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## Transcript

00:01:16 Emma Barnett (presenter)

We're going to start today's programme with the reaction of a woman who's been nicknamed the Queen of the Nimbys.

00:01:30 Emma Barnett

So Rishi Sunak's having to roll back on his enforced housebuilding targets after a Conservative rebellion raised its head, the new Prime Minister reversal is music to the ears of Rosie Pearson, who's the head and Co-founder of the community planning allowance, a group of around 600 grassroots community planning groups that have come together to lobby the government for change when it comes to local planning. Rosie a stay at home mother says she was "radicalised" and that's the word she uses into standing up for her local area and blocking certain developers from home building. After going to 1 terse meeting of her local councillors.

Many women are involved in this space, she works with a lot of them. But Rosie also notes how rude and aggressive it can be in the planning world, and I wonder, have you dipped your toe in are you involved with these sorts of campaigning groups? These sorts of neighbourhood forums? Are you reading the fine print in your local area on behalf of others, or do you run a mile from this? Maybe you're a developer. Maybe you're coming up against somebody like Rosie and some of her colleagues as she now finds them. Tell me about your involvement. Or could you think of nothing worse? Do let me know.

00:02:43 Emma Barnett

I have to say at the heart of this as well on the political side of this, which we'll get into very shortly. There's a row brewing over new homes, affordability. Accusations of a lack of inter-generational fairness. Once again, it's being said with this government that the needs of the young who want to get on the housing ladder are being side-lined for those already in homes, and don't want unsightly new developments "popping up". To paraphrase one side of this, but Rosie Pearson and others, and others, other Conservative MPs, it should be said, reject this as a way of describing that side of things and the idea of that is also an anathema to the woman who co-led the rebellion against Rishi Sunak last night; that these housing targets are arbitrary, they're not the way to go and things would be better in the hands of those who live in the area. So it is a real debate on the political side on the local side, where are you on this?

00:03:37 Emma Barnett

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00:03:50 Emma Barnett

In what is being described as one of his first big tests as Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak has had to water-down housing targets for local councils, faced by a rebellion from his own backbenches. The former Northern Ireland and DEFRA minister, Theresa Villiers led the charge alongside Bob Seely, a fellow Conservative MP. The housing secretary Michael Gove has now offered councils more flexibility over meeting the government set targets. The 60 rebels had argued that they are excessive and undermine local councils.

00:04:28 Emma Barnett

Well in a moment, we will speak to that woman who's been nicknamed by some, and she deals with that as well in our interview as the "Queen of the NIMBYS", which stands for if you're not aware, "not in my backyard", due to her campaigning on this issue. But first to put us in the picture Kitty Donaldson, UK political editor at Bloomberg News, Kitty. Good morning.

00:04:46 Emma Barnett

What has happened to these targets?

00:04:49 Kitty Donaldson

Well, in effect the government blinked in the face of the rebels and the central targets. Though the government had a target to build 300,000 new points a year, the central target would now be advisory. And that means councils may get rid of them if building plans are harmful to the character of an area. And this represents a win for people like Teresa Villiers, who represents, I suppose you put it "pretty bits of the countryside."

00:05:14 Emma Barnett

And what does it mean about that side of the argument where were the MPs who are concerned about house building targets appealing to the young, appealing to those who want to get "on the ladder."?

00:05:25 Kitty Donaldson

Well, exactly. I mean it's, it's not a, it's not a win necessary for the Tories, is it? It's sparked a row internally with claim and counterclaim that two things really.

One is, does Rishi Sunak look incredibly weak because he's broke down and faced his party? I mean that's an open question at the moment, and I suspect you'll come into a minute. There's another rebellion going on as well on onshore winds, and that's, that's on the same bill that's on the levelling up there as well, but secondly really, it's pitting true blue sort of voters who possibly already own homes against younger people who are trying to get onto the housing ladder and actually one of the biggest factors in indicating Tory voting is home ownership. So for people like Teresa Villiers, she's been empty since 2005. He's probably pretty safe. She survived the Brexit years. He just got a good career behind her but for younger MPs, particularly representing red wall, areas such as Dehenna Davidson and choose the emblem of the red wall surging, 2019 support for the Tories.

00:06:25 Kitty Donaldson

She's I mean, she's not. She's stepping down. I mean you'd have to ask her for exact reasons, but I can't imagine defending the fact that there won't be much house building her in her area will go down well on the doorstep.

00:06:37 Emma Barnett

Although as I explore 'cause I did record this interview with Rosie Person at just before coming on, although we explore, it doesn't necessarily mean there won't be housebuilding, it's just how much of it and whether it will be affordable and the call for the government to do that. So there's some detail in that, but I take the bigger point, the row then politically about whether Rishi Sunak has the power, has the dominance in his party. It is being described as one of the first big tests because it shows whether he's got control.

00:07:05 Kitty Donaldson

Absolutely, it's, it's, it's almost an existential point isn't it? Weird, but what two years away from an election? And he's ostensibly got a 70-seat majority and down a bit from, from what Boris Johnson wanted, about 80 seats. But if you've got 70 seats and you can't do anything with it, you know what's the point? Are they just gliding towards the election?

00:07:25 Emma Barnett

Well, there's also of course the idea of politics of consensus. Trying to get people to come round to you. He wasn't the, the, the man in charge when the, the polls opened, and I suppose it's trying to keep everybody within the same thing.

00:07:37 Emma Barnett

But you mentioned it within the same park on the same agreement, but you also mentioned that there's other battles coming.

00:07:44 Kitty Donaldson

And absolutely and and and you're right about the the point about trying to get consensus. And actually I think that is to be fair to assume that gives one of the characteristics of his form of governance and I've been talking to some of the rebels who are involved in the planning issue and actually they've been saying the negotiations with number 10 and the whips, the whips, you know, the party managers. That should be quite amicable, and that makes quite a stark difference in the start change from what we saw under Liz Truss and the way there was kind of arm bending going on. And during the Brexit years.

00:08:15 Kitty Donaldson

Of course, when. I was very vicious. Infighting. Yes, absolutely.

00:08:19 Emma Barnett

But Kitty just finally then to the overall house building targets the housing Secretary Michael Gove is said no change. 300,000 still the target, even though it's not been met since the 70s.

00:08:32 Kitty Donaldson

Well, it's a sort of slightly arbitrary number, isn't it? I mean, yes, you said that, but I mean, what does it mean in practise, it's....

00:08:37 Emma Barnett

Yes, so but I'm just checking that's not changed in the last few minutes or no developments on that.

00:08:42 Kitty Donaldson

No, I don't think so, but you know whether they get there, that's a completely different question.

00:08:47 Emma Barnett

One you'll have your eye on, and perhaps we'll talk again. Kitty Donaldson. Thank you very much. UK political editor at Bloomberg News.

00:08:53 Emma Barnett

Well, I did mention the term NIMBY, not in my backyard, but have you also heard of note, "NOTES" and BANANAs with a small "s", being the acronym spelt like that, I should say believe it or not, these are also terms to do with planning objections. They stand for "not over there either", and "build absolutely nothing, anywhere near anything". Well, joining me now is someone who knows these terms very well. They're often, you know, put in her direction and she, as I say, has been branded by some as queen of the NIMBYs. Her name is Rosie Pearson she's the founder, the co-founder of the Community Planning Alliance and now the co-head of it. A group of around 600 grassroots community planning groups have come together to lobby the government for change. When it comes to local planning, I spoke to Rosie just before I came on air and I asked her for her reaction to those changes that Rishi Sunak has been forced to make to housing targets.

00:09:41 Rosie Pearson

We think it's amazing. It seems to be moving towards redressing the balance back away from developers towards communities, which is exactly what we campaigned for. UM, and we're really pleased to see Bob. MP, Bob Seely on Twitter last night, saying that he has agreed with Michael Gove that the planning system will be more community led, green and regenerative. So all of those words are music to our ears.

00:10:02 Emma Barnett

Do you worry though about this concern around intergenerational fairness and the government still falling short of its housebuilding targets and how to get those who need homes, onto the ladder?

00:10:14 Rosie Pearson

We do not feel that removing top-down targets makes any difference to redressing the balance with intergenerational unfairness, because actually what we've seen in in recent years with planning is that a housing that's being is not affordable. Developers often renege on their affordable promises and that social housing isn't being built so we don't feel it make any difference to allow communities greater say and what gets built and where. And it might actually make a positive difference.

00:10:38 Emma Barnett

But no, no, no social housing being built, no new properties are more affordable. Can you really say that?

00:10:45 Rosie Pearson

Very few new properties. It's around about 6000 new social houses built in 2020 and through right to buy more social housing is being sold off and it's being built. So it was a real problem with housing waiting lists getting ever longer and those people not being provided with housing. Affordable housing that developers provide, which is it's called affordable. It's often not very affordable because it's just a 20% below market price. And they, developers are told to make me to commitment of round about 20 to 30% affordable. They often come back and claim the sites not viable and they don't even provide that amount of affordable housing. So the top down targets that ask developers to build 300,000 homes a year don't address the intergenerational divide anyway.

00:11:29 Emma Barnett

What would?

00:11:31 Rosie Pearson

I think giving communities more control over building the right things will start to make a difference, which is exactly what these new proposals are trying to do. I also think the government does need to step up to the mark. Invest in social housing in a very big way and if we look at past housebuilding numbers, the time when government met higher housing targets was when it was building hundreds and thousands of affordable homes and I know Shelter says we need to be building 90,000 social houses a year so they've got a long way to go. But that that's what needs to happen is we need to look at what's happening for those that really, really need a house that can't afford one.

00:12:04 Rosie Pearson

And top down targets are doing nothing for that.

00:12:05 Rosie Pearson

Anyway, even. If people do agree with you about the target side of things and it, it seems of course the Prime Minister for whatever the reason, we can talk about the politics of it. If we get there, but it'll be, people will be aware that this is a defeat. If you like for his leadership at the moment, even if you agree about the targets. I know that you will have faced at your fair share of how, how do we put it, backlash? The worst opposition in some ways that some would say people like yourself and those you work with. Also, won't let new houses be built in many different places. You know that that that the nickname "build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything".

00:12:48 Emma Barnett

What do you say to that? Because yes, it's going back into the local control, but you know if there's no agreement about where things can be built. What do you say to that?

00:12:59 Rosie Pearson

Well yeah, so. And you're absolutely right, I'm often labelled a NIMBY and other insults, but actually I have always said there is absolutely nothing wrong with wanting the best for your local community, and whether that means local biodiversity, whether that means wanting affordable housing, wanting housing that not is not just car-dependent urban sprawl. So the planning system at the moment is very confrontational and what it does is it presents communities with a done deal and it then forces them to fight that if there isn't the infra strategy. If there aren't the doctors place as if there aren't the schools, or if wildlife isn't protected. So what we are advocating in the Community Planning Alliance is that the whole system is rebalanced towards asking communities what they want and need. Letting communities set out the problems such as infrastructure deficits and then finding ways to sort those problems out and to address the issues and to provide the affordable housing. And I think if you ask anybody, and in fact there are surveys that show that people support house building but they don't support what you see, which is sort of generic unaffordable housing estates plonked on the edge of villages with no care for the wildlife. Developers reneging on their affordable promises and and all the problems are associated with that lack of school places..

00:14:12 Emma Barnett

You talk about “Nimbys”, you've even been branded, I believe, in a recent article I read with a profile of you, an interview with you in The Sunday Times as “queen Of the nimbys”. How did this happen for you? Talk about being radicalised.

00:14:24 Rosie Pearson

Yeah, well, I mean it sounds like a strong word, doesn't it? But actually other people have said subsequent to that article they feel the same and I became particularly angry about planning by going along to local council meetings and presenting evidence about problems with proposals they're putting forward and not only being ignored but being quite abusively treated. As were other members of the public, and it was interesting. Anyone that ever came along to this..

00:14:47 Emma Barnett

By who? So just, by who?

00:14:52 Rosie Pearson

By a council leader. So when you find the people that's supposed to be making the right decisions, treating you pretty rudely and not listening to evidence that was then proven to be correct by planning Inspector. You do find yourself getting angrier and angrier because you want the right thing to be done, and invariably the proposals that I put forward have got flaws in them and for people to be called NIMBYs for holding councils to account and developers to account I think is wrong.

00:15:14 Emma Barnett

You mentioned that things get heated and people not being treated quite as they should. Are you a rare woman in this space. How do you describe that, you are obviously talking on Woman's Hour?

00:15:25 Rosie Pearson

Yeah, I know there are a lot of women in campaigning and I think a lot of women in sort of community groups, Community Action groups. So yes, we are all very used to being often treated quite badly, but you can't necessarily say that's just a gender thing. I did ask around my committee and one lady in particular has had definitely sexism, both online and in person, so so it can be an issue.

00:15:51 Emma Barnett

As you say, targets have been missed. I mean the target to build 300,000 houses a year. Michael Gove. Is still insisting that is the target, that it remains despite these new powers for councils to dismiss it. It's not been hit since the 70s, which is also just something to say at this point.

Do you get a buzz from this? From not, not necessarily even stopping things going for because you've explained it's not. It's not just about that but, but what is it that's got you in and kept you in? And is this your job now? How does it occupy in your life what role does it play?

00:16:24 Rosie Pearson

Yeah, I mean I'm, I'm “sort of”, officially a stay at home mum but I am working full time. Unpaid as a campaigner, so it's trying to protect the environment and trying to make sure communities are listened to in the way that we weren't. It really motivates me because you see from our group, we've got 600 campaigners on our map all over the country or campaign groups and you hear similar stories everywhere. I mean I'm getting emails every day. I'm seeing on our Facebook page that

people are being badly treated. The evidence is being ignored. The councils are railroading things through, so I am very motivated by helping those campaigners to fight their campaigns as I started out a campaign that know nothing about planning.

00:17:00 Speaker 3

Have you have you? Have you ever been wrong?

00:17:04 Rosie Pearson

I'm not special, I'm will be wrong in arguments, but actually the two planning battles I felt fought so far, we have one and we were proven right, so I'm not saying I'm always right of course, but so I think it's hard for anyone.

00:17:20 Emma Barnett

So you have sympathy for those in the cabinet looking to increase housing targets on that side of things, but doing it in a different way?

00:17:29 Rosie Pearson

No, I don't have sympathy with increasing housing targets because the current ones are too high anyway. They're based on out of date projections. We have to, for boring technical planning reasons, to use the 2014 housing projections. Uhm, despite the fact the census this year has shown that housing has not grown as fast as those projections and everyone's known that for some years

00:17:49 Emma Barnett

So what's the number you... Just so I get this right, what's the number you would agree with? Is there a number that you would agree with?

00:17:53 Rosie Pearson

Yeah, round about 160,000 was the sort of household projections figures, but again, it's not as simple as a number.

00:17:58 Emma Barnett

OK, so I get that but where you have sympathy is the need of course for more housing, but not yet at the same level that we've been talking about.

00:18:08 Rosie Pearson

Exactly, and the need for the right types of homes and "unaffordable" is the real need. There's no shortage of investor homes, luxury penthouses, and sort of executive boxes. There's plenty of those anyone wants to or can afford. Those can buy them, but there's a desperate shortage of truly affordable housing and literally by having a target, that makes no difference because the developers won't build affordable housing. And why should they? They're running businesses, so government will need to step up.

00:18:30 Emma Barnett

Well, some of them will say that that that perhaps they are motivated to, but you need the government as you're saying as well to, to step up

For those who think planning is the dreariest thing in the world, they wouldn't want to go anywhere near it, they don't want to read these sorts of documents. They certainly don't want to spend their evenings, you say, having some very passionate conversations with their local councils. Let's let's cast it like that. What would you say to them?

00:18:53 Rosie Pearson

I'd say yes, that that is the problem in the planning system, is that you have to get involved with the technical side of it, but if you really care passionately and you should do because planning it affects literally everything about your life. Then it's very worth getting involved in a local neighbourhood plan, which is a much more positive way of doing things because that helps to plan for your area's future.

00:19:12 Emma Barnett

Is Jackie Weaver one of your heroes? Do you have the authority?

00:19:16 Rosie Pearson

[Laughing] Yes she is, isn't she? So yes, managing, managing those men very well.

00:19:23 Emma Barnett

Well, Rosie, yours is another name for people's minds. Your name, that is. Thank you very much for your views this morning and telling us about how you got into this.

00:19:28 Rosie Pearson

Thank you very much.

00:19:29 Emma Barnett

Rosie Pearson there. The founder of the Community Planning Alliance, a group of around 600 grassroots community planning groups that have come together to lobby the government for change on this subject. Rosie mentioned there are some difficult meetings and treatment she experienced by Council members and Council leaders.

Of course they're not here to give their perspective, but you are and you're texting in.

I'm a woman of the planning industry. I am appalled by the slashing of targets. The news this morning out of the government. Rosie is just harking back to stale arguments regarding building on brownfield resulting in houses in which people like her would want to live, not to mention the limited feasibility of this due to the Greenbelt policy.

No, she has compromised the ability of women like me to get our foot on the housing ladder and secure stable housing, reads this message.

But Gemma's written to say she's someone who is concerned by the lack of truly affordable housing but also. But I welcome a pause on indiscriminate house building targets. A mixture of increased homeworking plus a change and shopping habits towards online means. There are empty attractive buildings plus brownfield sites suitable for redevelopment. Once we build on our pressure screen spaces, they are lost forever and so it continues. Many of you very passionate about this.

00:20:41 Emma Barnett

Indeed, do keep those messages coming in. 84844 is the number you need to text or get in touch on social media or drop us an e-mail via the Woman's Hour website.