

Need planning permission? Do it yourself

HOMEOWNERS will have greater say over developments in their neighbourhoods under an overhaul of planning laws.

The changes could pave the way for householders to improve their homes without interference from officials.

But there are fears that it could also be a charter for Nimbys - Not In My Back Yard protesters - as residents will also have the power to block large developments in their areas.

The plans will be unveiled by Communities Secretary Eric Pickles this week as part of the Localism Bill.

Sources close to Mr Pickles said he was intent on 'reversing the mistaken belief that bureaucrats in Whitehall or the town hall know best'.

Under the proposals, residents will be able to define themselves as being part of a particular 'neighbourhood' - based on existing groups of streets.

These neighbourhoods would be given more autonomy over issues such as planning and would try to come up with an official plan, on which all residents would vote in a local referendum. Whitehall sources said this would take place at the same time as local elections.

The plan could decree rules for home improvements such as extensions, conservatories, loft conversions, driveways and wind turbines.

But decisions over large-scale devel-

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opments such as new blocks of flats, schools and other public buildings may also be handed to residents.

Neighbourhoods which agree to more housing developments will get a council-tax rebate as an incentive.

But despite concerns over Nimbys, the source insisted it would 'neither be a free-for-all, nor a block to all developments'.

And residents would still not have the power to decide over infrastructure projects such as flats with more than 400 dwellings, high-speed rail links or new nuclear power stations in their area.

Greg Clark, minister in charge of decentralisation, said: 'We want to change the philosophy behind local planning.'

'We want to move away from a system with significant elements of imposition from above, to one with participation and involvement at its heart.'

The Bill will also scrap the minimum density targets which meant that 30 homes had to be built on to every hectare of developed land.

The Localism Bill also introduces measures for elected mayors in 12 cities. They are: Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol, Coventry, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield and Wakefield.