

Telegraph undercover planning investigation: a summary

A guide to the Telegraph's undercover investigation into planning reforms, which exposed how councillors across England were offering to help people take advantage of relaxed planning laws



Graham Brown
Councillor, East Devon:

'I'm low profile, have access to all the right people for the right clients. [I] don't come cheap'

The Telegraph exposed how councillors across England were offering themselves for hire to property developers who were hoping to take advantage of a relaxation in planning laws.

An undercover investigation published in March 2013 showed how councillors traded on inside knowledge of the planning system to receive fees of up to £20,000 for advice on how to get developments approved.

"If I can't get planning, nobody will," boasted one councillor to undercover reporters, adding that he didn't "come cheap". He later resigned after his council reported him to the police.

Another councillor gave tips on how developers could "prepare the ground" before a planning application to a council, including cutting down trees so neighbours or interested parties did not get a chance to apply for protection orders.

One councillor who also sat on the council's planning committee described himself as "Mr Esher". He told undercover reporters that he was the man to go to for securing planning approvals.

Another councillor for hire confided that even if certain councillors would not talk to them about a planning application, there were certain "tricks of the trade" which offered "a good way of, of getting round this".

The same investigation also found that planning officers were offering to draw up applications for developers who could then take advantage of "vulnerable" councils in the wake of the relaxation of building laws

After the publication of these revelations, the investigations team obtained a recording of a meeting between Nick Boles and some of the country's biggest property developers in which the Planning minister privately promised to relax laws to allow them to begin a house-building boom. The investigation prompted an appeal to Telegraph readers by Eric Pickles, who mounted a defence of the government's proposed planning reforms.

The increasing controversy over the Coalition's planning reforms eventually prompted Labour to pledge to scrap them altogether.

Hilary Benn, the Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, wrote an article for the Telegraph condemning the reforms and promising to overturn them.