



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

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Dear David,

Thank you for your letter on behalf of Standlake Parish Council about the Government's consultation on planning reform. It is always valuable for me to hear from town and parish councils as well as constituents on important matters such as this. I am very grateful to you for taking the time to write and I do appreciate you have a number of concerns.

Whilst building new homes is never popular, the reality is that for decades, as the population of the UK has swelled dramatically, we have failed to build enough homes to keep up with demand which has vastly outstripped supply. The best estimate is that only half the required amount has been built, leading to inflated prices. The reality in terms of lives, not statistics, is that a generation of young people find it increasingly difficult to afford a home of their own.

In West Oxfordshire, we need to provide good quality, affordable homes for people born and brought up in the area. I have spent a great deal of time over the last four years going and speaking to pupils at our local schools and it is striking (and upsetting in equal measure) to be repeatedly told by Sixth Form students that they do not feel they have any prospect of being able to find somewhere to buy or rent in our area. This is without question the number one concern amongst young people in our area and, indeed, the country at large.

The Coronavirus outbreak has only highlighted this issue further. For some this has been an opportunity to spend more time in the place they call home with the people they love. For others this has been a moment where longstanding issues in our planning system have come to the fore. For those in small, substandard homes, those unable to walk to distant shops or parks, those struggling to pay their rent, or indeed for those who do not have a home of their own at all. For these people, we must do something.

I know that building homes is always controversial, particularly in a beautiful rural area like ours, where all proposals are sensitive. I am conscious that for some, these proposals will be seen as too much change too quickly. But we must do something: the system we have now simply does not work.

It is worth examining what is currently wrong with the current process, before moving to the Government's proposals.

Firstly, it is far too complex. Since the creation of this nationalised and discretionary system in 1947, decades of reform have built complexity, uncertainty and delay into the system. What is strikingly clear is that the current system works for large developers and investors but does not work for those without significant resources.



Secondly, it is discretionary, not rules-based. Decisions are made on a case-by-case basis rather than based on a clear set of rules. This makes England an international exception: no other country does it like us – for good reason. Furthermore, this leaves decisions overturned at appeal at an unacceptably high rate: 36% for major applications and 30% for minor applications. This has an unacceptable price in terms of money lost for local communities in legal fees that councils must pay.

Furthermore, the system takes too long and is based on outdated technology. Whether it is a small development, or a council's Local Plan, it takes far too long to navigate the planning process. Aside from the complexity, this is partly down to the outdated technology the process relies on. This is made up of legacy software, relying on documents not data, and sometimes places far too much emphasis on the opinions of a single council official which can often differ from day to day and across authorities.

Another point I am sure you would agree on is that the existing system does not place enough emphasis on building design and appearance, which has significantly impacted public confidence in the planning process. It is not a revelation to anyone that public confidence in the system has reached an all-time low. This has only been accentuated by the unsatisfactory developments that people have had to put up with in their communities.

In an area like West Oxfordshire housing design is particularly important, which is why I have always been a champion of vernacular architecture. In West Oxfordshire this will often mean using Cotswold stone and slate roofs, ensuring new homes are within keeping with existing towns and villages.

Key to this, in my view, is greater use of local small builders, of which there are some superb examples in West Oxfordshire. Someone who was born locally, who works locally, whose company builds houses locally and whose children go to the local school and stay in the area long after the houses have been built and have weathered into the environment will ensure that their housing complements the area instead of blighting it.

The result of long-term and persisting undersupply is that housing is becoming increasingly expensive, including relative to our European neighbours. In Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, you can get twice as much housing space for your money compared to the UK. We need to address the inequalities this has entrenched.

For all these reasons, the Government has created the following five-step plan to fix the system for good:

1. Streamline the planning process with more democracy more effectively. In practice, this means simplifying and strengthening the role of the local plan. Local authorities should create local plans that designate land into three categories: Growth, Renewal and Protected. Growth areas where outline approval would be automatically secured, Renewal where some development is permitted, with Protected being self-explanatory.
2. A radical, digital approach to modernising the planning process. Moving from paper-based processes to data driven decisions, streamlining the process and resulting in better outcomes for buyers and communities across the country.



3. A new focus on design and sustainability. This will ensure the process supports our efforts to combat climate change and maximise environmental benefits. The system will insist on beauty and be far more ambitious for the places we create, expecting new development to be attractive, and to create a 'net gain' not just 'no net harm'. It will also introduce a quicker, simpler framework for assessing environmental impacts and enhancement opportunities.
4. Improve infrastructure delivery in all parts of the country and ensure developers play their part through reform of developer contributions. Reform the Community Infrastructure Levy and the current system of planning obligations into the value-based flat rate: the Infrastructure Levy. This levy should raise more than the current system and develop as much if not more affordable housing on-site as of now. This will streamline the process and eliminate the time-draining Section 106 negotiations.
5. A new nationally determined binding housing requirement on local authorities to deliver through their local plans. This would be focused on areas where affordability pressure is highest to stop land supply being a barrier to enough homes being built. This would of course factor in land constraints, including the Green Belt, and would be consistent with the aspiration of creating a housing market that is capable of delivering 300,000 homes annually.

These proposals are radical and ambitious. But as I have explained above, they are ultimately necessary and will provide benefits for everyone involved. For residents, they will be able to engage in a much more democratic and accessible process. It will restore local communities' trust in the planning process. They will know the rules, the local plan and be better informed of the progress through technology.

Businesses and entrepreneurs will benefit from a planning system designed for the 21st Century that can adapt to the changing needs of the economy. A greater amount of land available near to workplaces, and a more flexible approach to how that land can be used, will make it much easier for firms to set up and expand in the most productive locations. Small builders, housing associations and those building their own home will also benefit from the new system which levels the playing field for planning, taking away the advantage big business has currently.

Local authorities will be liberated to plan and able to focus on what they do best, with the shackles of current burdensome assessments and negotiations removed. They will be able to give more attention to improving the quality of new development and focus on those large and special sites that need the most consideration.

Crucially, for our children and grandchildren these reforms will help us to leave an inheritance of environmental improvement: environmental assets protected, green space provided, sustainable development supported, an emphasis on biodiversity and planting trees, new energy efficient homes and more.



I do note your concerns on the use of an 'algorithm' in these proposals. However, as I have explained above it is crucial that we modernise the planning process. It is also worth noting that the use of technology including artificial intelligence and 'algorithms' is commonplace in public policy and everyday life in 2020.

In forming a view on these proposals it is essential we consider the evidence and the data. Looking at the numbers it is encouraging to see that West Oxfordshire would only see an increase of 90 houses per year if we were to build the proposed standard's requirement compared to the current standard. In reality, West Oxfordshire's Local Plan proposes our local building requirement which is currently above that of the algorithm's proposed standard. Therefore, if we were to build the proposed standard's requirement instead of the Local Plan, we would actually reduce annual building in West Oxfordshire. Furthermore, in West Oxfordshire we delivered an average of 625 homes annually over the last three years while the new standard would require 653, an increase of just 28 homes a year.

Looking briefly at the proposed standard for neighbouring areas, we see a clear vindication of West Oxfordshire District Council's Local Plan. Areas with building most significantly increased by this algorithm are those that do not have Local Plans, that have not made difficult but correct decisions and have not been led by decisive, competent leaders. West Oxfordshire is a perfect example of what a well-run and well led council looks like. With some areas of the country now looking at hundreds more homes a year, this is a huge victory for our local strategy and shows how lucky we are in West Oxfordshire.

Whilst I support the plans that have been outlined by the Government, they are now subject to a public consultation, giving everyone a chance to have your say on the Government's proposals. I would very much encourage all constituents, the individual members of the Parish Council and the Council itself to respond formally to the consultation which will ensure your voices are heard. To access the full White Paper and respond to the consultation, please head to this website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future>

I am grateful to you for taking the time to write to me and for sharing the Parish Council's views on this important matter.

Robert Courts MP