

Housing numbers for Wokingham

I am pleased to report the government has listened to the arguments I and other MPs put to allow more local decision taking on the crucial issue of how much housing development an area can accept and sustain. They have agreed to drop mandatory top down targets, leaving local Planning authorities including Wokingham Borough free to make decisions about how much housing to include in a proper effective local plan. The government will issue guidance of how much housing they think is needed, but accept that this may need modifying in the light of local circumstances, local opinion and environmental issues. They have also proposed ending the five year supply of land requirement where there is an up to date plan in place, and propose ways to encourage the build out of existing permissions instead of seeking more.

Below is the position as set out by the Secretary of State in a recent letter to me

THE LEVELLING UP AND REGENERATION BILL: PLANNING AND LOCAL CONTROL IN ENGLAND

Since returning to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities, I have listened

to the powerful representations made by colleagues about the ways the current planning system

is not working and must be improved. I recognise that at the heart of concerns is a principled

desire to make the system work better for our local communities and constituents. I fully agree

and share this goal.

Whatever we do at a national level, politics is always local and there is no area that

demonstrates this more than planning. Through reforms made by Conservative-led

governments since 2010, we have a locally-led planning system – for instance, by scrapping

policies like top-down regional targets that built nothing but resentment – and introducing

neighbourhood planning.

COMMUNITY CONTROL

Too often I hear from communities that they are not getting a proper say in protecting the

landscapes and natural environment they cherish, nor can they build the homes they want, in

the places that are most suitable, with the right access to public services. To address these

concerns, including those raised by members signing amendments NC21 and NC24 relating to

housing targets, 5-year land supply, and the presumption in favour of sustainable development,

I will consult on the following.

First, while I will retain a method for calculating local housing need figures, I will consult on changes. I recognise that there is no truly 'objective' way of calculating how many homes are needed in an area, but I do believe that the plan-making process for housing has to start with a number. This number should, however, be an advisory starting point, a guide that is not mandatory. It will be up to local authorities, working with their communities, to determine how many homes can actually be built, taking into account what should be protected in each area – be that our precious Green Belt or national parks, the character or an area, or heritage assets. It will also be up to them to increase the proportion of affordable housing if they wish. My changes will instruct the Planning Inspectorate that they should no longer override sensible local decision making, which is sensitive to and reflects local constraints and concerns. Overall this amounts to a rebalancing of the relationship between local councils and the Planning Inspectorate, and will give local communities a greater say in what is built in their neighbourhood. For example, when assessing a local plan, the following will have to be taken into account:

- Genuine constraints: local planning authorities will be able to plan for fewer houses if building is constrained by important factors such as national parks, heritage restrictions, and areas of high flood risk.
- Green Belt: further clarifying our approach to date in the National Planning Policy Framework and the Localism Act, we will be clear that local planning authorities are not expected to review the Green Belt to deliver housing. This is in line with commitments made by the Prime Minister in the Summer.
- Character: local authorities will not be expected to build developments at densities that would be wholly out of character with existing areas or which would lead to a significant change of character, for example, new blocks of high-rise flats which are entirely inappropriate in a low-rise neighbourhood. While more homes are needed in many existing urban areas, we must pursue 'gentle densities' as championed by the Building Better,

As the Prime Minister committed in the Summer, I will also review how the

'soundness' test

for reviewing plans at examination is operated by the Planning Inspectorate. I will ensure that plans no longer have to be 'justified', meaning that there will be a lower bar for assessment, and authorities will no longer have to provide disproportionate amounts of evidence to argue their case.

The effect of these changes will be to make absolutely clear that Local Housing Need should always be a starting point – but no more than that – and importantly, that areas will not be expected to meet this need where they are subject to genuine constraints.

Inspectors will therefore be required to take a more reasonable approach to authorities that have come forward with plans that take account of the concerns of the local community, by taking a more pragmatic approach at examination which fully reflects this updated policy.

LOCAL PLANS

I want to change the system on the rolling five-year land supply. We will end the obligation on local authorities to maintain a rolling five-year supply of land for housing where their plans are up-to-date. Therefore for authorities with a local plan, or where authorities are benefitting from transitional arrangements, the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the 'tilted balance' will typically not apply in relation to issues affecting land supply. I also want to consult on dropping the requirement for a 20% buffer to be added for both plan making and decision making – which otherwise effectively means that local authorities need to identify six years of supply rather than five. In addition, I want to recognise that some areas have historically overdelivered on housing – but they are not rewarded for this. My plan will therefore allow local planning authorities to take this into account when preparing a new local plan, lowering the number of houses they need to plan for. Places with existing plans will benefit from the changes above, as they will be free of five-year land supply obligations provided that plan is up to date. Communities will therefore have a much more powerful incentive to get involved in drawing up local plans. Only four-in-ten local authorities have up to date local plans and I am determined to change this. They can protect the important landscapes they cherish, direct

homes to the places they want, and adopt design codes to secure the houses they want to see. Once a plan is in place, these changes mean that they will no longer be exposed to speculative developments on which they have less of a say. To give further assurance to colleagues who have signed amendment NC27 on community appeals, I will increase community protections afforded by a neighbourhood plan against developer appeals – increasing those protections from two years to five years. The power of local and neighbourhood plans will be enhanced by the Bill; and this will be underpinned further through this commitment. Adopting a plan will be the best form of community action – and protection.

BUILD OUT

I strongly agree with the intent of amendments NC 28, 29, and 30 that seek to ensure developers build out the developments for which they already have planning permission. We need to hold developers to account so that desperately needed new homes are built, and I already have a significant package of measures in the Bill to do this, including public reporting and declining new planning applications on a site if developers are failing to build out. I will consult on two further measures:

- i) on allowing local planning authorities to refuse planning applications from developers who have built slowly in the past; and
- ii) on making sure that local authorities who permission land are not punished under the housing delivery test when it is developers who are not building.