

CONTROVERSIAL PLANS QUIETLY DROPPED

Back to square one over homes targets

By Alan Smith
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Local authorities across Kent are breathing a sigh of relief after changes that would have increased government-imposed housing targets further were quietly dropped.

Housing ministers said they would consult on an adjustment to "the standard method for assessing Local Housing Need" - which is the starting point for all boroughs' Local Development Plans.

Although the proposed changes would have reduced housing targets in some northern counties, for the South East it would have resulted in universal increases.

In Swale, the borough council's existing Local Plan, passed in 2017, allowed for 776 new homes per year. That had already been revised upwards to 1,038 per year in the Local Plan Review, and the proposed change would have ramped it up still further to 1,483 homes per year.

Ten Kent MPs wrote a combined letter to the government protesting against further change, and the county's local authorities made similar protests.



'We suggest the government reconsider plans to turn the Garden of England into the concrete backyard'

of 1,038 is still far too high. It represents unsustainable and undemocratic imposition on local people. "We recognise this is the case across Kent, and suggest the government reconsider their ongoing plans to turn the Garden of England into the concrete backyard."

Building targets could have increased; top right, Cllr Mike Baldock; bottom right, housing minister Christopher Pincher

Now the change has been quietly dropped.

In a letter sent to all MPs in England, the Minister for State for Housing, Christopher Pincher, said: "Local housing need was introduced in the revised National Planning Policy Framework to provide a standard method for assessing local housing need.

"The Changes to the Current Planning System consultation,

published in August 2020, proposed updating the formula. Our objective was to ensure we are planning for the 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s as per our Manifesto commitment."

But as a result of responses received to the public consultation, Mr Pincher said: "We plan to leave the Local Housing Need method created in 2017 the same for the majority of local authorities."

Instead the government proposes to impose even greater increases on just 20 of the country's largest existing urban areas.

They will see their house-building targets ramped up by 35%.

Fortunately none of the 20 largest conurbations is in Kent.

Mr Pincher gave the list as being (in size order): London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds,

Leicester, Coventry, Bradford, Nottingham, Kingston upon Hull, Newcastle upon Tyne, Stoke-on-Trent, Southampton, Plymouth, Derby, Reading, Wolverhampton, and Brighton and Hove.

Cllr Mike Baldock (Swale Independent Alliance), the cabinet member for planning, said: "While we welcome the decision not to go ahead with the higher housing target, the lower figure

for authorities such as Tonbridge and Malling, and Sevenoaks, which contain large areas of protected Greenbelt land, Mr Pincher said: "Local housing is the first stage in a development plan.

"It does not set a target for the number of homes to be built - local planning authorities should take into account land supply considerations and environmental constraints before determining the number of homes likely to be delivered in the area."

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Elisabeth Heriz-Smith
(by email)

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Dear Ms Heriz-Smith,

Thank you for your letter of 25 February to the Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP about the changes to the standard method for calculating local housing need and the new housing numbers for Swale. We have been asked to reply on behalf of the Secretary of State. We sincerely apologise for the long delay in responding to you.

Due to the quasi-judicial role of Ministers in the Planning system, we hope you understand that we cannot comment on specific plans or proposals and can only comment in general terms.

Following consultation, in December we changed the standard method for calculating local housing need to help to deliver 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s, whilst continuing to protect the Green Belt and make best use of brownfield and urban centre land. This is to focus greater need into our biggest 20 cities and urban areas to maximise existing infrastructure and to support development that reduces the need for high-carbon travel. All other local authorities in England, including Swale, should see no change compared to the previous method, so will continue to calculate their local housing need in the same way as previously. The uplift in need within our biggest cities and urban centres in England will also support our wider objectives of regenerating brownfield sites, renewal and levelling up.

The Government does not set housing targets, the standard method is only the starting point for local authorities in identifying the housing need in a local area. It provides a minimum number of homes, not a maximum, and does not set a target. It is for local authorities to determine whether this figure can be delivered. In doing so, they should take into account their particular local circumstances, including land supply considerations and relevant constraints, before determining the number of homes likely to be built in the area. This recognises that, where available land is constrained, an area may need to plan for fewer new homes, or seek opportunities in neighbouring areas.

We understand Swale Council recently consulted on its draft plan which has reached the draft plan publication stage (Regulation 19). Hopefully you took the opportunity to make representations on the plan as it is important that local communities shape the future development of their local areas. Following consideration of the responses to the current consultation, it is likely that the plan will be submitted to the Secretary of State for examination in due course. The Secretary of State appoints an independent Inspector, who plays an important role in examining plans impartially to ensure that they are legally compliant and sound. Anyone who has submitted a representation during the consultation on the draft plan may make a request to be heard by the Inspector during the examination.

Thank you again for your letter. We hope you find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely

The Planning Policy and Reform Correspondence Team