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23 May 2022



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State,
Department for Levelling up, Communities, Housing.
2 Marsham Street,
London,
SW1P 4DP.

The Leader of the Council

P.O. Box 150

Shute End, Wokingham

Berkshire RG40 1WN

Tel: (0118) 974 6000

Dear Mr Gove,

REFORM OF THE PLANNING SYSTEM: HOUSING NEED

As you are aware, following the local elections Wokingham Borough Council has a new administration. As Leader of the new administration, I wanted to reach out to you at the earliest opportunity to raise the continuing concerns of our residents as to how the planning system is failing our borough and no doubt many other local authorities.

I am sure we both wish to see a planning system that is fair to all places, and is consistent and understandable to residents and business. Whilst recognising the needs of the country, the government must be sensitive to and respond to how government policy impacts communities and places.

In your releases as part of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, you refer to devolving power and giving local leaders and communities the tools they need to make better places. There is much for us to reflect on in the Bill and the wider changes you propose. Conspicuous by its absence however was any reference to how housing need is calculated and distributed across the country.

National planning policy has lost sight of any positive plan for how development should be managed on a national scale. In the case of housing, housing need is calculated through a simple mathematical formulae. These formulae are applied without any sense check or any consideration of constraints or opportunities. Stepping away from this formulae requires a local authority to demonstrate 'exceptional circumstances' – a very high bar which I do not believe any local authority has cleared, even those which are within the green belt.

Whilst at one level, having a simple approach to calculating housing is a laudable approach, the reality is that the questions we must ask ourselves are more complex than can simply be expressed in a formula.

The current standard method simply reinforces past trends and uses only three volatile datasets and where the principal and variant household projections can significantly disagree showing the impact of short term trends. The formulae takes no account of the impact of development on an area or the scale of the opportunity for development, such as the availability of brownfield land. The most recent amendment to the standard method increased the housing ask of our neighbours Reading Borough Council by 35% through the urban centres uplift without any regard as to whether this is achievable at



all. Their current local plan already has a shortfall in supply so why are they being asked to do substantially more?

In 2001, the number of dwellings in Wokingham Borough was just over 58,000 homes, making us the third largest local authority in Berkshire in this regard. Now Wokingham Borough stands as having the highest number of dwellings at over 71,000 homes, an increase of just under 22% in 20 years. The current standard method requires us to accommodate both significantly more homes per year than in the past and significantly more than the rest of Berkshire (the exception being Reading Borough who will not be able to meet the government's increased expectations).

The government must step away from a mathematical approach and instead set out a positive strategy for development, one which purposely aligns housing with economic aspirations such as levelling up and is fair and achievable for all places. It should recognise that places that have been asked to accommodate more development in the past cannot simply continue and that another solution is required. The ask of Wokingham Borough and our residents must be lowered to a fair scale.

I welcome the opportunity to meet and discuss planning reform further with you and in particular the housing need for Wokingham Borough. I also warmly extend to you an invitation to visit Wokingham Borough and see for yourself the exemplary work we do, alternatively I and our officers will be pleased to visit your offices.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Clive Jones', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Clive Jones
Leader of the Council

c.c. Stuart Andrew MP
 Theresa May MP
 Sir John Redwood MP
 Matt Rodda MP
 James Sunderland MP
 James Jamieson, Chairman LGA
 Susan Parsonage, Chief Executive Wokingham Borough Council