

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Cabinet
c/o Councillor Tony Kingsbury
Leader of the Council
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Date: 21/09/2022

Rt Hon Simon Clarke MP

publiccorrespondence@cabinetoffice.gov.uk

Dear Secretary of State,

Cc: Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP

Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan

Firstly, may we take this opportunity to congratulate you on your new role and wish you every success.

We are writing now 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. The examiner indicated that, to be found sound, the plan would need to aim for 16,000 homes.

Summarising the process since then, there were changes in these targets from both sides. Winding forward to the current situation, the Council made a decision this July to provide for sites to allow 12775 dwelling to the end of the plan period, but with a 10-year target and an early review. This is equivalent to over 25% of our current housing numbers and is therefore a substantial number.

Even this involves significant take up of Green Belt land for development but in general to areas of less Green Belt harm. Additionally, we will use every brown field site available to us in the borough.

A key point for us was that this allocation removed three sites classed as 'high harm' to the Green Belt, following a review instigated by the Inspector.

We know through discussions that we have the support of our local MP, Grant Shapps, on this matter in terms of numbers and protection of the Green Belt.

We also note that in an answer at Prime Minister's question time on 7th September the Prime Minister stated that there is not enough power in local hands and that you want the housing secretary to stop the planning inspectorate having too much power to overrule councils.

Additionally, she has written to us individually stating 'I will put more control in your hands. First and foremost, through scrapping Soviet-style, Whitehall-imposed housing targets'.

This is exactly the situation we are in. Time is short and this statement is contrary to the latest correspondence received from the Inspector.

It seems that if we stick with our current proposal, the inspector may imminently find the plan 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.

The Council has spent £8.8m since 2010 on the Local Plan and it continues to take time and effort from us as the administration, time that could be focussed on other council priorities if our proposal were accepted.

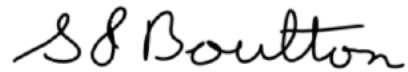
We are in a very difficult position. We believe it would be extremely irresponsible to risk an unsound plan, or to try and start again, but we have made a decision to remove these sites and will not reverse that decision.

In summary we would like to understand how the Prime Minister's welcome statement will affect the inspector's decision-making process in the short term and hope that government policy will allow a pragmatic resolution of this matter.

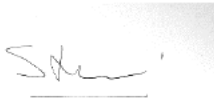
Yours Sincerely,




Councillor Tony Kingsbury
Leader of the Council



Councillor Stephen Boulton
Deputy Leader and Executive Member, Resources
and Planning



Councillor Samuel Kasumu
Executive Member, Environment and Climate
Change



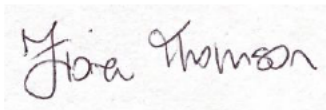
Councillor Terry Mitchinson
Executive Member, Leisure and Community



Councillor Nick Pace
Executive Member, Governance and Public Health
and IT



Councillor Bernard Sarson
Executive Member, Community Safety and Parking



Councillor Fiona Thomson
Executive Member, Housing