



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Cllr Tony Kingsbury
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Rt Hon Christopher Pincher MP
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Our Ref: 12317223

18th November 2021

Dear Cllr. Kingsbury

Thank you for your letter of 8 October asking for my support in achieving a sound local plan for Welwyn Hatfield and raising specific questions regarding the Inspector's view on the housing requirement and potential for changes to Government Policy on planning.

I regret that due to the Secretary of State's quasi-judicial functions in the planning system, I am unable to comment on the details of a specific Local Plan. However, I can offer the following general comments.

Planning Policy Position

The Government's priority for getting plans in place by 2023 has not changed. After the consultation on the White Paper last year, I clearly reiterated the importance of having up to date plans in place in my Written Ministerial Statement of 19 January 2021. Plan makers should continue to prioritise getting up-to-date plans in place under the relevant National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) by this date.

We are firmly committed to protecting and enhancing the Green Belt, as set out in our manifesto. We have ensured strong protections for Green Belt land through national planning policy to safeguard this important land for future generations and I want to reassure you that these protections will remain firmly in place.

The NPPF strongly encourages the re use of suitable brownfield land- especially for development to meet housing need and regenerate our town centres. We are committed to making the most of brownfield land and the Government is putting significant investment into brownfield redevelopment.

In relation to future changes to the planning system, an announcement on our proposed way forward for the planning reforms will be made in due course. In the meantime, local authorities should continue work on meeting the deadline the Government has set to have an up-to-date local plan in place by the end of 2023. This will ensure we can build back better and continue to deliver the homes that are needed across England. As further decisions are taken on any changes to the planning system, including any changes to local plan production, local authorities and other stakeholders will be kept informed.

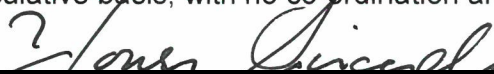
Local Authorities are more at risk of appeals and speculative planning applications being successful if they do not have a Local Plan setting out an up-to-date housing requirement, as the presumption in favour of sustainable development applies. The latest Housing Delivery Test results show that the majority of those Local Authorities delivering 75% or less of the housing they need, have a plan over 5 years old at the time of results publication – this underlines the importance of having an up-to-date plan and proactively supporting development in a plan-led way. An out-of-date Plan puts local residents at risk.

Housing Need

The Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan was submitted for examination in 2017 and accordingly the transitional arrangements apply with the plan being examined for its consistency with the version of NPPF published in 2012. This remains unchanged and means that this iteration of the Local Plan is not expected to use the standard method as its starting point for calculating need. Under the transitional arrangements where plans are withdrawn or otherwise do not proceed to become part of the development plan, the policies in the current National Planning Policy Framework will apply. This includes the policies in relation to the use of the standard method for calculating local housing need which is the starting point in the process of planning for the right number of homes, but it is not the housing requirement. When housing requirements are decided by local authorities writing their local plans, we expect them to take account of constraints they face locally such as the Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty amongst others. Authorities must also have regard to national policies. The Government does not set local housing targets.

In relation to your specific question requesting my observations about the Inspector's report on housing need, for reasons given above it would not be appropriate for me to comment on this detailed matter. The Secretary of State appoints an independent person to carry out plan examinations. The Planning Inspectorate plays an important role in examining plans impartially and publicly to ensure that they are legally compliant and sound. Any concerns you have on this matter should be raised with the Inspector through the programme officer. Councils can only adopt a plan that is sound - it must be consistent with national policy.

The Government is clear that councils and their communities are best placed to take decisions on local planning matters in their area without unnecessary interference from central government. I hope you have found these clarifying comments helpful. As I have stated above this Government's policy for having a plan in place by 2023 has not changed. Authorities that fail to ensure an up-to-date plan is in place are failing their communities by not recognising the homes and other facilities that local people need. Without an adequate up-to-date plan, homes can end up being built on a speculative basis, with no co-ordination and limited buy-in from local people.



RT HON CHRISTOPHER PINCHER MP

