

Working Group against Overdevelopment
c/o Clerk to Chiddingly Parish Council
Springwood
Back Lane
Cross in Hand
East Sussex

12 December 2022

By e-mail

The Right Honourable Theresa Villiers MP & Robert Seely MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Ms Villiers and Mr Seely,

We are writing on behalf of the Working Group against Overdevelopment (WGOD) whose aims are supported by 41 out of the 42 Town and Parish Councils in Wealden, a group of 11 Low Weald Parish Councils in Lewes and the Rother Association of Local Councils (consisting of two town councils and 29 parish councils). Together, we represent the majority of the rural populace of East Sussex.

With the withdrawal of your new clauses to the Levelling Up Bill, we are very concerned that what Mr Gove is intending, will have absolutely no impact on the existing so-called local housing need that our respective LPAs face. Mr Gove's genuine constraints will provide no relief to the current excess overdevelopment.

Each of our districts of Lewes, Rother and Wealden have and continue to be subject to excess development; as being rural districts, this predominantly

occurs on our green field land. The cause of this overdevelopment is the standard method, which purports to provide the 'local housing need'. This is an appalling misuse of the English language as the natural rate of population growth in each of our three districts is negative, meaning that our real local housing need can never be represented by the standard method. For example, the standard method would require Wealden to plan to increase its housing stock by 35% over a 20-year plan period, which is a ludicrous number when our existing population is naturally falling.

Therefore, we were very heartened with your proposed planning amendments to the Levelling Up Bill, notably NC 21 and the number of like-minded supporters that you had gathered. We had hoped that your proposed changes would be accepted by government and we could look then forward to an immediate relief from the current excessive development.

But on reading through the sketchy detail contained in Michael Gove's two letters to MPs dated 5 December and his WMS, we are now very concerned that his proposals fall considerably short of the measures you proposed in your new clauses. Although we are very supportive of your changes to the five-year supply of land etc., we will concentrate in this note purely on the standard method, your new clause 21, which we firmly believe is the largest cause of the overdevelopment blighting our rural surroundings.

Mr Gove has promised to consult on the standard method (and a c12 further related issues) and outlined the proposed potential changes. However, the intention to undertake a consultation on changes to the standard method falls woefully short of what your new clause 21 would have provided. We consider that the status of the standard method may not even change – it was always the starting point for assessing the housing requirement and it appears that this is intended to remain. That PINS chose to interpret the guidance as meaning that the housing need figure became the minimum housing requirement, ran counter

to the PPG (and we do not believe that their approach was not sanctioned by ministers).

Furthermore, we are very disappointed that Mr Gove has not mentioned any change to the method of calculating the standard method local housing need. We refer to the totally inappropriate use of the well out of date 2014 Household Projections, combined with the use of the affordability factor. In many instances, the use of this factor totally fails to increase affordability but has the completely opposite effect – it further decreases overall affordability for every new additional home that is built. Thus, as both the inputs are perverse, it is no wonder that the standard method completely fails to assess the local housing need. Its continued use should be regarded as inexcusable by anybody concerned with trying to logically address our housing issues.

Mr Gove has outlined areas whereby the housing requirement can be less than the figure derived from the standard method; this being when there are “genuine constraints”. But the suggested genuine constraints are of little benefit to all of our towns and parishes in the Low Weald and unless the constraints can be considerably expanded, we will likely still be faced with the current, excessive number for the housing requirement. Thus, the considerable overdevelopment will continue.

Mr Gove proposes that genuine constraints include the Green Belt, National Parks, heritage assets, areas of flood risk and character. However, the first four of these constraints already currently gain protection under the NPPF. Is it proposed that this protection be strengthened in the forthcoming revision to the NPPF or that PINS is instructed to more objectively consider these constraints rather than simply focusing on boosting the supply of housing at the exclusion of everything else, or both? We currently don't know, do you?

There is no Green Belt land in Sussex, meaning that we cannot claim any relief from the standard method on this score. The South Downs National Park is the planning authority for that area meaning that all other East Sussex authorities are minimally impacted by the protection afforded to the National Park. East Sussex does have land within the flood zone, but sensibly, the rural LPAs do not grant permission for housing in these areas. The High Weald AONB stretches right across East Sussex, but the standard method does not recognise the effect of this protected landscape and anticipates that the majority of its highly inflated housing need will be accommodated on that rural land that is not afforded protection. There does not appear to be any change to this approach offered by Mr Gove.

Thus, the only one of the list of genuine constraints given by Mr Gove that could provide relief to our districts is that of character and he gives the example of a high-rise development being inappropriate in a low-rise area. In a similar vein, we would consider that development of green fields would be a considerable and unwelcome change in its character. But we have grave doubts whether the government or PINS would agree with this position. All too often, green fields are seen as simply as a resource available for development. Thus, with the standard method surviving unchanged together with a list of genuine constraints that are largely inapplicable to the majority of our areas, we are unable to take any comfort whatsoever from Mr Gove's proposed changes with regard to the standard method.

Your proposed new clauses did propose considerable leeway, but Mr Gove has firmly closed that down for our LPAs. The devil is in the detail and although not much detail has been provided, what there has, is not considered helpful at all. Furthermore, Mr Gove's proposed new changes are not guaranteed to occur, but to be consulted upon. We are certain that the very well-funded development industry will be firmly against any relaxation of the status quo and Mr Gove's current proposals could well be subsequently rendered even less effective following the consultation.

Given that Mr Gove has only proposed the recent changes due to the support that you have gained for your new clauses, now that these have been withdrawn, it is inconceivable that he will voluntarily address the shortcomings in his proposals that we have highlighted above.

Thus, after initially taking great heart from your proposed new clauses, we are now very concerned that on their withdrawal, we will likely be left with a revised system that retains as far as our rural East Sussex authorities are concerned, minimal changes from the detested standard method.

Unfortunately, it thus appears from Mr Gove's letters and WMS that our current overdevelopment is likely to continue largely unchecked. Is there any way that you could further prevail upon Mr Gove to achieve changes that will provide real relief from overdevelopment to our rural areas?

Yours sincerely,

Nikos Mikelis

Chairman Chiddingly Parish Council

Nick Beaumont

Chairman Plumpton Parish Council

David Young

Chairman Ewhurst Parish Council

cc:

41 Wealden Councils:

Alciston;

Alfriston;

Arlington;

Berwick;

Buxted;

Chalvington with Ripe;

East Sussex MPs

Caroline Ansell MP

Maria Caulfield MP

Nusrat Ghani MP

Sally-Ann Hart MP

Huw Merriman MP

Chiddingly;
Crowborough;
Cuckmere Valley;
Dane Hill;
East Hoathly with Halland;
Fletching;
Forest Row;
Framfield;
Frant;
Hadlow Down;
Hailsham;
Hartfield;
Heathfield and Waldron;
Hellingly;
Herstmonceux;
Hooe;
Horam;
Isfield;
Laughton;
Little Horsted;
Long Man;
Maresfield;
Mayfield & Five Ashes;
Ninfield;
Pevensey;
Polegate;
Rotherfield;
Selmeston;
Uckfield;
Wadhurst;
Warbleton;

Wartling;
Westham;
Willingdon & Jevington; and
Withyham.

11 Lewes Councils:

Barcombe;

Chailey;

Ditchling;

East Chiltington;

Hamsey;

Newick;

Plumpton;

Ringmer;

Streat;

Westmeston;

Wivelsfield;

Rother Association of Local Councils

Wealden District Association of Local Councils

Susan King - Sussex Express