

NEWS RELEASE



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

Date: 20 January 2023
Issued by: James Burton

Issue No: 013/23
Version: 0.1

YOUR CHANCE TO HELP CAMPAIGN FOR FAIRER DEAL ON NEW HOMES

Residents are urged to give their views on new Government proposals that could help Wokingham Borough Council's ongoing campaign to ensure the area takes a fairer share of housing in future.

Shortly before Christmas, following repeated calls to ministers by leader Cllr Clive Jones, the Government began consulting on revised policies which could let the council plan for a lower number of homes per year than in the past.

Everyone who lives or works in the borough is urged to respond before March 2 by visiting www.gov.uk and searching for "reforms to national planning policy".

A fairer deal on the horizon?

Like all local authorities, the council must assess local housing need using a standard, Government-imposed formula which currently requires it to plan for 781 homes per year.

Even if the council exceeds this - which it has done in recent years, taking about 1,700 more homes than required since it adopted its local plan in 2010 - it can't offset this by planning for fewer homes in future.

It is cautiously optimistic as the latest announcement seems to suggest that past over-provision of homes could be counted when looking ahead.

The proposals would make it harder for developers to overturn planning refusals by arguing the council hasn't secured enough housing land, as inspectors overseeing appeals would take recent over-provision into account.

They also say councils that plan responsibly will be better protected from less suitable, speculative development and remove the need to add a further five per cent “housing buffer” when working out how much available land they have.

The right number of homes, in the right places

Wokingham Borough's population has risen by about 15 per cent between 2011 and 2021, one of the largest increases in the South East against a national average of 6.6 per cent over the same period. The council believes it cannot keep up this level of growth.

The right amount and type of development brings benefits like affordable housing, high-quality infrastructure funded by developers and a chance for residents to remain locally, but the council fears excessive development will eventually have a damaging effect.

Its campaign is supported by Wokingham MP Sir John Redwood, former Prime Minister and Maidenhead MP Theresa May and Bracknell's MP James Sunderland.

Cllr Jones has also made direct appeals to Michael Gove MP, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and raised the issue with him in person when they met at the Local Government Association's annual conference last summer.

Changes would benefit the borough and beyond

The latest announcement appears to be a positive step but the council still disagrees with making every local authority work to a standard housing formula.

It argues that the planning system should assess the nation as a whole and positively decide where homes would best support other Government goals like “levelling-up”, which should spread economic opportunities as fairly as possible. This would be fairer for everyone as it would give a boost to areas, particularly those outside the South-East, where more housing would help to grow their economies.

As part of its duty to plan ahead by updating its local plan, the council consulted the public on a revised growth strategy for the borough between November 2021 and January last year.

Its analysis of more than 3,000 responses shows that all proposed housing sites, including those proposed for large-scale strategic development, drew objection from some in the community.

It must now balance these comments against the real need for housing as it plans for future growth, taking account of whatever may emerge through the Government's consultation.

Your chance to make a difference

Cllr Lindsay Ferris, executive member for planning and local plan, said: "We're pleased that the Government has committed to tackling inequality through its Levelling-Up agenda, which should include recognising the diverse needs of different communities.

"We've long been paying the price for a system that focuses growth in successful areas like ours, bringing excessive development, while other areas with more significant economic challenges unfairly miss out on the benefits the right development can bring.

"I also believe we need a period of stability to allow the borough's new developments to continue emerging as communities, instead of constantly having new homes built in or around them.

"I urge everyone to make the most of this opportunity to support our campaign for change. We'll keep battling to have our voices heard, but we'll have more impact with your voice on our side."

Looking ahead, the council will also emphasise the need for more genuinely affordable housing to be provided locally. This will include a higher amount of socially rented housing as well as a larger overall number of smaller homes with one, two or three bedrooms.

The borough needs more of these to help young people and families and those seeking their first property, as well as older people who want to downsize but continue living locally.

- ENDS -

Further information: More from Cllr Lindsay Ferris, executive member for planning and local plan, at lindsay.ferris@wokingham.gov.uk or Cllr Clive Jones, leader of Wokingham Borough Council, at clive.jones@wokingham.gov.uk