



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Secretary of State, The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities
2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4DF

23rd February 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

Firstly, I want to thank you for your department's important work on finding solutions to the housing challenge, one of the major issues we are facing as a nation today – which will fall on our local councils and parishes to help us provide answers. I write following the letter requesting urgent assistance from Council Leader, Cllr Jonathan Ash-Edwards, which you will have received from Mid Sussex District Council (MSDC), outlining the impact of the current methodology regarding housing and the impact of the awaited revisions to an updated Planning White Paper.

I write as a concerned Constituency MP to you on behalf of my community and District area. It is imperative I am able to raise my constituents' deep concerns following the recent progress and then pause of the updated Mid Sussex Local Plan. This must be updated from the 2018 version which currently runs to 2031 and includes 16,500 homes. You will be aware this formal process is now 'paused' by the Council to allow for further considerations, insights and to reflect on the significant challenges on delivering this updated plan and the new legislation in the Environment Act and in anticipation of the Housing white paper update.

The Planning Inspector, as part of the five-year review, has determined we must find an extremely challenging, further 7,000 additional houses in the Mid Sussex District, covering a new plan taking us up to 2038. The Council have rightly followed the process, called for local sites and looked to deliver what they currently have to. However, the review has now been published and it's clear to all the scale of the challenge faced by Mid Sussex cannot be met without significant amendments. They have predominantly opted for very large sites which are untenable to local communities. However, due to the limited infrastructure, and that larger sites provide these, they are more appealing in the current plan process, but unfortunately, change the look and feel of rural communities demonstrably and these cannot be undone.

Member of Parliament for Mid Sussex

Serving Burgess Hill, East Grinstead, Haywards Heath & the Villages

The current national policy and the Planning Inspectorate require a five-year review which is now due as mentioned above. Sadly, this current process, as designed allows for wider regeneration and prioritising brownfield applications and in my view does not reflect the pressure to achieve this plan to be properly updated and agreed by 2023. To be looking for sites into 2038, this is a deeply flawed process without updated guidance in relation net zero, the Environment Act and other changes meaning the widespread use of 'easy' greenfield sites to achieve these gigantic housing targets.

The current legislation sets a truly unrealistic pressure on local planning by our Districts and Boroughs. By implementing this required update would mean unacceptable and irreversible changes to Burgess Hill, East Grinstead, Haywards Heath and the villages in Mid Sussex. Both this, and the NPPF, patently do not reflect the core principles of the Environment Act, including protecting our ecosystems and biodiversity, focusing on the regeneration of brownfield sites and protecting the precious landscapes and farming land within our rural communities.

Numerous constituents, pressure groups and local parishes have already been in touch; they are aghast at where we are at. They are determined to share their resounding fears for these potential proposals, while Councillors have also been highlighting their own deep concerns about the pressure on our stretched infrastructure, whether it be our services, road networks, water supplies, NHS, dental and GP services, as well as on our local schools.

As you will be aware Mid Sussex is in a 'Serious Stress Water Area' and in fact two summers ago we ran out of water in Mid Sussex. This was predominantly due to the availability and design of structure of the water system in our area, which was not fit for purpose for these growing numbers. It was further intensified by the heavy demand from homes plus urban and rural businesses during the height of summer. This was made all the worse by the fact we were in a heatwave, leaving thousands of people without water, including many of our most vulnerable at a time when they were isolating, as well as livestock in danger because they could not be prioritised during this extremely worrying time, which I fear could repeat itself if the above developments and housing numbers come to pass.

After the recent storms, we in Mid Sussex have had five days of no or limited water supply to East Grinstead, parts of Haywards Heath alongside multiple surrounding villages and areas as the reliability of the aforementioned infrastructure is unquestionably not fit for purpose. I have been working with South East Water, since the drought in 2020, who are clearly in peril of being unable to meet the current need let

alone future requirements. It is a ridiculous notion that the additional housing numbers in the new plan can be catered for. I understand they are in the process of bringing this matter forward to MPs locally for us to approach Ministers with their fears.

I cannot understate the substantial impact of this update to the plan in its current form, due to the existing methodology which will merely deliver drastic and irreversible changes to Mid Sussex's special rural areas. It would dramatically change numerous landscapes and communities in our constituency both reducing green spaces and green gaps we have sought consistently to protect as well as increasing pollution and traffic congestion on many small roads and lanes. No-one is against more housing where it is suitable and needed, as long as it is in the right place with the right associated infrastructure.

In the meantime, it is hard to countenance this updated plan being acceptable if it has to progress in its current form, when we have recently failed in our attempt for a LUF bid to bring forward important brownfield development and a vital new town centre, which is urgently needed, for one of our main towns, Burgess Hill. This town sits on the edge of the 3,500 new homes of the Northern Arc - agreed in the current plan, supported by Homes England, and is one of the largest new homes sites in the country. Of these new properties, the first are coming on stream imminently, many of them will be 'affordable homes' in this first phase and shortly we expect a new science park to be agreed for the edge of the town. It is impossible to tell my constituents the area can sustain more housing and a larger population if we cannot support the existing population with the local amenities they need. It is of great disappointment to us all that the strong bid to the LUF was not agreed so that we can put a new heart into Burgess Hill after this vital and much wanted redevelopment project stalled.

One further such example which highlights the extreme nature of these proposals which fulfil the current legislation is the proposed site affecting Ansty and Cuckfield. Ansty is a small hamlet which has already taken 1500 units to form part of Bolnere Village, now part of Haywards Heath, and is instrumental in delivering the further 3,500 homes in the Northern Arc, a Homes England project. It could now see 1600 further houses built on bordering greenfield sites and green gaps, under the possible, updated plan. One greenfield site in Ansty having to be included is a consistently opposed development along the Cuckfield By-Pass towards Haywards Heath, which currently showcases an iconic view of Cuckfield's Holy Trinity Church. Furthermore, this plan proposal would actually double the size of the communities in Hurstpierpoint, Albourne, Bolney and Sayers Common, with thousands of houses in large, unsustainable rural locations.

On behalf of our constituency and the wider Mid Sussex area, I want to request that we are able to look again at whether vital and pressing reforms can be implemented urgently which give power and control and the housing numbers required over planning back to our communities and local authorities, who can implement the housing need of the area and country in the most appropriate and sustainable way, using their local expertise to fairly and understandably meet these local requirements.

Our area is truly constrained in terms of planning. We have the South Downs National Park to the south, and the impacts of constrained coastal communities and its overspill, with the High Weald AONB to the north, and Ashdown Forest to the east. In essence, I understand from local Councillors that about 60% of Mid Sussex's land area is constrained. MSDC are now trying to deliver the significant, additional housing requirements into an extremely restricted area. Additional problems now restrain planning to the west following Natural England's decision on water neutrality – you will be aware of this matter affecting 3 Councils in West Sussex, which again puts strain on us and other areas continuing to push duty to cooperate onto us means we are truly in an invidious situation.

My Councillors and Parishes have all told me they believe significant measures are needed to support the South East and 'level up' more positively, and I know it will always be impossible to make everyone happy on this difficult matter, but I am certain we can and must do better on housing and protecting our communities, while supporting our villages and highstreets to thrive, before it's too late for rural areas like Mid Sussex. I would like us to absolutely challenge the methodology on housing need and projected housing numbers required following recent updated ONS data.

I have very strongly supported the 'pause' on the process, due to the clarity of required action on this matter and all of the above. I urgently ask that you meet with West Sussex MPs and Council Leaders to discuss this matter further and help us to find alternative solutions, given the constraints on our delivery of the current legislation. We have been determined previously to deliver a well-supported district plan, it is now proving impossible to bring the updated one forward. This will leave the area in an even more precarious situation, due to the lack of a sustainable, updated and justifiable local plan.

My Council has always taken its duties and responsibilities seriously in plan making to protect our communities. It's with a heavy heart that I respectfully convey these messages on my constituents' and Councillors' behalf that we are unable to move forward with the great responsibility set before them, despite huge efforts so far to achieve an updated plan. However, it is vital we share with the department this grave situation and ask for your strongest support and guidance as soon as possible.

Yours ever,

Mims

Mims Davies MP

Cc The Rt Hon Stuart Andrew MP