



# UCKFIELD TOWN COUNCIL

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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

12 March 2022

Dear Mr Gove,

Uckfield Town Council are writing to explain our thoughts and concerns on the current situation regarding planning in our Town and District, and to show support to our neighbouring parishes who have recently written to you. We are aware of the discussions that you have had with District Councillors at Wealden District Council but cannot stress enough the importance of further discussions with all parties involved.

As I'm sure you are aware, Wealden is a rural and agricultural district, with beautiful, varied and unspoilt landscapes and views. It has undeveloped coastal cliffs, beaches and broad mix of countryside characteristics which incorporate ancient woodlands, forests and heathland to patchworks of medieval fields, parklands, open rolling downs and prime agricultural land supporting wildlife habitats essential for climate change control. Small towns and villages within East Sussex are typically constructed along minor roads and with limited infrastructure make them incompatible with transport for more urbanised districts. The wealth of historic and timber-framed, flint and thatched buildings, with limited or no frontages/gardens is also typical of the South East of England.

As councillors, we represent the views of our parishioners who have frequently voiced their concerns to us on the unprecedented levels of house building take place across Wealden.

Uckfield is one of five market towns within Wealden District and one of 42 parishes. It is a unique town within Wealden with a number of geographical constraints as a result of the railway and, River Uck and its key tributaries (which is subject to frequent flooding). There are narrow roads and many character cottages which have short frontages directly onto the roadside, meaning there is limited or no parking facilities. The community and leisure facilities are oversubscribed, and located in the mid and north of the town and current development is being built to the mid and south of the town with further proposals coming forward on the eastern, western and northern sides (including along the defined development boundary but over the boundary line). This is putting further strain on an already congested highway system. There is only one road through the centre of town and with a single carriageway bypass located to the west of the town there is limited space for expansion.

It is important to emphasise that we are not opposed to house building but challenge the quantity, size, affordability and placement of vast developments which are not being supported by adequate infrastructure leaving our roads congested, increases in air pollution and a knock on impact on natural habitats such as the Ashdown Forest. There is a limited supply of school places, doctors, dentists and medical facilities in this area. This quantity of housing is also reducing our much needed available agricultural land supplies, it is being built on areas of outstanding natural beauty and flood plains putting thousands of homes and businesses at risk of flooding in addition to irreparably damaging ecology and diversity.

Developers are not supplying the affordable housing at prices our community can afford along with omitting the provision of adequate eco-friendly features needed for future generations. They are not building level-access accommodation (bungalow-type) homes for the increasing elderly population or less mobile.

The Local Plan for Wealden which is currently being prepared will use the figures suggested in the Planning Inspector's (refusal) report, of 1,231 new homes per annum throughout Wealden, and "*carefully consider and test the potential unmet housing needs of neighbouring planning authorities.*"

Wealden DC are planning to see the delivery of nearly three times more dwellings than their nearest neighbours. See below:

Eastbourne: Core Strategy Local Plan (February 2013)  
5,022 (2006-2027) 239 p.a.

Hastings: Hastings Planning Strategy (February 2014)  
3,400 (2011-2028) 200 p.a.

Lewes: Joint Core Strategy (June 2016)  
6,900 (2010-2030) 345 p.a.

Rother: Core Strategy (September 2014)  
5,700 (2011-2028) 335 p.a.

Wealden: Core Strategy (January 2019)  
14,228 (2013-2028) 949 p.a.

From 2017/18 to 2019/20 the requirement for new houses for Wealden went up from 499 to 1,236, which is an increase of 226%. In the same three-year period, new homes delivered in Wealden increased from 491 to 1,034 (210% increase).

Notwithstanding this large increase, our district failed to deliver the quota demanded by the Ministry, as we achieved 83% for the Housing Delivery Test. We were therefore penalised with an increase to our 5 Year Land Supply by a buffer of 20%, resulting in a 5 Year Land Supply figure of 7,440. Although Wealden has presently given approvals for over 8,000 new homes, the projected completions within five years currently amount to a 3.6 years' supply. Having been unable to keep up with the increasing demands from the Ministry, our district now has to operate under the presumption in favour of development, which means that it loses the appeals against its own planning decisions. The local planning authority is therefore not able to deliver its objectively assessed local housing needs or place development in the more sustainable locations within the district.

This has resulted in a “free for all” by developers on rich bio-diverse agricultural land which is distant (actual distance) from everyday facilities and without any realistic expectation that public transport or cycling could provide a viable alternative to the car. This then contradicts the objectives of Wealden District Council’s Climate Change agenda and that of the UK Government in their intentions to become carbon neutral.

It should also be noted that the vast majority of housing being built in Wealden is executive style housing. This is not representative of the size of homes needed for households in the town, district and county. And, despite the unprecedented levels of house building in Wealden, the district is still not meeting the needs of the local population in terms of affordability. See appendix A.

This issue has been exacerbated further since the Covid-19 pandemic, with local estate agents inundated with enquiries from people looking to move to the countryside and coast following a change in working patterns and risk of infection and has resulted in an uplift in sale and rental prices in this area, as a result.

The National Planning Policy Framework clearly sets out:  
*“to help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right types is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth, innovation and improved productivity; and by identifying and coordinating the provision of infrastructure”*

The job market has been irrevocably changed following the impact of Covid 19 and the change specifically of shopping habits, travel and further use of AI especially in warehouse and delivery settings. The UK Government’s plans to ‘level up’ work opportunities in the civil service and possibly locate some government departments to York is likely to have a huge impact on job opportunities in the South. The collapse of the airline industry due to Covid and the expectation that it could be five years or more before Gatwick airport recovers from this will reduce job opportunities for the whole of the South East let alone Uckfield and Wealden District. Short-term gain from building large scale developments will not be sustainable in the long term and the economic impact on Uckfield, Wealden and surrounding towns and villages will be profound. It could also result in homes built lying dormant and empty, with knowledge already of a large scale development in this area struggling to sell its new homes at sale value.

The way that agricultural land is being used is changing, and in an area where agricultural land has traditionally been a source of work and provision of food, any further loss of agricultural land in Wealden is significant. The total land area of the UK amounts to over 24 million hectares with more than 75% of that being used for farming. Whilst self-sufficient in products like barley, wheat, milk, lamb and mutton, the UK still imports large amounts of fruit and vegetables and other farm products including pork.

The UK runs a food, feed and drink trade deficit of £18.6bn and the UK population is expected to exceed 70 million by 2030, this extra demand for living space and food will have a major impact on the way land is used. The UK Government is committed to using bioenergy crops such as miscanthus as renewable sources of energy, further limiting the stock of land for food. It is suggested that all these factors will require an extra seven million hectares of land by 2030 which could provide job opportunities in Wealden and protect our landscapes and natural habitats.

Wealden already produces 47% of its emissions through traffic and 35% through housing, how can it be acceptable that this is to be increased again and again. Uckfield not only absorbs the new builds in Uckfield, it also is the gateway for the new builds from Hailsham, Polegate, Horsebridge etc. So how much carbon emission is being produced by stationary vehicles, sitting in traffic jams up and down the town at least twice a day?

The carbon footprint of building a new two bedroomed house has been calculated at 80 tonnes (over eight times a UK citizen's current average annual footprint, which has to be reduced by 80 per cent by 2050).

New homes need maintaining, as does the infrastructure associated with them: streets, lighting, electricity, sewers, gas and telecommunications etc. Wealden is a 'water stressed area,' so where will all the fresh water come from for all these new dwellings?

- Average per person per day = 142 litres of water
- Average household = 349 litres of water each day.
- Estimated 4000 new houses for Uckfield alone = 1396000 litres per day

We therefore question how this could possibly be sustainable when there are no extra reservoirs in Wealden being built. If a new reservoir is built it might not happen for ten to twenty years.

When you attended the Conservative conference chaired by Maria Caulfield at the East Sussex National near Uckfield, both our Town Mayor and local commercial estate agent Mr Lawson advised you that we are being bullied by the developers into having what they want and not what we as a town and district need. One recent planning application even suggested the removal of a prominent building from our high street within their application!

We urge the UK Government to look again at the housing numbers for Wealden, to look at the lack of infrastructure, the irreparable changes to our ecology and diversity, the pressure that will be placed on potential for increased flood risk and effects on climate change.

The long 'talked about' term of 'localism' was never experienced at the grass roots level of parish and district councils. Towns and parishes know the history and constraints of their landscapes and would know where would be most appropriate to put the right houses in the right places supported by adequate infrastructure. Therefore we cannot continue to let developers dictate, and see rural settlements expanding in unsuitable places to increase their profit margins. It is essentially destroying the very nature of the countryside that we have been left custodians of.

This letter outlines our extreme concerns regarding the huge burden being placed on us and we hope you will consider the points raised in new strategies for levelling up and house building.

Yours faithfully

Councillor Karen Bedwell  
Chair of Plans Committee  
Uckfield Town Council

## Appendix A

### Size of properties

Estimated that between 2019-2023 there will be an increase of 12,170 (8.4%) people aged over 65, and 4.3% of the East Sussex population will be aged over 85 years, (greater than the 2.7% proportion of England) therefore ranking East Sussex as having the second highest population of 85 year olds in England.

Yet there is limited provision through the increase in development for those of an older age and those requiring support services e.g. assisted living. Bungalows are not being built or what was previously referred to as lifetime homes (*homes easily adaptable for a range of abilities and age groups*).

### Affordability

In 2018 the median house price in East Sussex was £278,500. This is ten times the average salary of £28,746 compared to England = £239,000 (8 x salary of £29,869).

In Wealden District, the average house price is £377,858 with a gross income of £85k per annum and a deposit of £75K needed to buy.

The average wage in Wealden = £28.4k (female) £35.3k (male) means that these large housing developments which start their 2-bedroom property values at £350k/£375k are not sustainable for residents in Wealden.

This issue has been exacerbated further since the Covid-19 pandemic, with local estate agents inundated with enquiries from people looking to move to the countryside and coast following a change in working patterns and risk of infection and an uplift in sale and rental prices as a result.

A couple earning £50,284 gross (take home pay £3,143 per month) buying a 3-bedroom house would lose more than one third of their salary to mortgage/rental payments.

### Poverty/deprivation

It must also be understood that Wealden is **not** as affluent as most consider it to be, and when residents in poverty are living cheek by jowl with wealthier households, the matter is exacerbated even further. Many residents are earning below the average wage with approximately 32% earning between £0-£20k per year and 40% earning £0-40k per annum.

- Uckfield East Ward 2019: 28% living in poverty – 2022 (28% still in poverty);
- Uckfield Newtown Ward 2019: 27.3% living in poverty – 2022 (26% still in poverty)
- Uckfield North Ward 2019: 32% living in poverty – 2022 (32% still in poverty)
- Uckfield Ridgewood and Little Horsted Ward 2019: 15% living in poverty – 2022 (15% still in poverty) Earning between £0-£20k a year.

Percentage of households whose income falls between £0-£40k in Uckfield by ward:  
Uckfield East 60%;  
Uckfield Newtown 56%;  
Uckfield North 63%;  
Uckfield Ridgewood and Little Horsted 42%;

### **Housing need**

- 640 households on the Housing Register;
- In 2019/20 there were 347 lettings by the Council or Housing Associations.
- 50% of applicants need 1 bedroom but 18% of stock is 1 bedroom
- 18% of applicants need 3 bedroom but 31% of stock is 3 bedroom.
- Therefore, mismatch between needs of qualifying households and supply.
- Affordable housing delivery - 2019/20 -275 2020/21 - 197

### **Increase in cost of living**

Average property rent in Uckfield in the month ending January 2022 was £1,442 pcm and a median rent of £1,138 pcm;

Average council tax band D will increase in Uckfield by £88.53p if approved. This means band D will go from £2,150.66p to £2,239.19p;

Average rent in Wealden = £900

Studio flat £550, 1bed- £685, 2 bed- £850, 3 bed-£1,075

Average UK energy bills by house size:

Small house (1-2 beds) £66pcm,

Medium house (3 beds) £97pcm,

Large house (4+ beds) £137pcm with energy set to increase by 54% in April with a predicted increase of 20% in October.

Most households in Uckfield are medium sized (3 bed) using these data and this means the average households' energy bill will be £149.38p pcm

UK average water bill £33.05p pcm

All this added up means that the average household in Uckfield living in rental accommodation without any clothing, food or basic living goods like the internet or car is costing in the region of £21,732.16p. This means that in Uckfield East ward 28% can't meet the average cost of living, Uckfield New Town ward 26% can't meet the average cost of living, Uckfield North 32% can't meet the average cost of living and in Uckfield Ridgewood 15% can't meet the average cost of living. And this is supposedly an affluent area!