



Department for  
Communities and  
Local Government

Councillor Bob Cook  
Leader  
Stockton on Tees Borough Council  
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29 AUG 2014

**The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP**  
*Secretary of State for Communities and Local  
Government*

**Department for Communities and Local  
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20 AUG 2014

Dear Cllr Cook

Thank you for your letter dated 23 July about the potential for delay to Stockton Council's Local Plan because of concerns about traveller site provision. I hope you will understand that my Ministerial role prevents me from commenting directly on matters related to an individual authority's Local Plan. However, I am happy to set out the current position.

I understand that planning for traveller sites is locally contentious, and I welcome the general approach that Stockton is taking to assess and address their traveller site needs. Local Plans, including those elements which deal with traveller site provision, are subject to independent examination by an Inspector, and must be found sound before they can be adopted. In testing soundness the Inspector will consider whether Local Plans are consistent with national planning policy.

The Planning Inspectorate is not unduly inflexible in their consideration of Local Plans and may take a pragmatic approach where appropriate. It is of course open to the Local Planning Authority to put the case to the Inspector for exceptional circumstances in justification of departure from policy. However, I would reiterate that it is for the Inspector to weigh up all relevant factors in coming to a decision regarding the soundness of a Local Plan.

As set out in my written ministerial statement to Parliament of 17 January, the Government's intention is to consult on proposals to improve planning policy and guidance to strengthen protection for the Green Belt. We will also consider whether the definition of "travellers" for planning purposes should be amended to refer only to those who travel.

As part of this consultation, I can confirm we are currently considering how to assist the small number of local authorities in exceptional circumstances, which face a significant increase in need arising from large-scale unauthorised occupation and are subject to special or strict planning constraints across their areas. I would encourage you to respond to that consultation which will be launched on the Department's website in due course.

**THE RT HON ERIC PICKLES MP**

SIGNED ON BEHALF  
OF THE MINISTER  
AS DUTY MINISTER