

Mayor – Councillor Barbara Inman

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11 April 2014

Dear Secretary of State,

As you will be aware from the letter of Alex Cunningham MP 12th November 2013 Stockton on Tees Borough Council at its meeting held on 6th November 2013 agreed the following motion:-

“This Council calls on the Conservative-led Government to urgently review its National Planning Policy Framework which effectively removes planning control from local authorities and communities and places it in the hands of private developers, and to reverse its huge reduction in public funding to support the development of brownfield sites for housing by investing to create jobs and new housing in the Borough and the rest of the North East.

Housing developers have made it clear they are no longer interested in developing brownfield sites because the costs of remediating these sites before they can start construction are too great. This has meant that the brownfield sites which previously contributed to the required five year supply of housing are no longer deliverable within a reasonable timescale. This is leading to Councils being directed by national Government policy, planning appeal and case law precedents, to approve developments on greenfield sites to meet their obligation to deliver a five year supply of housing land. This is causing increasing anxiety in the local communities affected, and as a result totally undermining the Government's stated intention of empowering local people to influence plans for their areas.

The Council is also aware of the written response to Alex Cunningham MP by Nick Boles dated 28th November 2013 and has again debated the issue of the National Planning Policy Framework at its meeting of full Council on 5th March 2014 when it received and debated a petition signed by 2,408 constituents objecting to residential development granted on greenfield sites within the Borough. In response, Council agreed the following motion:-

Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP
Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU

- We support the offer of the Mayor to meet with petitioners along with the Cabinet member, Chief Executive and appropriate officers, to allow for a more informed discussion on some of the issues raised during the Council debate.
- The Council again records its great sympathy for the many local residents who have invested considerable time and effort in contributing to local consultations on the local planning framework. We understand their extreme concern at the current top down interference with the democratic process that the new planning system was intended to prevent.
- We resolve to write directly to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Planning) to again request Parliament to urgently review the National Planning Policy Framework and to look again at the levels of investment available to support development of brownfield sites.

While the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) allowed a period of 12 months for local plans to be brought in line with the provisions of its policies, this was not a viable solution for this Council due to the lengthy time period involved complying with the statutory process to update the development plan.

As a result this Council through no fault of its own is still several years away from achieving an up to date Local Plan which accords with the NPPF to be accorded substantial weight to resist development this Council considers is inappropriate

Government must be aware that this situation even with the exceptional circumstances of the economy is clearly at odds of being plan led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings, setting out a positive vision for the future of the area and does not provide a framework within which decisions on planning applications can be made with a high degree of predictability and efficiency.

This situation has resulted in developments being allowed either by this Council or on appeal in what the majority of residents of this Borough consider as totally unacceptable such as Green Wedges, Strategic Gaps and Open Countryside.

Stockton Council's Core Strategy was adopted in March 2010, and the Council is currently consulting on its Regeneration and Environment Local Development Document to address the lack of a 5 year supply of deliverable housing land by identifying sites it would wish to allocate for housing. However the timescales for completing the statutory plan making process have resulted in planning applications for unsupported sites being submitted on the basis that limited weight can be accorded to the LDD as it is only at the preferred options stage and the presumption in the NPPF. How can this be an acceptable outcome when the LPA's hands are tied in how soon they can put in place an updated plan after having successfully adopted a core strategy? This situation clearly could not have been envisaged by Government and cannot be allowed to continue.

The views forcibly expressed by many residents are that Stockton Council has ignored its own consulted on plan and turned its back on residents who involved themselves in the process.

Consequently there is no public confidence in the system as to where new residential development should or will take place.

There is great difficulty in being able to remove barriers to development in terms of what infrastructure is required, where and how will this be funded, and the need for significant highway infra-structure improvements both on trunk roads and the local highway network to serve the new residential developments.

Serious concerns have been justifiably raised by the public in relation to key services such as Education, Doctors and Dentists which are under great strain and where the control and commissioning is outside the powers of the Council – Free Schools and Academies, Clinical Commissioning Groups. There is clearly a need to maximise public investment to deliver these services at the right level at the right time in the right place

There is no doubt that the way forward to having an effective planning system is for the planning decision making process to be plan led and maximises public investment whilst at the same time ensuring that a 5 year supply of deliverable housing land is provided and maintained as previously indicated by the Prime Minister

How can this be achieved

1. That the Secretary of State should as a matter of urgency put legislation in place to provide specifically for a fast track process to allow the updating of existing plans to cover specifically strategic issues relating to housing and employment.
2. That great weight should be accorded in the NPPF to the preferred options stage of a Local Development Document and any emerging plan gaining more weight in decision-making depending on the stage in the plan preparation process it had reached as it did prior to the NPPF.
3. That the planning horizon within the Local Plan process be reduced from 15 years to 10 years in order for any forecasts on which policy is based to be more accurate and robust.

I shall look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Barbara Inman
The Worshipful the Mayor of Stockton on Tees

