



Department for
Communities and
Local Government

Councillor Barbara Inman
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Dear Barbara

Thank you for your letter of 17 April about the National Planning Policy Framework and Local Plans.

The National Planning Policy Framework encourages local councils to re-use brownfield land if not of high environmental value. Brownfield continues to make an important contribution to meeting our housing needs and the Government has brought forward a range of measures to facilitate the re-use of redundant land and buildings, and to regenerate empty homes. We are accelerating the sale of surplus public sector brownfield for housing, and extending permitted development to help bring thousands of redundant buildings back into use, thereby reducing pressure on greenfield land.

Our new planning guidance, which we published on 6 March, makes clear that local authorities should positively incentivise brownfield development in Local Plans, and ensure that any higher costs are taken into account in viability assessment and in charges applied. They should also investigate what alternative funding mechanisms are available to cover the cost of bringing such sites back into use. Moreover, our changes to Community Infrastructure Levy arrangements give local authorities greater flexibility in setting levy charges by development type, size or location, so as to incentivise brownfield development. We have given developers exemption from the levy where an existing building is brought back into relevant use (other than for increased floor space). This extends the ability of developers to claim credit against any levy charge in respect of the existing floor space of other vacant buildings which are to be re-used or demolished for new development.

The Government's aim is for every area to have a Local Plan which sets out the views of local people on how they wish their community to develop, and we are clear that planning decisions should be made locally wherever possible. The Localism Act and the National Planning Policy Framework together reaffirm the importance of Local Plans as the primary basis for identifying what kinds of development are needed in each area and we have been very clear that locally-produced plans and neighbourhood plans are central to our ambition to give local people more control over the planning decisions that affect them. Wherever a Local Plan is drawn up, consulted on and agreed, local residents should expect decisions to be taken in accordance with it. This is a sign of true local and democratic decision making in action.

The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP

*Secretary of State for Communities and Local
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Our Ref: ER/ER/011279/14

Your Ref: fao Peter Bell

12 MAY 2014

The Framework is also clear that it promotes sustainable development, not development at any cost. So, where decisions do need to be made on the basis of the Framework, because a council has not yet put in place a proper plan, or it cannot demonstrate a five-year supply of housing sites, these decisions will need to be made in the light of all the policies contained in the Framework, including those that provide strong environmental protection. The weight to be given to different considerations is a matter for the decision taker in each case.

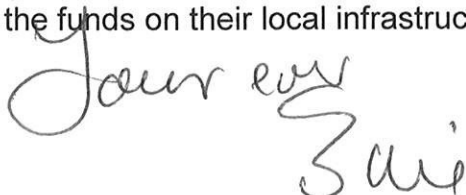
Getting an up-to-date plan in place, which includes a five-year supply of housing sites is the best way to protect an area from unplanned development and, will stand councils in good stead in deciding applications and dealing with appeals. 53 per cent of local authorities have now adopted a Local Plan, and 76 per cent have reached at least publication stage. To help those councils who have not yet completed their plans, we continue to fund the Planning Inspectorate and Planning Advisory Service to provide assistance. Between them, they have visited over 200 councils in the last year to help with getting a good quality plan in place.

The Planning Inspectorate deal with all examinations as efficiently as possible, and show pragmatism where there is scope to do so. Fast track reviews may already be undertaken when they are relevant, limited and do not have implications for the Plan as a whole. Our planning guidance emphasises that Plans should be regularly reviewed in a way which is proportionate to the issues at hand.

Our policy is already clear that weight may be given to emerging Plans before they are formally adopted depending on the circumstances of each case, the stage of preparation, the extent to which there are unresolved objections to relevant policies and the degree of consistency with the Framework. The 'preferred options' phase in the preparation of a Local Plan is relatively early on in the development of a Plan; there are usually two or three further chances for public comment on Local Plans following this stage. I am sure you will appreciate that significant weight in planning decisions can only be given to plans which are at a fairly advanced stage of development, or else Plans which are not consistent with national policy, or over which significant local controversy remain, could adversely affect development. Again, our planning guidance sets out the weight of emerging plans in decision-taking.

National policy sets out that Plans should be drawn up over an appropriate timescale, preferably 15 years. Our planning guidance makes clear, however, that where a local authority is not able to plan for a full 15 year timescale, this need not necessarily mean that the Local Plan is unsound. A local council will still need to provide robust justification for a Local Plan which does not last for 15 years at the examination of that Plan. The planning guidance can be viewed on our website at: <http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/>

Turning to the issue of infrastructure, the Local Plan process should identify the future housing and development needs of the area, and the supporting infrastructure needed to ensure that development is sustainable. The Government's preferred mechanism for collecting contributions from development, to contribute to supporting infrastructure, is the Community Infrastructure Levy. Unlike section 106 planning obligations, which are individually negotiated, the levy is a set charge on most new development, based on viability evidence, and is subject to public consultation and independent examination before it can be charged. The levy can also help foster local acceptance of development as 15%, or 25% if a Neighbourhood Plan is in place, of local levy receipts are directly allocated to the local community, who can use the funds on their local infrastructure priorities.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eric Pickles', written over the printed name below.

THE RT HON ERIC PICKLES MP