



North Mymms District GREEN BELT SOCIETY

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Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
2 Marsham Street
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18th October 2021

Dear Secretary of State

“Not on Green Fields”: Welwyn Hatfield local plan housing targets and the Green Belt.

I am writing to you on behalf of the North Mymms District Green Belt Society to wish you well with your new responsibilities and especially those relating to planning. North Mymms is a parish within the borough of Welwyn Hatfield.

We are pleased and relieved at the announcement that you are pausing and reviewing the planning proposals being considered by your predecessor and particularly by the reports that you intend to reassess the current standard method for determining the housing targets that local authorities must include within their local plans.

This is of urgent concern to our society.

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, in an advanced stage of preparing its local plan, is faced by a demand from the inspector to meet an FHOAN of 15,200 dwellings that simply cannot be done without causing great harm to the Green Belt within the borough and damage to the historic reputation of Welwyn Garden City. Failure to meet the inspector's demand will likely lead to the plan being declared unsound and face the borough with an even larger housing target calculated under the current standard method. It may also open the borough to speculative planning applications that are approved on appeal by planning inspectors as has happened recently in our parish.

This is an intolerable situation for the local community and a huge threat to the Green Belt.

Fighting for the Green Belt since 1971

In recent years there have been many declarations from government ministers supporting the Green Belt. Regrettably, these have been more honoured in the breach than in the observance. The Prime Minister's emphatic statement, "not on green fields" at last week's party conference gives some hope that the government is indeed serious in its intentions.

As you know, Welwyn Hatfield council leaders have written to you seeking clarification of the Prime Minister's remarks. We strongly support their approach. We also urge you to hasten your review of the standard method for calculating local plan targets and to allow councils to suspend their preparation timetables until this has been done.

Much like building tractors in the old Soviet economy, the standard method allocates ambitious targets without regard for genuine local need or ability to provide.

Furthermore, the concept of "need" as currently applied is wholly inappropriate.

It is a statement of the obvious that Welwyn Hatfield, like other areas in Hertfordshire, is under great pressure from people seeking to move out of London. Research by Estate agents, Hamptons, as reported in the Welwyn Hatfield Times in August, shows that more than half the homes sold in the Borough in the first half of this year were purchased by Londoners. This is objective evidence of what we and others have been arguing for years — namely that the target of 15,200 does not reflect a local requirement.

We believe that local Authorities should set local plan targets using the most recent population and household formation projections by the ONS to reflect local need as tempered by land availability.

In the case of Welwyn Hatfield, the OAN is based on out of date population projections exacerbated by unrealistic "up lifts". Using the most recent ONS projections would indicate a target figure of under 10,000 dwellings for the plan period, not the 15,200 as demanded by the inspector. Clearly, the lower number would considerably alleviate the harm to the Green Belt in the borough that is currently envisaged.

To be successful in Hertfordshire, Green Belt policies must be applied more widely than at borough level. The "duty to co-operate" simply isn't working. Local authorities are failing to co-ordinate their proposed developments with the result that developments are threatened on Green Belt land adjacent to borough boundaries without regard for their impact on neighbouring areas and certainly not on the Green Belt overall. This is a particular problem for Welwyn Hatfield which shares boundaries with six other local authorities.

Indeed we believe, as does the London Green Belt Council, that the London Metropolitan Green Belt needs to be overseen holistically with policies for access, recreation and mental health as well as development.

We appreciate that this is a complex and difficult matter but urge you to move quickly to clarify uncertainty about the government's support for the Green Belt and allow a more sensible approach for Welwyn Hatfield.

I am copying this letter to Grant Shapps.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Nigel Matthews OBE
Chairman North Mymms District Green Belt Society