



SO MODERN: Above, images of Wilderness House at Westleton, a country house proposed by Sara Low, below right, which was given planning permission last October. Below left, Suffolk Coastal MP and former environment minister John Gummer, who backed the development of Wilderness House. Legislation he introduced on new country homes has just been replaced by the Government, which favours such cutting edge designs over mock Tudor country piles

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Is this the country home of the future?

Nick Mead, of PA News, examines why the Government is introducing new laws about building country houses

THE Government's new guidance on building country houses – favouring cutting-edge modern designs over traditional ones – aims to rid the countryside of large historic style houses.

Much derided mock Tudor or imitation neo-Classical country piles will be blocked from being built on isolated greenfield sites under new planning guidance, with exceptions granted for innovative designs which reflect “the highest standards in contemporary architecture”.

The move was welcomed by the Royal Institute of British Architecture (RIBA) and award-winning architect Sir Norman Foster, who designed the world famous Willis building in Ipswich, said it was “very progressive”.

“Changing the face of new country house architecture from a pastiche of historic styles to innovative cutting-edge design is essential if the best of British architecture is to be encouraged,” according to planning minister Keith Hill.

More than 1,000 country houses were destroyed during the last century through dereliction, fire and owners fearful of death duties.

The new guidance aims to create country houses “that people will want to visit in 100 years’ time”, Mr Hill said.

It replaces “Gummer’s Law”, issued by former Tory environment minister John Gummer, Suffolk Coastal MP, which relaxed planning guidance

to allow exceptional houses to be built in the countryside.

One of the last new country houses to be allowed under the so-called Gummer’s Law was Wilderness House.

The woman behind the project, Sara Low, was given permission by Suffolk Coastal District Council last October to build the large modernist house on land at Westleton, near Yoxford.

At the time, Mr Gummer welcomed the decision and said he feared the Government was planning to remove his policy exception, making Wilderness House the last property given backing under “Gummer’s Law”.

However, the Government’s new guidance for rural England

‘Vital endorsement of excellence in design’

introduces a new policy exception for houses in the countryside “that reflect the highest standards of contemporary architecture”.

Tom Oliver, head of rural policy at the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), described the so-called “Country House Exception” as “a pompous exception for a few rich people”.

“It’s very difficult to see the justification for a government, especially a Labour government, in giving an exception to high net worth individuals to build houses in open countryside,” he said.

Until 1997 and “Gummer’s Law”, the country house question was mute but there was a general



expectation against developments in the open countryside, he explained.

But Mr Gummer’s planning policy guidance PPG7 introduced an exception, which the CPRE opposed, to allow outstanding new country houses.

Mr Oliver said the guidance did nothing to encourage exceptional design but rather achieved the opposite in encouraging poor designs which were then rejected.

Around 50 applications have been made under the exception and only 14 have been accepted.

Most were based on familiar historical styles, most popularly Queen Anne, Palladian and neo-Classical.

Compared to an average planning application acceptance rate of 95% this was “ridiculous”, he said.

Mr Oliver welcomed the Government’s new block on “derivative” mock historic styles as “good progress” but said the CPRE would judge designs on

their merits, looking at the effect on the landscape, biodiversity and public access.

“It’s badly thought through because all those factors will still need to be looked at with this planning exception,” he said.

“The Country House Exception is spectacularly unimportant in comparison with other planning issues in the countryside – it’s amusing to see RIBA in such a froth about it.”

RIBA president George Ferguson called the new planning guidance “a brave and vital endorsement ... of the value of excellence in design”.

Mr Gummer, currently on holiday, recently told *Country Life* magazine: “Country houses are unique.

“We’ve lost hundreds since 1945 and this modest clause (Gummer’s Law) has permitted less than 20 new houses to be built. These are the classics of tomorrow and I hope that no one seriously believes that country houses are a thing of the past.”