

Michael Gove response 31/1/22

Thank you for your letter of 6 December to the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, about the oral evidence given by the Secretary of State to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on Monday 8 November, and the approach being adopted by Wokingham Borough Council in relation to its Strategic Plan update. We have been asked to reply on behalf of the Secretary of State. We are very sorry for the delay in responding, which is due to a large amount of correspondence in recent months. Due to the role of Ministers in the planning system, we hope you will understand that we are unable to comment on specific local development plans or development proposals, but we will attempt to address the points that you raise as far as possible.

We would re-iterate here that the standard method for calculating local housing need does not set a target for the number of homes to be built. Local authorities take into account land supply, constraints, such as Green Belt, and cooperation with neighbouring authorities on whether need should be shared, before deciding their housing requirement. This recognises that not everywhere will be able to meet their housing need in full. As with all our policies, we would like to assure you that we will monitor the impact of the standard method, particularly as the effect of changes to the way we live and work and levelling up become clear. It is also worth noting that local authorities can put forward a different approach to the standard method if they wish although a different method should only be used in exceptional circumstances and there should be a strong justification for doing so.

Turning to the suggestion that local authorities be given more time to adopt their local plans pending a review of how housing numbers are calculated, or to place their plan preparation on hold, we would emphasise that the Government's priority for getting plans in place by the end of 2023 has not changed. After the consultation on the White Paper, the Minister of State for Housing reiterated the importance of having up to date plans in place in his 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, by this date. This will ensure we can build back better and continue to deliver the homes that are needed across England. 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.

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. We understand your concern about how the Government's aspirations for community engagement in the planning system are being interpreted by your local authority, particularly in the context of adopted Neighbourhood Plans. In this respect, each local planning authority must comply with section 18 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, which requires them to prepare a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) which should explain how they will engage local communities and other interested parties in producing development plan documents and determining planning applications. The Wokingham Local Plan has been subject of consultation most recently from 22 November 2021 and 24 January 2022. Hopefully you took the opportunity to make comments on the plan at this time. However, in due course there will be further consultation on the plan before it is submitted for examination. The most recent timetable for plan preparation or Local development scheme is available on the Council's website.

Neighbourhood planning gives communities direct power to develop a shared vision for the future of their area and to shape development and growth. Communities can decide the location of new homes, employment, shops and services, protect local green spaces and heritage, and set policies on the design of new buildings. Neighbourhood plans continue to have real statutory weight in planning decisions. Once passed at referendum, neighbourhood plans form part of the development plan and become the starting point in making planning decisions. This policy gives a high degree of protection for neighbourhood plans that are up-to-date, although it does not entirely rule out giving permission where the decision-taker considers that other material considerations outweigh the conflict with the plan.

This Government strongly encourages the re-use of suitable brownfield land, especially for development to meet housing need. As set out in the National Planning Policy Framework, planning policies and decisions should give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements. We have introduced mandatory brownfield registers, leading to every local authority in England publishing a register of brownfield land suitable for housing in its area. These registers identify enough land for a million homes. We are also putting significant investment into brownfield redevelopment through the £4.35 billion Housing Infrastructure Fund; the £4.95 billion Home Building Fund; the £400 million Brownfield Housing Fund and the £75 million Brownfield Land Release Fund. We would emphasise, however, that local authorities are best placed to identify sites and to decide if they are suitable to redevelop. It would therefore be for the local authority to determine whether it has sufficient brownfield sites available to meet its housing needs in full.

Thank you once again for writing in on these matters.

Yours sincerely,

Planning Policy Correspondence Team