I am worried that we will not be able to make people live next to where they work, so even if we zone land for employment in the middle of Yate, people will still come in and go out. We cannot control that—that’s life—and it will always happen. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Stephen Williams) said, we already have gridlock, which will only get worse. We should not simply wish that public transport was better. Even if we had the money, the physical possibility of improvements would be a bonus.

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Mr. Jeremy Browne (Taunton) (LD): My hon. Friend is making the point that extra housing development is motivated by proximity to existing transport infrastructure. Taunton, for example, is set for massive expansion. I echo the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) in saying that we want extra housing, but not on such a scale, and not by imposition. Taunton is earmarked for expansion because it is on the M5, and people can get to Exeter and Bristol more easily for work. However, they could make those journeys only if thousands of people were not already trying to do so.

Steve Webb: My hon. Friend rightly stresses the importance of infrastructure. One other infrastructure matter is hospitals. One would assume that the health service was

involved in the process, and that thinking on housing and health service planning was integrated. The Minister was a Health Minister—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Iain Wright) *indicated dissent.*

Steve Webb: I am sorry—he was not a Health Minister. Nevertheless, South Gloucestershire has a major, world-renowned hospital—the Frenchay—which includes an A and E department. That is great, but it is being closed. The population numbers on which that decision was taken were old. I asked the North Bristol NHS Trust how many people it thought would be in the area when the new super-hospital opened, but it had done no projections. When I asked how many extra people would be in the area and what that would mean, I was told that the new super-hospital would be the equivalent of 250 beds short when it opened. Are the health plans going to be revised in the light of the new housing? Has the Department of Health even had a say in the process? The infrastructure must be put in place simultaneously, not as an afterthought.

We are told that when we get the new houses, we will get schools, libraries, playing fields and so on, but some of the prime sites for development are playing fields. Some 500 children play football and rugby every week on the sports fields on the edge of Chipping Sodbury, but I bet that the developers fancy them as a prime site for building lots of houses near a nice market town. We cannot lose our infrastructure simply to build houses. People need those open spaces, and it would be criminal to lose them.

Many other hon. Members wish to speak, but I wish to talk about sustainability. Alongside the document, as the Minister knows, is a detailed, technical, independent sustainability assessment. Obviously, I read the full version—I assure hon. Members it was not just the non-technical summary, but I shall quote the latter. The assessment is an independent, expert commentary on the plans, which was published on the same day.

It states:

“There are aspects”

of the document

“that cause us significant concern. The most obvious change is the significant increase in the housing numbers planned for the region”.

By law, the Government must have the plans assessed. The people who made the assessment say that they are worried, but the document has not changed. The process

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was supposed to be integrated, but on the day the document is published, the experts say that they do not think that the housing numbers are sustainable.

The assessment states that the experts are worried about the “indirect impacts” on

“natural and historic landscapes”—

such as the green belt to the east of Bristol—and

“biodiversity...from noise, light and air pollution associated with increased population, new development and traffic”.

We did not need sustainability experts to tell us those things, but what is the evidence that they have been taken account of in the document?

The assessment also states that

“the high level of economic growth upon which the Proposed Changes RSS is based is now unlikely”.

We can be as sure as heck about that. This is a serious question. What do events in the real world mean for the proposals in the document? Given what we see on the news every night, do we really still want to plan such a vast level of development? What do the Government think? I have heard hon. Members who are present say that the document is scaremongering and that the development will not happen because of the credit crunch, the housing crash and so on, and that we do not need to worry. However, will the Minister tell us whether we need to worry? My concern is that once the land has been zoned for housing, that is that.

On a local point, what about flooding? That will concern the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson). South Gloucestershire is undertaking a strategic flood risk assessment. It has not finished that process, so we could find out that we have land zoned for housing in flood-risk areas. Will the local authority be able to change the document if that happens?

Appallingly, the housing numbers in the document are a floor, not a ceiling. The Government said that they wanted to go further if possible and, amazingly, there will be an early review to see whether higher household projections can be accommodated. The document is not as bad as it gets—it might get a lot worse. The people in my constituency are appalled by the process. They are not nimbys, nor are they opposed to affordable housing to meet local needs and local economic development, but they object profoundly to the undemocratic nature of the process. Many of us are going to Downing street later to hand in a petition signed by thousands of people to register our concerns. On behalf of my constituents, I plead with the Minister not to dismiss us as nimbys, but to listen and to change this flawed document.

11.27 am

Roger Berry (Kingswood) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) on securing this debate and on his speech. I was brought to the Chamber both by the title and by his eloquence. I agree with most of his speech, especially the parts in which he addressed the overall situation in south Gloucestershire, which I will talk about as it affects Kingswood.

I am conscious that many hon. Members wish to speak, and I do not want the debate to be exclusively about our patch, as it were. I wish to make only two points. First, the proposed increase in housing development up to 2026 is absolutely unacceptable.

There is not a

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shred of evidence that the numbers are doable or sustainable. Secondly, I am totally opposed to any building on the green belt to the east of the Avon ring road—the A4175. I am not saying that there should be fewer houses on the green belt, but that there should be no building there whatever.

On the overall situation, let me confirm what the hon. Gentleman said. There was all-party agreement on South Gloucestershire council when it was a joint administration in 2006, and today, when it is a Conservative-led administration, that the proposed 32,800 extra homes are entirely unacceptable. The infrastructure arguments on roads, public transport and other community facilities have been made. It is simply not doable, and certainly not desirable. At the same time, all three parties on the council—and we should listen to what local councillors say—said that 21,500 is a substantial additional contribution. The Emersons Green development was pushed through by the previous Government without infrastructure being developed and the last thing I want is another situation like that.

Notwithstanding Emersons Green and Bradley Stoke in the constituency of the hon. Member for Northavon, the fact is that councillors, myself and, I believe, the majority of local residents are prepared to accept something pretty close to the original draft RSS figure of 21,500. However, what is now being proposed is significantly more than that, and it is entirely unacceptable. It must be revised down to a more acceptable level. I speak not only for my constituents and myself but, I am sure, for any sane person who has examined the numbers. There is no case for the figure that is currently out for consultation.

Secondly, as I have said, I am totally opposed to any building on the green belt to the east of the Avon ring road, from Shortwood and Bridgegate down to Bitton, for three basic reasons. The first is that the green belt is there to separate adjacent urban communities, and if the proposal were to go through, it would totally undermine the credibility of the green belt between Bristol and Bath. I hope that the Minister will take that on board. There is massive opposition to the erosion of that green belt.

Secondly, the proposals for new housing are actually in the wrong place. I have pored over the documentation for more hours than I would wish, and found that in Kingswood, in the southern part of south Gloucestershire, there is a massive net outflow of people who work in Bristol, on the northern Bristol fringe and in the northern part of south Gloucestershire. People are migrating out. I believe that it is sensible to try to locate houses close to where people work, but the proposals would do precisely the opposite.

That brings me to my third reason. Just imagine the environmental implications of the proposals—the hon. Member for Northavon made that point. Imagine the implications for transport and roads, and particularly for public transport. Like many other people in my constituency, I have to use the Avon ring road regularly. One of the first things that I demanded when I came to Parliament was the completion of the ring road,

because there were bits at either end but nothing in the middle. It has helped many neighbouring communities to alleviate transport disaster, but it is now operating pretty close to full capacity. The idea that thousands more homes to the east of the ring road, on the green belt, would cause anything other than a disaster for public transport and the environment is, frankly, cloud cuckoo land.

Julia Goldsworthy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Roger Berry: I shall very briefly, but I am conscious that other colleagues wish to speak.

Julia Goldsworthy: I shall be brief. I wish to draw the hon. Gentleman's comments out more widely by saying that the lack of a match between the number of houses and the number of jobs is explicit. The regional spatial strategy proposes 11,100 dwellings in my constituency, but we know that only 4,700 jobs can be provided. That is implicit in the calculations.

Roger Berry: I strongly agree that, particularly at a time that we are concerned about the environment and environmental damage, we must pay due attention to ensuring that decisions about housing and employment are made together. Otherwise, the transport, infrastructure and environmental problems will become enormous.

I have two final points, which will be brief because other hon. Members wish to speak. First, I do not believe that the regional spatial strategy should be site specific. The hon. Member for Northavon referred to that. There must be an agreement on the total level of housing in each local authority area, and it should be made democratically. At the end of the day, however, whatever the level of housing development in south Gloucestershire needs to be by 2026, where the houses go should be a matter for the local council and local councillors. I spent far too much time as a Labour local councillor on the old Avon council, before the previous Government abolished us, arguing that local councillors should have the power to represent their people. I am not going to change that view now, just because I happen to be here. Local councils must have the powers and opportunities to say where housing is best placed. I do not believe that it is right for anyone else to assume that responsibility.

My final point is about the importance of South Gloucestershire council's own response to the consultation. It is critical, as are the responses of all local councils, and I wished to make two points about it. However, I shall make only one, because I am conscious that other Members wish to speak. It would not be good enough for South Gloucestershire council to object simply to the scale of developments east of the Avon ring road. It should oppose them altogether, and I expect it so to do. That is what the economic and environmental arguments demand, what local residents want and what the vast majority of those who live in Kingswood want. I very much hope that the Minister is listening, and I am sure that he is.

11.35 am

Annette Brooke (Mid-Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Steve Webb), who exposed most eloquently the

very many flaws in the process that has brought us to this point. The top-down, undemocratic nature of those flaws are crucial problems. The matter is the most frequently raised issue in my constituency since the report of the examination in public, and even more since the end of July. I have been personally involved throughout the process, but other MPs were not even allowed to speak at the examination in public.

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I wish to pick up the point about affordable houses, for which there is a huge need in my constituency. If I believed that the proposals addressed that need, I would support them. However, given the environmental and other constraints in my constituency, I do not believe that we can build our way out of the crisis. The approach to providing the housing that we need should involve local communities providing houses to agreed targets, very locally and in suitable locations, and it must be backed with more Government money. When faced with a large amount of heathland, as is the case in Purbeck in my constituency, there are so many constraints that it is necessary to have extra Government support—not Government dictation—to meet our needs.

There are two sites proposed for my constituency, one of which popped up after the examination in public. It is proposed that there should be 2,750 homes in the green belt. The proposal is opposed by every council at whatever level, and was made by one developer. Was the hearing balanced, I ask myself? Everybody is against the proposal. It will shatter the green belt, and we will have just one urban sprawl. By the end of the process, if it is not halted, I imagine that there will be wall-to-wall housing from Wareham to Christchurch.

Mr. Steen: The problem is not just in and around Bristol and Purbeck. Is the hon. Lady aware that in Torbay, the spatial strategy would mean an urban sprawl right out of Torquay into Paignton and into green fields, with tens of thousands of houses? There is already gridlock on the roads and no schools or health services. The proposal is preposterous and ought to be buried fast. Does she agree?

Annette Brooke: I welcome the common ground that is being found today among all parties and from all parts of the region. There is good reason for the Minister to listen, and I accept the hon. Gentleman's point.

The overall number of houses proposed is going up, up, up, and it is debatable. The growth premise of the regional spatial strategy must surely be reviewed in light of what is happening. I appreciate that it is a 20-year prediction, but the predicted growth rate of 3.2 per cent. appears to be totally out of line. I endorse the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon that there is uncertainty about exactly what the report of the examination in public says. It certainly seems to me that it implies that there is now no necessity to look for brown field sites first. We must have clarification on that point today.

I endorse my hon. Friend's point about infrastructure. The change that the Secretary of State has brought to my area would remove any infrastructure requirements. In some ways, there is some practicality about that because, for example, the roads

cannot be greatly improved without their impinging on the heathland. However, given the congestion during the tourism season, the provision of all the proposed extra housing without any extra roads is absolutely impossible to comprehend.

Purbeck's target has been increased during the process, from what the local councils agreed, by 145 per cent. Purbeck is one of the most constrained areas for development in the country, so it is an impossible proposal. In addition to the Purbeck housing, there are proposals with which some local councils originally agreed, but not at local community level, such as those

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for 700 new homes in Corfe Mullen, and a further 1,000 in east Dorset, at Wimborne and Colehill, which are located in beautiful green belt areas. I think that everyone believes that if the proposals go ahead they will represent the destruction of beautiful areas for ever. We do not have faith in the process by which we have reached this point. I urgently ask the Minister to reconsider, and to listen to the many representations that are being made. Let us get back to making our decisions at local community level.

11.40 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Because of the time constraints and the fact that so many hon. Members want to speak I shall keep my remarks very brief.

I was at a meeting of Unite activists last week, many of whom came from the constituency of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson). I thought I was there to answer questions on the economy, employment and trade union rights, but we spent half an hour talking about how unfair they thought the proposals were to impose housing development on the flood plain, particularly in the Tewkesbury area. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister realises that this is not an issue that will go into the long grass; it is a burning problem in our area, because people feel very strongly.

[Interruption.] We get those as well, with the floods. The issue will not go away and we must face up to the fact that housing development in Gloucestershire—but obviously the whole RSS—is highly controversial.

I want to make some very specific points, the first of which is quite critical of local government. I understand where the South West of England Regional Development Agency and the Government office for the south-west are coming from in relation to the RSS, but there are local government representatives on the RSS and I want to know why their voices were not heard, apparently, until the plan came back with everyone against it. I should like to know who was on the RSS, and what they had to say. Were they were part of the proposals? Did they walk out? Did they not turn up? Did they express their anger? If they did not, I want to know why not, because either local government is part of the process or it might as well give up completely. That is my criticism of local government, but it does not enable us to escape from the fact that we have a problem.

Principally—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda) will say something on this point if he is called to speak—we were very angry about the way in which a site-specific recommendation was brought forward, in relation to the RSS, for Whaddon, which is in my constituency but happens to abut Gloucester

city. I could make the point that that is entirely the responsibility of Stroud district council, because it has been obsessed with pushing the Hunts Grove development, which, again, is concentrating development on the southern rim of Gloucester, but it should not be making site-specific recommendations in connection with the RSS.

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester) (Lab): On that point, my hon. Friend and I have both been working very hard on the matter, and we were told that the RSS would not be site-specific. In fact, Brookthorpe with

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Whaddon was taken out of the text of the RSS but has remained in a map—whether accidentally or on purpose we do not know. Surely the sensible thing to do would be to remove the allocation, take the map out, and say that those 1,500 homes should if anything be part of the local development framework. That would then, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Roger Berry) has said, give the local authority the ability to decide where to put those homes, including in the rural communities that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) has been suggesting for some time.

Mr. Drew: Obviously I agree with my hon. Friend. It is good to see him back with us mere Back Benchers; we can find many opportunities to argue our position—and we will. I want to make a couple of other points. We feel strongly about Whaddon, and about other opportunities to bring forward ideas on housing development—I know we are obsessed with housing development, but that is a controversial part of the proposal. The point has been made about the need to link employment and housing. We have an employment problem in the Stroud area, not least in that virtually all the employment growth has been in my own town of Stonehouse. That has led to all manner of other problems about where people live in relation to where they must work. I asked a parliamentary question during the recess about how many commercial properties are still empty in the Stroud district and the answer was more than 500. I do not want to lose those as employment possibilities, but I cannot believe that all of them are suitable for employment and I want to know whether we are in any way going to move away from the brownfield first obligation that the Government have been right to pursue, and which has been successful. What are the implications for that? I want some of those sites to be used for housing.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): I am very grateful to my neighbour from Gloucestershire. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that one of the reasons for the mounting fury in Gloucestershire, and certainly around my constituency, is that the sequential test has been lost and we have developers, right now, putting in planning applications that some of them will appeal within weeks, on the basis of an RSS that is not yet policy, and that thousands more are being mapped out across our green belts? That is the implication of losing that sequential test—that the greenfield sites will be developed first, not just at the same time as the others.

Mr. Drew: I hope that the Minister hears that important point, but I want to finish with one more point: there is a degree of unfairness in the RSS. I think that that unfairness is that Gloucester and Stroud are again taking the lion's share of development. I know that Tewkesbury is catching up, and there are some issues that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury may want to raise if he is called to speak; but I think that the balance between the Forest of Dean, Stroud and even Cheltenham—my neighbour the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood) may not necessarily

agree with me about that—is not right. However, I also want to make the point that the development on the ground is happening specifically in some parts of the districts—almost certainly the Labour parts of the districts—where we are taking an intense increase in the

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amount of development. I have always argued that we need to disperse at least some of that development around.

It is good to see the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) here. The Taylor report gave us some indication of what rural areas need. They need some development. I shall always argue in favour of dispersal. At the very time when we are concentrating housing development as excessive numbers of the wrong type of housing where the jobs are not, we are killing our rural areas because we cannot get any development in them. What is happening is a recipe for telling developers, “Go for the easy pickings. Forget the rural areas; they do not matter.” That kills rural areas and is unfair to the places with excessive development. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister hears that; it is important that we get the point. We need development in rural Britain. It should be of the right scale, but we certainly need it.

11.48 am

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): I shall focus on north Somerset. I know that other hon. Members want to speak.

The targets for housing allocation in north Somerset were always absurd. They represented a Whitehall-centred view of housing development, and took no account of the impact on the local environment, the need for infrastructure development, or the detrimental effects on the quality of life in the area in general. Let me just put the size of the development in perspective. In the census of 2001, the town of Clevedon in my constituency had a population of 22,000, representing about 9,300 households. I imagine that that is the size of development in many of the constituencies of my colleagues here today. By 2006 it had grown to the size that is now proposed for development in north Somerset; so what did Clevedon have in 2006 that a similar development would require? It had seven wards and seven ward councillors, one secondary and six primary schools, one leisure centre, one swimming pool, seven places of worship, six pubs, two post offices, three supermarkets, one hospital, three doctors’ surgeries, three dental surgeries, four vets’ practices, one library, 16 community meeting places, 150 allotments, one youth club and about 100 bus stops served by six main services. That is the sort of infrastructure that any of the developments in the strategy would require. Yet in north Somerset we are witnessing a contraction of infrastructure, with doctors’ surgeries at risk, post office closures, and inadequate public transport, especially in rural areas.

I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb). We are not talking about nimby areas. We have taken a large share of development. In the past 20 years in my constituency—in Nailsea, Clevedon and recently in Portishead, with a huge and prestigious development on a former brownfield site—we have taken more than our share of increased housing. We accept that people need places to live, but one cannot simply continue to stuff the same places with ever greater numbers of houses without any consideration for infrastructure. Who would live in those homes?

The hon. Member for Kingswood (Roger Berry) mentioned transport. My constituency has the lowest unemployment rate of any in the United Kingdom and among the fewest job vacancies. Where are the people in

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all those houses going to work? They will have to drive to Bristol or Weston-super-Mare, increasing road traffic against every one of the Government's targets on transport and the environment. Our road networks are already struggling under the burden from the increased housing development of the past 20 years.

John Penrose: My hon. Friend is making an elegant statement of the problems that we in north Somerset face. As he is making points about transport infrastructure, I remind him—to return to the earlier point about the lack of cross-departmental co-operation—that the Highways Agency has said that it has no plans to expand the capacity of the M5, the major arterial route for people making the type of journey that he describes, and that it is at odds with the Minister's Department over the RSS.

Dr. Fox: It represents a complete dislocation of government. There are targets in one place and different targets in another, and they do not seem to add up in any way. Try to get into or out of Portishead at peak times: it is now the biggest cul-de-sac in Britain. Barrow Gurney is still waiting for a bypass 10 years after it was promised. The airport is dragging more and more traffic through the villages in my constituency. We do not have the infrastructure for what we have, let alone for any more.

In a letter to Sir Simon Day, Baroness Andrews said:

“The lack of a transparent, systematic and rigorous assessment, prioritisation and testing of infrastructure proposals significantly reduces the clarity and certainty that should be essential features of RSS and the development of planning process. Furthermore, if the specific proposal for infrastructure provision were included at this stage, the RSS would be exposed to a substantial risk that, on further testing, those may be found to be undeliverable.”

To interpret the jargon, if we take into account the actual cost of the proposals and the real amount of infrastructure required, the numbers do not add up, and if we include the genuine price, the strategy becomes totally uneconomic.

We are witnessing a dramatic slowdown in the housing market. House-building activity is grinding to a halt as demand falls. To sign up to the sort of housing expansion envisaged in the strategy before we know what impact the current economic crisis will have on home owners' behaviour would be complete folly. This is no time to grant speculative permissions that might be used in entirely different future circumstances. With the possibility of a change of Government—a Conservative Government would take an entirely different approach to housing targets—developers will face even greater temptation to get as many permissions as possible for future development. It is essential that local councils do not play into their hands, wittingly or unwittingly, by seeming to go along with some of the underlying assumptions.

For example, we in north Somerset must not agree to the current scope of environmental impact assessment. First, it implies wrongly that there is consensus on the issue. Secondly, it might be argued in a future inquiry that such an agreement constituted a nod from the council in the direction of permitted development. Our area faces one of the most unimaginative planning schemes, whose answer to shortage in south Bristol is simply to concrete over the adjacent countryside. A back-door extension to the city boundary is the least acceptable solution to the problems we face.

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As the fields of the village of Dundry in my constituency are being built on, I can easily imagine the argument: “Now we’ve got this housing built, health services are being provided by the Bristol primary care trust, but social services are being provided by north Somerset. We’ve lost coterminosity. Wouldn’t it be much nicer if we simply created a new boundary? It would make everything much tidier for the bureaucrats.” The only planning permissions that should be granted are those that would be accepted under current policy and that fit in with local priorities. Elected councillors in all our areas must give their offices clear leadership to ensure that the wishes of those who live in north Somerset and the south-west as a whole are given priority over the convenience of the bureaucracy or a speculative development. Our green belt must be left alone.

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs. Anderson, on my second debut from the Back Benches. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on securing his role in Government as a paid position. He is being asked to earn his money today, and I know that he will listen well to earn it. He has done a good job as Minister in the past year, and I wish him the best of luck. One thing that is likely to be in his brief—rightly so—is the fact that average house prices in the south-west of England are higher than the national average, but average wages are lower.

I congratulate Gloucester city council on its pragmatic way of taking on the issue of housing. We have a housing list of some 5,000 people in dire need, so we do need more houses—the council tells me that it is still interested in growth status as well—but we have major concerns about where the houses are to be built. Plans for regeneration in our town centre, along the Gloucester docks, are progressing well, but they could be jeopardised by the development that might be proposed for the Brookthorpe-with-Whaddon area. I am concerned about that, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). The area lies within the Stroud boundary and is part of the Stroud district.

The city of Gloucester looks almost comet-like. The city centre is in the north, and the rest of it trails to the south. Brookthorpe-with-Whaddon would add to that trail of urban sprawl. It is also a greenfield area that has protected areas of my constituency, such as Grange and Tuffley, from severe flooding. My hon. Friend the Minister will know that we have had terrible floods in Gloucester. They would have been far worse but for the green area south of Grange and Tuffley, which affects the Grange road and Bodiam Avenue areas because of its proximity to Wyman’s brook, Whaddon brook

and Daniel's brook. The plans could have a cataclysmic effect on an area where people are still homeless from last year's major floods.

I ask my hon. Friend to consider working in partnership with Gloucester city, which has taken a pragmatic approach to housing, to remove Brookthorpe-with-Whaddon from the maps of the RSS, as it has been removed from the text. If an allocation of 1,500 houses or any other allocation is to be made for the site, I ask him to work with Stroud as well and to say, "You decide where those

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properties should be." My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud has some clear ideas, but he does not believe that the development should occur at the location called 3B on the RSS maps.

From dealing with officials on the matter as a constituency MP, I know that some of them are working hard on it, but I do not think I have got through to them. They tell me that the RSS is not prescriptive. The first thing that Stroud district will do when it develops on that site on the borders of the city of Gloucester is say, "The Government are making us do it." Regardless of whether or not the RSS is prescriptive, that is what it will say. Let us put the ball back in its court by letting Stroud have greater control over where the houses should be. By working in partnership, we can get the right amount of housing for the area in a more pragmatic way.

[Robert Key *in the Chair*]

11.58 am

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I hope that the Minister is getting the message that from one end of the region to the other, concerted opposition is being voiced to the proposals in the regional spatial strategy, not just by MPs from up and down the region and from all parties, but by many people who have come here to sit in the Public Gallery. I pay tribute to those who have written to me from my constituency and others, such as Chris Skidmore who is here. Many others are mounting very vocal campaigns to prevent the development.

I do not want to spend time going over issues that have been covered, but the crucial thing for my part of north Somerset, the constituency of Weston-super-Mare, is the proposals' lack of sustainability. We have mentioned the difficulties of the lack of liaison between the Minister's Department and the Department for Transport. The Department for Transport says it will not expand junction 21 of the M5 in my constituency unless proper provision is made to improve the balance between employment and housing in the RSS for my area, but at the same time, as everybody here knows, the RSS has dramatically increased the amount of housing without any concomitant or matching increase in local employment. As a result of that lack of joined-up Government thinking, my constituency, which already has an enormous amount of net out-commuting every morning and evening—it also has the matching degrees of traffic congestion—will actually face increases in out-commuting. We need jobs before yet more houses, otherwise a crucial element of sustainability in the RSS will be lost.

Without wishing to take up any more time, on the grounds that everybody else wants to say something, I would still like to mention the problem with the growth rates. It has to be wrong—it cannot be sensible—for us to talk with straight faces about a growth rate of well over 3 per cent. per annum for the next 20 years when, even as we stand here, we face one of the worst financial crises, and probably one of the worst general economic crises, of the past 20 years. As we all know, yesterday the stock markets collapsed to a tremendous degree—I do not know what they are doing today—so we are in cloud cuckoo land if we think that standing here and blithely talking about such high growth rates is reasonable.

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Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): It is vital that we make the Minister aware of how ludicrous some of the figures are. On my patch, they would mean building new houses at three times the current rate. What is equally ludicrous is that we are wishing to build student accommodation on our two university campuses, which will take people out of existing homes in my city centre, but that for some bizarre reason that student accommodation will not count towards the figures.

John Penrose: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Perhaps the only thing that could be said for declining house prices is that they make some houses more affordable, if people could only get the mortgages in the first place, which of course they cannot. We all understand that the growth rates are unrealistic and that therefore the central premise of the RSS is wrong, and yet for some reason the Government seem to be grinding on remorselessly and seem unwilling to change their figures or their view. The RSS is unsustainable; it does not represent joined-up Government and is tremendously environmentally unfriendly from the point of view of increasing commuting as well as concreting over green belt land. Ultimately, it fails the crucial test in my constituency—it does not put jobs before yet more houses.

12.2 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): I shall be very quick, Mr. Key. As others have said, it is important that we all acknowledge that we want additional housing, particularly affordable housing. In my area, the local council agreed 15,500 new houses; the examination in public then said we must increase that figure to 18,800, and then—bizarrely—the Government said even that was not enough and that we need 21,300.

Dan Norris (Wansdyke) (Lab): We want some housing for those who are desperately in need. In the district that I and the hon. Gentleman represent, 6,000 people are without homes. It is very important that we do not forget that in this debate.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I hope that he will join me in echoing comments made by others about the urgent need to have a sequential test so that we stick to the rule of developing brownfield, derelict properties first, and green belt land as a very last resort, if necessary. If we do not, it will lead to problems with developers cherry-picking the best and easiest sites, which would be a planning disaster. As others have said, infrastructure is crucial. Will the Minister at least

reconsider the ludicrous situation in the centre of Bath, where 1,772 family homes are entirely occupied by students? Building student accommodation on our two university campuses, including the one in the constituency of the hon. Member for Wansdyke (Dan Norris), would release many of those properties. Surely, releasing properties for ordinary home use should count towards the target.

12.4 pm

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Steve Webb). Many Members on both sides of the House and from all parties—in particular, from mine—have been

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interested in contributing to this debate. He pinpointed some of the key problems with the process: the first is lack of parliamentary scrutiny—this is one of the few opportunities that we have had to have any input into the process, other than in writing of course, and I am sure that everybody who has written in at every stage of this process will feel that their comments have been taken into account in their entirety.

My hon. Friend also pinpointed the barriers in electronic media that constituents have faced when trying to engage with the process. He raised the crucial “Gary question”—I guess that that is how it will have to be framed. I wonder whether a copy of our discussions could be sent to Gary, wherever he is in the world! There seems to be a real lack of understanding—understandably—about the importance of what we are debating today. That is a feature of the top-down way in which the process has been driven. It means that people are removed from decisions that will very much affect their lives. My hon. Friend was absolutely right to pinpoint that.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I would like to raise a matter that has not really been discussed—the so-called “Regional Approach to Transport” chapter, which indicates that there is no regional approach to transport. It also states that the A303 is apparently no longer the second strategic route to the south-west and makes the entertaining suggestion that the answer to the problems with the A303 is better walking and cycling measures. That will be a great help to people wanting to go on holiday in the south-west of Cornwall. It really exposes the poverty of thinking in the document.

Dan Rogerson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The extra housing numbers being advocated in the RSS mean that the available transport funding will be sucked into the new urban areas, which means that projects such as the A303, along with the A30 at Temple in my own constituency, which were on the original list, are now some way down it.

This debate is reminiscent of others that we have had in this Chamber on eco-towns, in which hon. Members have said time and again that planning ought to be about local people, through their elected representatives, coming together to determine the shape of their communities and looking at priorities and needs that must be taken into account. Hon. Members are right to point out that there is huge housing need but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said, there are empty properties out there, whether as a result of “studentification”—a phrase that has come into my

vocabulary in the past year or so—or of the imposition on communities, such as those in my constituency and others in the south-west, of second homes, or any other factor. We need to consider all those questions.

Problems exist with the underlying suppositions in the document. As the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) mentioned, current economic circumstances might mean that we are facing a very different reality from that which was in place when we started out on this process—or, indeed, when somebody started out on it. The process deals in artificial constructs. My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon talked about the very poetical language used to describe parts of his constituency. This is my favourite: unknowingly, many

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of my constituents live in the Devon and Cornwall polycentric housing market area—I am sure they would be delighted to hear that.

This Government's regional policy is in tatters. A referendum was held in the Minister's own area on moving towards regional government, and because of this we have staggered from one change to another, and now nobody is clear about where regional policy is going. It means that a document such as the one we are discussing, which could be hugely influential on and important to developers, if not to local communities, is still in question because we do not know how we are to move forward. My party's position is that regions must come about through local areas working and coming together to form natural regions with their own priorities that will then allow serious discussions to be had about transport and other infrastructure priorities, as well as the housing issues being debated here.

Sadly, the process as it stands will destroy any remaining confidence that the people might have had in the planning system. Last night, while staying in my constituency, I attended a Trewen parish meeting. I am sure that you, Mr. Key, and other hon. Members will be familiar with Trewen. It is a parish of about 70 or so dwellings. The most animated point of the evening came when planning issues were raised. But those are planning issues that people can get hold of—they are local, they are on their doorsteps and they understand them. It is easy to get people involved in parish planning processes, to get them engaged and to make them feel empowered—they ought to be the building block of planning policy. Clearly, some brokering is required, but I think that we can overcome any nimbyist tendencies.

Hon. Members have said that their constituents are keen to have housing, but in the places where they decide, not those decided by developers. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) was right to say that we should move forward, with local authorities representing their communities and working in partnership with developers to come up with serious plans. That is what planning should be about, and that is the sort of planning that could re-engage people with the planning system. That is what my party would seek to do.

We have seen, through the eco-towns development and from a debate that we had about Northamptonshire some time ago, that developers are using the threat of housing targets imposed from outside to go to appeal and avoid local engagement. That is a criminal position for us to be in, and we need to move forward in a far more constructive way.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): I am aware of the lack of time, but does my hon. Friend agree that the south-west strategy, as produced by the Department, is an exercise in micro-management of the region that will lead to a cataclysmic outcome in many areas, as many have described? Above all, it projects forward the past failures of growth-led strategies, particularly in his area and mine, where house numbers have doubled in the past 40 years while the housing problems of local people have become worse. Does he agree that simply building more houses is not the answer?

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Dan Rogerson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

I shall draw my remarks to a close. The so-called planning process has continued to undermine people's faith in the system. What we should have—I hope that at some point we will have it—is a far more transparent, grass-roots-led programme that is driven by community need and gives communities control over their future.

12.11 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham) (Con): I am a veteran of a number of Westminster Hall debates, and I have never seen either the Public Gallery or the Chamber so full of people singing from the same hymn sheet. There has not been one dissenting voice so far.

Mr. Iain Wright: Not yet.

Mrs. Lait: I said, “so far”. Hon. Members will be relieved to know that I do not plan to take up too much time, because we all ought to hear from the Minister at great length.

Another irony is that there are several veterans of the Planning Bill present for our debate. Let me take up the issue of infrastructure, which was raised by the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb), whom I congratulate on gaining this important debate, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). Being slightly conspiracy-minded, I wondered whether the community infrastructure levy was going to be the Government's answer to all our infrastructure problems. Given our doubtless expanding economy in the next few years, on which all this is based, do they think that it will produce the money to magic up a junction on the M5 for my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), and open up the expansion of the ring road that the hon. Member for Kingswood (Roger Berry) mentioned? What about the other requests for infrastructure and the eloquent description of the infrastructure that is needed in Woodspring?

Before I launch into the few words that I have to say, I need to put on the record the fact that my husband is the leader of East Sussex county council and the deputy chairman of the South East England Development Agency. As hon. Members can imagine, he has been engaged in all of these debates regarding the south-east. All the arguments that have been put forward today are familiar in the south-east, and I suspect that Members from other areas of the UK would make exactly the same

criticisms if they were present, because the Government's regional strategy is bust. It does not work, it is hated and loathed, and it has contributed fundamentally to the British people's distrust and suspicion of our planning system. Our planning system used to be the envy of the world—so much so that one can still find similar systems around the world—but the Government have bust it, because local people no longer feel that they are in control of planning.

Mr. Jeremy Browne: I completely agree with the hon. Lady that there should be more local autonomy when taking decisions of this sort. I am therefore curious to know why she came to my constituency to try to overrule the local council on housing decisions that it seeks to take.

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Mrs. Lait: Those proposals are very controversial within the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and local people must therefore be able to voice their objections. His party maintains that it has long believed in localism, although it has not really delivered it, so its representatives, of all people, should understand that issue.

Moving on to how we can sort the problem, it is clear from all that has been said that there is no acceptance of the Government's regional spatial strategy. As many hon. Members have pointed out, if the houses that local communities know they need are to be built, local people need to be in control of that process. The only way that they will gain that control is if the whole regional spatial strategy is abolished. That is what we will do when we become the next Government. That is one of the keys to ensuring that our planning system regains the respect of the people who have to live with it. We must put them in control and work with the councils so that, for every local area, a development plan is produced that local people respect and are prepared to buy into—indeed, that they own. Once we have abolished the RSS, local people and councils will be in the driving seat. That was the tenor of everyone's contribution today, but I am surprised that the Liberals, in particular, did not make that commitment.

12.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Iain Wright): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr. Key. I am keen to start by asking the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), "Is that it?" I am quite amazed by the response from the Conservative party.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) on securing the debate. He was entertaining, funny, engaging and passionate. Indeed, that is a word that I would use to describe the debate, as Members on both sides of the House have been passionate. However, I was not aware that there were so many Liberal Democrat Members. I am amazed by how many there are—far too many for my liking.

The hon. Members for Northavon and for North Cornwall (Dan Rogerson) said that there has been a lack of parliamentary scrutiny of the whole process, but I disagree vehemently. We have had several debates on the south-west regional spatial strategy,

both in this Chamber and in the main Chamber. Indeed, the hon. Member for Northavon himself mentioned that the RSS was debated on 22 January, when my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury was Minister for Housing. I have responded for the Government in debates on 7 May—I believe that that debate was secured by the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson)—and on 25 June. This week, we have this important debate and I shall talk about housing in Plymouth later today, when I expect the RSS to be mentioned. In addition, the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) has secured a debate on affordable housing and planning tomorrow, in which the issue will be debated again. Oral questions to the Department for Communities and Local Government are scheduled for next Tuesday, and I would welcome questions on this subject: they must be tabled by tomorrow. The idea that the matter has not been subject to parliamentary scrutiny is wrong. It was announced that the 12-week consultation process would start in July. This has been subject to public consultation, as it rightly should be.

Andrew George *rose*—

Dr. Fox *rose*—

Mr. Wright: I shall give way first to the hon. Member for St. Ives and then to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox).

Andrew George: The Minister mentioned the debate on 25 June, which I secured. He said—and this confirms what my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon said earlier:

“I hope that hon. Members will understand that because of the nature of the process I am constrained in what I can say at this stage”.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall, 25 June 2008; Vol. 478, c. 99WH.*]

That continued throughout the whole process. At what stage will the Minister be unconstrained? When can we have the debate? When will there ever be the parliamentary scrutiny that he says has been promised?

Mr. Wright: I shall respond directly to that point after I have given way to the hon. Member for Woodspring, but I give due notice to the House that, with regards that issue and the quasi-judicial nature of the process, I am going to disappoint Members again.

Dr. Fox: What is the point of scrutiny when the Government absolutely disregard the views of those who represent the region? In this room today, more than 20 MPs, representing all parties and all parts of the region, have unanimously decried the Government’s strategy. What conclusion does the Minister draw from the debate? And what change of policy will come about as a result?

Mr. Wright: Let me get to the very heart of my response. As the House is aware, owing to the quasi-judicial role of the Secretary of State in this matter, I am very limited in what I can say. The House, and certainly hon. Members present today, will be aware that, in taking quasi-judicial decisions under the various Planning Acts, there is clear guidance for Ministers, based on advice from the Law Officers and first Treasury counsel. A copy of the guidance can be found on the Department for

Communities and Local Government website and is snappily titled “Guidance on propriety issues in handling planning casework in Communities and Local Government”. I am more than happy to provide copies of it to hon. Members. The guidance states that Ministers should not enter into discussions with interested parties on the changes that might be made to a draft regional spatial strategy. This is to ensure that the process is fair and transparent, and that representations to the Secretary of State are channelled through the proper statutory consultation process. It would therefore be entirely wrong if I were to say in this debate or in others, “Well, actually, I agree with so-and-so on that particular point, and I disagree fundamentally with that approach on that point.” It would be wrong because of the quasi-judicial process.

Steve Webb: The Minister seems to contend that, on the one hand, there has been lots of parliamentary scrutiny in the debate, but that, on the other, at no point since Christmas has he been allowed to say anything. That is a funny concept of debate, but to assist us in

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responding to the consultation, surely he can at least tell us what the document means. That must be allowable. Does the document mean that we have to say yes to the first application on the most sensitive site, or can we be sequential? Surely he can tell us what the document means so that we can respond to it.

Mr. Wright: I shall come on to that point. First, I shall try to respond as best and as fully as I can to the four or five points that were made.

I have just mentioned process, so it might be useful if I outline the process that has been used. As I have said on previous occasions, the function of regional spatial strategies is to determine first, how much housing is needed and the general location where it should be built; secondly, the priorities for new infrastructure and economic development; thirdly, the strategy for protecting countryside and biodiversity; and finally, the policy for reducing carbon emissions and safeguarding natural resources, whether they are, for example, water or minerals.

As the House is aware, responsibility for the initial drafting of the strategy for the south-west rested with the South West regional assembly, which submitted its draft to the Government on 24 April 2006. A 12-week public consultation gave the public the opportunity to put comments to an independent panel, which was appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to test the soundness of the draft RSS. Following that, an examination in public—an EiP—was held between April and July 2007 to discuss and test the draft RSS that was put before the panel. The length of the EiP reflected the level of interest in the draft RSS, and the panel reviewed comments from almost 2,000 different parties. Some 191 organisations and individuals took part in public hearings, which were held in Exeter.

The panel’s report was submitted to the Government on 10 December 2007, and published for information on 10 January 2008. It contained recommendations to the Secretary of State on all aspects of the draft RSS, but representations on those recommendations were not invited. Following the publication of the panel report, the recommendations were considered, and proposed changes on behalf of the Secretary of State were published for consultation in July. As the House is aware, we are now making progress through a further consultation period, which will end on 24 October.

What I can tell the House is that the Government are committed to ensuring that everyone has access to a decent home at a price that they can afford and in a place where they want to live and work. There is strong evidence to suggest that more homes are needed in the south-west to make that possible over the next 15 to 20 years. Consequently, the proposed changes set out higher levels of housing because, as hon. Members from all parts of the House have said, the south-west has a serious housing problem. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda) for the excellent work he did as a Minister in the Department for Communities and Local Government. As he pointed out in his contribution, the south-west is the only region in the country with above-average house prices and below-average incomes, which is why the independent panel concluded that more than 28,000 homes would be

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needed each year. We considered that carefully and concluded that slightly higher increases will be needed if the region is to make real progress in tackling affordability and housing supply issues and ensure that housing supply is closely aligned with the likely location of employment opportunities. I shall expand on that point in a moment.

A key point is the current financial, economic and banking difficulties that Members have mentioned. In light of those difficulties, which are extremely turbulent and traumatic, it is important to focus on the long term as well. For the past generation or so, there has been a huge imbalance between the demand for, and supply of, housing. As a population, we are ageing, and that problem is not going to go away, regardless of the current difficulties in stock markets throughout the world. We need to address the issue through housing supply, and one way in which we can do so is through the regional spatial strategy.

Martin Horwood: I am tempted to challenge those numbers on the basis that first, they are unreliable, as many academics and Select Committees have pointed out, and secondly, they are profoundly outdated, since they are based on growth rates of 2.8 per cent. to 3.2 per cent. over 20 years, which are now fantasy. In the closing minutes of the Minister's response, will he answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon has just put to him? In the absence of a sequential test, the impact of those numbers in a housing downturn means that developers are going straight for the greenfield sites first. My hon. Friend therefore asked what we should say at those public inquiries to developers who want to build first on the most sensitive sites.

Mr. Wright: Let me address that direct point now. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Northavon for providing prior notice of the question, which I know is of concern to him. He knows about planning policy statement 3, which puts local authorities in the driving seat in respect of development in their area. All hon. Members agree that a plan-led development system is the right approach, as opposed to something with a short-term, speculative and ad hoc nature. Having said that, I do not think that a sequential test is the right approach, because it would be rigid and old-fashioned, and it would say, "It would be wrong to provide that site for development before that site." If we can be as flexible as possible, certainly during the current economic difficulties, that is the approach to take.

Let me elaborate on that point. The key test, which must be established, is whether a site is suitable for development. [Hon. Members: "No!"] Let me finish. Part of the test

is whether the development is on green belt, which is not usually suitable, because in the planning system there is a very strict presumption against development on green belt; whether it is on greenfield, which could be suitable; or whether it is on brownfield, which, for the past 10 years, has been our preferred option. We had a policy—a target—whereby 60 per cent. of all developments would be on brownfield sites, and we have comfortably exceeded it. That is a major achievement, and something like 75 per cent. of all new development is on brownfield sites. That is the continuing policy of this Government; it is something that we continue to see.

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Mr. Laurence Robertson: I know that the Minister has limited time, but he has not even mentioned the flooding issue, whereby the building of thousands of houses is proposed in flood-risk areas. The House will remember that in Tewkesbury last year, three people died and hundreds were kept out of their homes for more than a year because of the flooding. Building thousands of houses in that area will be disastrous.

Mr. Wright: I shall come on to that point, but first, I want to respond the point about green belt, because it has been mentioned several times in the debate. As hon. Members have said, from the Prime Minister downwards, we remain absolutely committed to preserving, enhancing and increasing the proportion of land that is accorded green belt status. The regional spatial strategy simply states that any partial review of the RSS should include a green belt review, with a particular view to determining whether additional land should be designated as green belt at all of the region's three green belts.

I shall respond very quickly to the point that the hon. Gentleman made about flooding. I recall a similar discussion during the Adjournment debate before the summer recess. I think that we have a very strong policy on flood protection. It has been increased and enhanced by planning policy statement 25, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester not only for what he did as a Minister, but for his hard work as a constituency MP. I think that—

Robert Key (in the Chair): Order. We must move on to the next debate.
[Interruption.] Will Members and the public leave the room quietly?