

Reforming planning – a five year supply of land

The biggest planning issue that confronts my constituency of Wokingham is that surrounding the pace of housebuilding.

The government and planning system lay down that Wokingham Borough, not the same boundaries as my constituency, has to allow the construction of 900 new homes a year. To do this the Council needs to set out in a local plan where the homes should go, and has to grant sufficient planning permissions to allow this to happen. The government planning system requires a Council to make available a five years supply of residential plots. If the Council does not do this, there is every likelihood that additional planning permissions will be granted in the Council area on appeal by Planning Inspectors. Failure by the Council to make 5 years available gives the Inspectors the right to override the Council's local plan, and to grant additional permissions elsewhere.

Wokingham has granted 11,000 permissions for individual new homes that have not yet been built. Commonsense tells you that this means the Council has made available a 12 year supply of land for the 900 a year build rate. Until recently the planning establishment took the view that Wokingham had a supply lower than five years. They came to this conclusion from looking at the actual build rate achieved, rather than at the outstanding permissions. Developers were also suggesting they could not build and sell at the required rate from the four main areas for housing expansion in the local plan and reflected in the permissions granted.

It is possible for a developer to get substantial permissions granted on one site in a given district, to build out at a slow rate, and to gain planning permissions on appeal on other sites it has acquired in the same district. Or it may be that some other landowner benefits from the slow build rate. Sometimes it may be true that the developer cannot build and sell at a fast enough rate. Other times it could be gaming the system, deliberately going slow on an agreed site to win permission on a contested site.

I am currently in discussion with the government over how this system can be reformed. A local authority like Wokingham which is co-operating fully with the national policy aim of increasing housebuilding should not be undermined by grant of permissions on appeal elsewhere in its area outside the local plan. The whole point of a local plan is to set a sustainable pace of building, and to concentrate the development to make it easier to provide the additional roadspace, schools and health facilities a growing community needs. Such planning is more difficult and dearer if the Council loses control of where the bulk of the new homes will be.