

Draft Briefing and Lobbying 'Open Letter' to the Minister of State for Housing and Planning

We the undersigned Parishes within the Ashford Borough consider that national planning legislation and policy have become far too heavily weighted in favour of speculative developers and against proper democratic local policy-led decision making.

Smaller communities with valuable rural assets deserve to be better protected from developers, who can manipulate planning laws to acquire piecemeal many of our vital, and often historic, green spaces, cumulatively making huge changes to our environment and local infrastructure. Such spaces would be planned into larger developments, but in villages we are very vulnerable to unplanned losses of land and amenity, with no benefit to the community in return.

We recognise that there will inevitably be more house building (though the methods for deciding where and how many need more local consultation and review) and we simply ask that this is achieved without destroying our heritage.

The following matters must be rectified so that elected local borough and district council members, (as well as town and parish members) can better make decisions which fully comply with locally led planning policies within the national framework:

1. The NPPF paragraph 14 needs to be altered so that failure to meet the requirement for a five year housing land supply does not automatically override existing and otherwise valid planning policies. A recent Supreme Court judgment (10 May 2017)¹ goes a long way towards restoring the proper weight which should be given to such policies, whether or not there is a 5-year housing land supply shortfall. Government should be leading the way to implement this interpretation within the drive for development, so that growth does not lead to the destruction of healthy, currently sustainable communities.
2. Furthermore, the question and test of **sustainability** in these circumstances needs to be better defined nationally and then maintained during planning decisions. Either a site is sustainable or it is not, therefore it should not be a variable position depending on whether or not there is a technical housing shortfall. This is particularly the case where developers are stockpiling land and not building on it, thereby reducing the LPA's housing land supply - a patently unfair situation. LPAs must have the power to impose financial penalties on developers that gain permission to build, and then choose not to complete the building programme within a defined time.
3. Through the Government White Paper, the NPPF needs to redress the imbalance of weight given to developers. Rather than penalise or criticise LPAs for apparent slowness in bringing land forward, we now have a situation where economic constraints slowed or even stopped

¹ insert case reference/link and add as appendix to full dossier

house building in the slump period of 2008/9, for example. Nonetheless, LPAs are expected to deliver from a developer-created historical shortfall that has carried on, year on year regardless of the variations in the country's economic situation. This cannot be right.

4. The method for determining the actual five year housing land supply needs to be radically revised. It is a rolling year on year requirement which dates back too far. It also seems to be fuelled more by developer profits - building homes for commuters - than by local needs. The 'required numbers' for ABC are not currently within our purview [to be ascertained]; however we do know that the historical knock-on effect makes it very difficult for LPAs (not just Ashford) to ever catch up. A line needs to be drawn in the sand whereby realistic numbers are created taking account of historical economic up and down turns. **This must also include true and accurate assessments of local needs.**
5. The NPPF also needs to provide that **all** villages and defined communities have a **proper "green belt"** of land that is completely protected from any form of encroaching development. This will maintain separation and definition of that village and community and ensure that conurbations and other defined developments do not absorb such communities without suitable green space. In its proposed Local Plan, Ashford Borough Council has introduced the concept of preventing 'coalescence' of villages and their satellite areas by protecting a surrounding area of open countryside, which we commend.
6. Neighbourhood Plans, Village Envelopes and Village Landscape Protection Policies need to be given full weight through the Local Plan process, irrespective of any perceived shortage in the five year supply. Again, the Supreme Court judgment seems to give clear guidance for decision makers by narrowing the scope of the term 'policies for the supply of housing'.
7. The NPPF also needs to emphasise the importance of assessing and taking account of the **cumulative effects** of major development on existing local and nearby communities and the often serious impact on fragile rural infrastructure.
8. When assessing development, the NPPF must afford greater importance and weight to village heritage and local green spaces in terms of their value to local communities and their visitors. Our part of Kent contains some of the loveliest rural landscapes in the UK, and Ashford Borough has more listed buildings than any other in the county. Their loss, or the destruction of their settings, would be catastrophic for new as well as established communities here, and for the many local businesses which depend on visitor numbers for their success.
9. Parish and Town Councils know their areas. Pressures on LPAs to aim for a 5-year housing supply mean that sites are being included in local plans primarily because they appear deliverable within this time frame, whether or not they are the most suitable. In the spirit of localism, LPAs should be encouraged to openly consult with Parish and Town Councils where there is intention to impose development, whether in terms of specific sites or rates of growth.

10. Due weight must be given to the adverse impacts on the quality of life of residents when LPAs give priority for development that delivers housing within five years regardless of any necessary infrastructure, including medical and schooling needs, roads, drainage and broadband networks. There is a real danger of creating upmarket versions of sink estates, with no jobs, no cohesive communities and no effective support services, all in the name of 'growth'.

11. Rural communities used to grow organically. We recognise that our area is expected to deliver a disproportionate amount of new housing, compared with existing numbers, over a relatively short time. We will work with government to achieve this and are confident that it will be quicker and more cost-effective to consult and collaborate locally, before finalising plans for expansion, than to try and impose inappropriate development on existing communities, which will ultimately be unsustainable.

We ask the Minister of State to consider these points as a matter of urgency in order to assist with a much-needed adjustment of the government's national housing policy, to allow all local communities to take their rightful and constructive place in the future development of our nation.

Signed by the following Parish and Town Councils:

Council	Name	Designation
Aldington & Bonnington		
Appledore		
Bethersden		
Biddenden		
Bilsington		
Boughton Aluph		
Brabourne		
Brook		
Challock		
Charing		
Chilham		
Crundale		
Eastwell		
Egerton		
Godmersham		
Great Chart with Singleton		
Hastingleigh		
High Halden		
Hothfield		
Kenardington		
Kingsnorth		
Little Chart		
Mersham		
Molash		
Newenden		
Orlestone		
Pluckley		

Rolvenden		
Ruckinge		
Sevington		
Shadoxhurst		
Smarden		
Smeeth		
Stanhope		
Stone-cum-Ebony		
Tenterden		
Warehorne		
Westwell		
Wittersham		
Woodchurch		
Wye (with Hinxhill)		

draft 10.07.17