



The Government has insisted that the green belt will remain protected under long-awaited reforms to the planning system.

Planning minister Greg Clark said protection of the green belt and putting high streets and town centres first are national requirements which protect everyone.

"Over and above that, I think the people that live in the places and work in the places that they love actually do have an interest in wanting them to thrive in the future - they want them to retain the character that sometimes they have lost through development being imposed from above," he told BBC Breakfast.

"What we know from this country and the Continent is that if you involve people from the beginning, you get better development, you get development that is more consistent with the character and that is better for everyone."

He added: "It is very hard for people in communities to engage with the planning system, to protect the places that they want to see protected. So the reason that we are making these reforms is that we are transferring the power from the distant unelected bodies to local communities. To do that, it needs to be simpler."

Mr Clark's remarks come as the Government is due to publish reforms to the planning system which have been the focus of a bitter dispute with countryside campaigners.

Last summer ministers unveiled their proposals for slimming down more than 1,000 pages of policy on planning rules into a 50-page "national planning policy framework", which they said

would boost growth while protecting the environment.

The plans, which centre on a "presumption in favour of sustainable development", have been opposed by conservation and countryside groups such as the National Trust amid fears they would lead to a return to urban sprawl.

In the run-up to the publication of the reforms, there were reports that the new planning rules could be exploited to build up to 100,000 homes in the green belt near the new high-speed railway line to Birmingham, as part of a huge housing expansion.

In the Budget last week, Chancellor George Osborne announced that the new planning guidance would come into immediate effect when it was published today - slightly ahead of its expected April introduction.