# Government unveils changes to planning rules to cut environmental costs



The Government has introduced significant changes to planning rules aimed at reducing costs associated with environmental measures in major infrastructure projects, such as the controversial £100 million ‘bat tunnel’ linked to HS2. The planning reforms, unveiled on Tuesday, are encapsulated within the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which the Government describes as a means to instigate “seismic reforms” in the planning process.

Housing Minister Matthew Pennycook stated that the new regulations will replace current site-specific environmental obligations with a centralised fund for larger projects, with the intention to produce “more sensible outcomes.” Speaking to Sky News, Pennycook remarked, “We want to avoid bat tunnels,” labelling the tunnel a symptom of a failing planning system that does not yield optimal results for development or environmental recovery.

The bat tunnel has faced heightened scrutiny, with criticisms emphasised by both the Prime Minister, who deemed it “absurd,” and the Chancellor, who highlighted the infrastructure demands contributing to delays and costs. The Planning and Infrastructure Bill seeks to streamline the decision-making process, shifting authority from elected councillors to planning officers to enhance the efficiency of approvals for housing and other significant projects.

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner echoed the ambitious nature of the reforms, asserting that they would “unleash seismic reforms” and aim to create “the biggest building boom in a generation.” These changes are strategically positioned to facilitate the construction of 1.5 million new homes by the next election, a target that requires approximately 300,000 homes to be built annually. Current statistics demonstrate a shortfall, with only 221,450 homes completed in the year leading to September 2024, reflecting a 7% decline relative to the previous year.

In response to the Government’s claims, Pennycook highlighted the downturn in housing completions as a result of “anti-supply” policies adopted by the previous government, particularly referencing the removal of mandatory housebuilding targets. Despite these challenges, he expressed optimism, suggesting there are “green shoots” indicating a potential turnaround in housing development.

While some environmental organisations have tentatively welcomed the proposed reforms, there are calls for increased assurances. Richard Benwell, chief executive of the nature coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link, requested stronger guarantees within the Bill to ensure that planning decisions align with nature and climate commitments. He stated, “For nature recovery and development to go hand in hand, the Bill should be strengthened with a guarantee that all planning decisions must be compatible with nature and climate targets.”

In addition to planning changes, the Bill is poised to deliver measures such as discounts on energy bills for households situated within 500 metres of new electricity pylons, providing up to £250 annually over a decade. The initiative is designed to incentivise community support for essential infrastructure by requiring energy companies to finance local projects, including leisure facilities in affected areas. Funding for these discounts will stem from a modest increase in bills for consumers from other regions, which is expected to amount to between 80p and £1.50 per year, according to Minister Pennycook, who anticipates that long-term investments in renewable energy will eventually lower national energy costs.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.housingtoday.co.uk/news/planning-and-infrastructure-bill-sets-out-radical-shake-up-of-committee-system/5134877.article> - This article supports the claim that the Planning and Infrastructure Bill aims to reform the planning system by shifting authority from councillors to planning officers and introducing a Nature Restoration Fund to streamline environmental obligations.
* <https://news.sky.com/story/seismic-planning-system-reforms-to-be-unleashed-government-promises-13326085> - This news story corroborates the introduction of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and its goal to create a 'seismic' change in the planning process, including measures to avoid costly environmental projects like the 'bat tunnel'.
* <https://www.housingtoday.co.uk/news/planning-and-infrastructure-bill-sets-out-radical-shake-up-of-committee-system/5134877.article> - The article further explains the bill's intention to streamline the planning process for major infrastructure projects and housing developments.
* <https://news.sky.com/story/seismic-planning-system-reforms-to-be-unleashed-government-promises-13326085> - This source also mentions the government's plan to incentivize community support for infrastructure projects by offering discounts on energy bills for households near new pylons.
* <https://www.housingtoday.co.uk/news/planning-and-infrastructure-bill-sets-out-radical-shake-up-of-committee-system/5134877.article> - The article highlights Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner's statement about creating 'the biggest building boom in a generation' through these reforms.