

In a move that serves once again to highlight the damaging role the Department of Business is playing in undermining environmental and countryside protections, Vince Cable's Department has published a plan to force the Environment Agency, Natural England and English Heritage to promote 'sustainable development'.

The plan would place even more importance on how 'sustainable development' is defined in the National Planning Policy Framework . The Government has so far refused to make this explicit, leaving many concerned that this will simply mean almost any kind of development.

The three Government agencies are often active in highlighting when proposed developments would be damaging, and in exceptional cases they lodge formal objections. Unless sufficient priority is given to the role of the agencies in protecting and enhancing the environment, this move could effectively emasculate these environmental watchdogs and do untold damage to England's countryside and heritage.

Neil Sinden, Director of Policy at the Campaign to Protect Rural England, says: "Time and again we hear that the economic departments are really calling the shots over the Government's planning reforms . So while this latest announcement is no surprise, it should be deeply worrying for all those who care about the environment and long term economic health.

"The Government appears determined to make every organisation a tool for promoting its ill-defined notion of 'sustainable development'. Unless there are explicit environmental safeguards, it could enable developers to ride roughshod over the countryside and the views of local people.

"By making these agencies a tool for promoting development, their critical role as champions of our landscape, wildlife and heritage is undermined. They do not exist to promote development; they are there to make sure any proposed development does not destroy our national treasures and environmental support structures."