

My article for Wokingham Today about Housing Development

Wokingham needs a new local plan. Recent years have seen a lot of housing development which places strains on schools, surgeries, roads and green spaces. I would like to see a new local plan with a more sustainable rate of new housebuilding, with further additions to services and infrastructure to catch up with the new homes. The Borough draws up the plan, which is then tested in front of an Inspector giving people and businesses the chance to query the proposals.

The Government is currently putting through a levelling up Bill which aims to make investment more even around the country, and to provide more development and construction in those places that want the extra jobs, the new homes and facilities to enliven their areas. Places like Wokingham should be willing to share the dynamism of new homes and new employment more fairly by letting more of the investment go to places in greater need. The Levelling Up Bill had a lot to say about positives to promote the left behind towns and cities. I and a group of MPs also wanted it to say more about letting places with plenty of investment have more say over the pace of future change in our communities.

We tabled amendments to the Levelling Up Bill. One concentrated on dropping mandatory government targets for more housebuilding, which gave too much of it to the areas already full of new homes and new development. Others tackled the problem of developers gaming the system. They would accept the planning permissions granted under a local plan. They would then fail to build out those permissions and instead apply for more permissions outside the local plan areas for development. We proposed dropping the five year supply of land requirement which was often manipulated against a Council even though there were plenty of planning permissions outstanding. We argued for more control over the pace of build out of the permissions already granted within the plan instead of granting additional permissions.

The Government considered all of these proposals and agreed to change its Bill to meet our concerns. They have promised a system to speed build out of permissions where a Council has granted them under a plan. They agree not to use the five year supply of land argument to provide more planning permissions outside the plan, where an agreed plan is being worked through. They accept that whilst the Government will offer guidance on housing numbers, the Council should determine what is a realistic number that can be built given local circumstances. They accepted that where a Council has built a lot of homes in the past that should not be used as an argument for sustaining a very high rate of build. It should be an argument for considering a slowdown. They are strengthening the money that Councils can take from developers to assist with putting in the necessary public facilities to support the new homes.

I welcome the government's change of approach which gives the flexibility

our Council needs to take more account of our local circumstances, to get some credit for the recent rapid build rate and allows us to protect more of our landscape, farmland and green gaps between settlements.