

The Infrastructure Bill and Forestry (Grand Committee, House of Lords, July 10)

Dear

Many of us have been campaigning for new legislation to give lasting protection to our Public Forest Estate since it was threatened by sell-off in 2010. We are disappointed that a draft forestry bill has not been introduced, despite pledges from the Government. And we are now extremely alarmed that the Infrastructure Bill, which was introduced on June 5 this year, poses a considerable threat to our public woodlands.

Clause 21 of the Infrastructure Bill, in its current form, enables the transfer of any public land through the Homes and Communities Agency to developers.

Therefore, I am writing to you to ask if you will support amendments to Clause 21 of the Infrastructure Bill tabled by Baroness Royall of Blaisdon and the Bishop of St Albans to help protect our Public Forest Estate (PFE) from future disposal. These are due to be debated in the House of Lords in the autumn, and I hope you will be able to attend and lend your support.

Baroness Kramer, who has introduced the Bill to the Lords, gave a verbal assurance during the Second Reading on June 18 that none of the PFE will be affected by the transfer scheme. We welcome that assurance, but ask that it be confirmed in statute as present assurance and government policy are not binding on future administrations.

As regards surplus land the current Defra policy states:

“The Forestry Commission holds land for landscape value, recreational activity and commercial forestry. Due to the nature of the forestry estate it is not expected to yield large scale development opportunities for any purpose other than forestry, but where commercial development potential is identified and can be exploited in a manner consistent with wider objectives there is a commitment to investigate this opportunity.”

The wording is capable of an interpretation permitting development for purposes other than forestry where justified by 'wider objectives' (i.e.

wider than forestry) and thus would seem to be inconsistent with the 31st January 2013 Policy Statement.

This is all the more reason to secure an exemption.

In 2011, with the support of Bishops and Peers, we averted the threatened disposal of our public forests and woodlands by making amendments to the Public Bodies Bill. We now ask if you will support suitable amendments to the Infrastructure Bill to protect our treasured public woodlands.

Yours Sincerely