

**Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Cabinet**  
**c/o Councillor Tony Kingsbury**  
Leader of the Council  
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Date: 08/10/2021

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP

[publiccorrespondence@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:publiccorrespondence@cabinetoffice.gov.uk)

Dear Secretary of State,

Cc: Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP

**Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan**

We are writing to you to seek your support to enable us to achieve a sound local plan.

As you may be aware, our Local Plan process is now at a critical juncture.

Back in 2017, the Council submitted for examination a draft plan aiming at a housing target for the plan period of approximately 12,000 homes. Your examiner indicated that, to be found sound, the plan would need to aim for 16,000 homes.

The Council prepared a second draft in early 2020, with a target of 13,200 homes. The examiner recently issued a report indicating that, to be found sound, 15,200 homes would be required over the plan period. The examiner has also expressed his view that there is no further scope for debate on this.

The target of 15,200 homes is well in excess of the level felt appropriate by elected councillors, regardless of political party. It would represent an increase in the borough's population of over 30%.

It is clear from consultation responses to our earlier proposals that 15,200 is completely at odds with the view of the community.

It involves significant take up of Green Belt land for development.

We are not convinced that previous population trends in the borough, which have in recent years been driven partly by inward EU migration, will continue.

We understand that our MP, the Rt Hon Grant Shapps believes 15,200 is far too high. He is a widely respected local MP, with considerable experience of national planning policy, and he is of course your Cabinet colleague. It would seem inconceivable to proceed without his public support.

In his keynote speech to the party conference recently, the Prime Minister clearly stated that he was against building on “green fields”, and wished to minimise housing development in the already overcrowded Southeast of England. This has caused us considerable confusion, as the examiner, who has based his report upon the NPPF, certainly requires us to build on “green fields”. The examiner has made no reference to directing housing development to different UK regions. Is policy about to change?

Having said all that, expert legal advice obtained by the Council has confirmed that the examiner has produced a report consistent with the NPPF, and that any legal challenge would almost certainly fail.

Furthermore, it is clear that were we to stick to our earlier proposal of 13,200 homes, the examiner would find this unsound, and our community would be at the risk of planning applications going through on appeal, outside the control of the Council. It also seems that were we to withdraw the plan and start again, we would likely be faced with having to meet an even higher housing target.

We are between a rock and a hard place. We believe it would be extremely irresponsible to risk an unsound plan, or to try and start again. At the same time, if a sound plan involves a target of 15,200 homes, we would be driving it through against wishes of the community and their elected representatives, and will be sacrificing Green Belt to achieve it.

If there is no other alternative, we will try and drive through Council a plan involving 15,200 homes, in preference to running the risk of having the plan found unsound.

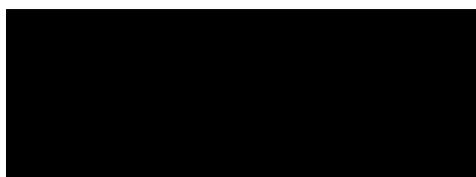
But to help us do this, we must ask you the following questions:

- Do you and your cabinet colleagues stand by your examiner’s housing number of 15,200, or is there room for further debate on this subject without the Council running the risk of “development by appeal” in the meantime?
- Is planning policy likely to change in the near future to direct housing development to other regions or to prevent building on green fields, as the Prime Minister seemed to indicate?

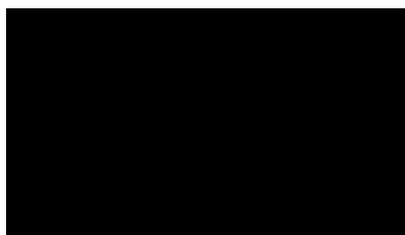
We are prepared to take necessary and unpopular decisions if we have to, but we must have a single and unambiguous message from HM Government to back us up if we are to do this.

We would be very grateful to hear back from you on these two questions.

Yours Sincerely,



Councillor Tony Kingsbury  
Leader of the Council



Councillor Duncan Bell  
Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member,  
Resources



Councillor Stephen Boulton  
Executive Member, Environment, Planning, Estates  
and Development



Councillor Nick Pace  
Executive Member, Governance and Public Health



Councillor Bernard Sarson  
Executive Member, Leisure and Community Safety



Councillor Fiona Thomson  
Executive Member, Housing and Climate Change