

**Parish Councils of Barcombe, Chailey, Ditchling, East Chiltington, Hamsey, Newick, Plumpton, Ringmer, Streat, Westmeston, Wivelsfield,**

1 Westgate  
Plumpton  
BN7 3BT

8th January 2022

The Rt Hon Michael Gove, MP.

Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, House of Commons, LONDON SW1A 0AA.

Dear Secretary of State,

This letter represents parish councils of the Low Weald within Lewes District Council in East Sussex. The Low Weald is predominantly rural and agricultural, much of which is either within or adjoins the South Downs National Park and is typified by ageing and inadequate infrastructure with a high reliance on car transport. The following will be of no surprise to you, mirroring concerns that we know have been raised by other districts in the Southeast, but we are grateful for your time in reviewing it.

In common with many areas of the country we are not against development and many parishes invested considerable time in developing Neighbourhood Plans in alignment with the local plan to address the development needs of Lewes District. Changes to the NPPF made in 2018/19 have put those plans under threat and have emboldened developers to make speculative planning applications that are now putting hundreds of acres of green fields in the English countryside under threat and risking the sustainability of our rural communities.

Defending against unnecessary development consumes almost all our parish councillor time which we consider would better be spent addressing other local priorities. The root cause of the issue is the Standard Method and its impact on 5-year housing supply.

The Lewes local plan was approved by the Planning Inspectorate based on an average supply of 345 dwellings per annum which paragraph 6.19 summarises as "*is considered to be the level of housing growth that most appropriately balances the objective of meeting housing needs with the aims of achieving sustainable development and sustainable communities.*"

Now, 5 years into a district plan that should have provided certainty until 2030, and despite your ministry assessing delivery at 100% in the latest 2020 figures, the Standard Method increases 345 dwellings per annum to a minimum of 782, providing the rationale for developers to propose building on multiple new green field sites across the district. That is despite almost 2000 unbuilt permissions across the district.

You are no doubt now already aware that the Standard Method is flawed by its use of 2014 ONS population figures which overstate the target, and by the perverse and indiscriminate affordability factor. This mechanism appears to act in direct contradiction to the levelling up agenda by creating a housing target for areas like Lewes that acts not to meet local need but predominantly allows developers to maximise profit and simply provides the supply for commuters from urban brownfield settings to move into the greenfield countryside.

The Prime Minister used his major Conservative Party Conference speech to make a firm commitment to protect our green spaces from unscrupulous development, as well as signalling a brownfield-first approach to new building. *However current planning policy does just the opposite*, and unless there is a radical change in policy, we are all at the mercy of opportunistic developers. Current policy does nothing to support the government's levelling up agenda nor its environmental objectives, including the 2050 net gain target and measures in the Environment Bill.

We need immediate action to stop speculative planning applications that ignore democratically decided local plans and exploit the tilted balance created by the 2018/19 NPPF revisions.

We would urge you to act decisively to:

- suspend with immediate effect the current version of the Standard Method for all districts that have a local development plan in place. That would provide the breathing space to facilitate your review of the planning system and establish a true measure of 'objectively assessed need' as the basis for refreshing district plans with local democratic support. As part of that review:
  - Revise the method to use the most up to date evidence data
  - Revise the "affordability factor" to meet objectively assessed need rather than simply increasing housing targets in the most profitable areas, therefore enabling the governments 'levelling up' agenda.

These measures would allow the fundamental NPPF principle set out in paragraph 15 to be met, namely that "*The planning system should be genuinely plan-led. Succinct and up-to-date plans should provide a positive vision for the future of each area; a framework for addressing housing needs and other economic, social and environmental priorities; and a platform for local people to shape their surroundings.*"

They would also deliver on your party's stated commitments to

- Prioritise brownfield sites
- Regenerate cities to create a sense of community and make city centres thrive.
- Protect our green spaces

The heart of any decision-making process should be based upon the wellbeing of our future generations and protection of our green spaces. As Boris Johnson stated, "Britain's iconic landscapes are part of the fabric of our national identity - sustaining our communities, driving local economies and inspiring people across the ages... ***it's more important than ever that we act now to enhance our natural environment and protect our precious wildlife and biodiversity.***"

We are relying on you to take the right action and create honourable outcomes that serve the country we live in and would very much welcome the opportunity of having a meeting with you to discuss our concerns further.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Andy Holman, Chair Barcombe Parish Council

Cllr Ken Jordan, Chair Chailey Parish Council

Cllr Don McBeth, Chair Ditchling Parish Council

Cllr Mary Symes, Chair East Chiltington Parish Council

Cllr Cllr Tamsyn d'Arienzo, Chairperson Hamsey Parish Council

Cllr Chris Armitage Chair Newick Parish Council

Cllr Nick Beaumont, Chair Plumpton Parish Council

Carol Hodgson, for Ringmer Parish Council

Tim Gaynor, Chair Streat Parish Meeting

Cllr Rob Mills, Chair Westmeston Parish Council

Cllr Ian Dawson, Chair Wivelsfield Parish Council

**Copies to:**

The Rt Hon Christopher Pincher MP

Maria Caulfield MP

Caroline Ansell MP

Mims Davies MP

Lewes District Council members

Robert Cottrill - Chief Executive, Lewes and Eastbourne Councils

Leigh Palmer - Head of Planning, Lewes and Eastbourne Councils

Parish Council Clerks

Members of the Press