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**Subject:** Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan Targets and development in the Green Belt

**Date:** 10 December 2021 at 14:32:20 GMT

**To:** "[chairman@northmymmsgreenbelt.org.uk](mailto:chairman@northmymmsgreenbelt.org.uk)"  
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Dear Mr Matthews,

Thank you for your letter of 18 October to the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP about the preparation of the emerging Local Plan for Welwyn Hatfield and the protection of the Green Belt in the area from development. We have been asked to reply on behalf of the Secretary of State, as our Team has the responsibility for national planning policies in this area. Due to the quasi-judicial role of Ministers in the planning system we are unable to comment on a specific Local Plan or development proposal. We do hope, however, that you find the following information useful.

We would like to start by being very clear that this Government is firmly committed to protecting and enhancing the Green Belt for future generations, as set out in our manifesto, and these protections remain firmly in place. That's why national planning policy delivers strong protections, with two tests safeguarding the Green Belt. The first test: our National Planning Policy Framework prevents local authorities changing a Green Belt boundary unless there are exceptional circumstances and they can show that they have explored every other reasonable option: using brownfield land, optimising the density of development, and discussing whether neighbouring authorities can take some of the necessary development. The second test: most new buildings in Green Belt are inappropriate and should be refused planning permission unless there are very special circumstances, as determined by the local authority. We also want to draw your attention to Paragraph 11 of the Framework, which sets out the importance of areas providing for housing and other needs, unless the national policy protections for areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting development. These protections are listed in footnote 7 of the National Planning Policy Framework and include the Green Belt.

We would emphasise that the Government's priority for getting plans in place by the end of 2023 has not changed. After the consultation on the White Paper last year, the Minister of State for Housing reiterated the importance of having up to date plans in place in his Written Ministerial Statement of 19 January 2021. Plan makers should continue to prioritise getting up to date plans in place, under the relevant National Planning Policy Framework, by this date. This will ensure we can build back better and continue to deliver the homes that are needed across England. It is also the best way to protect an area from unplanned or speculative development. As further decisions are taken on any changes to the planning system, including any changes to Local Plan production, local authorities and other stakeholders will be kept informed.

To help achieve our manifesto commitment to deliver 300,000 homes annually by the mid 2020's, and one million homes over this Parliament, it is important that local authorities plan positively to meet their full housing needs. Our National Planning Policy Framework introduced the standard method for calculating local housing need which gives a starting point for local authorities in identifying the housing need in their area. I would emphasise that local housing need does not set a target for the number of homes to be built. Local authorities take into account land supply, constraints, such as Green Belt, and cooperation with neighbouring authorities on whether need should be shared, before deciding their housing requirement. This recognises that not everywhere will be able to meet their housing need in full. Local authorities can put forward a different approach to the standard method if they wish although a different method should only be used in exceptional circumstances and there should be a strong justification for doing so.

Each plan, including the figures that form the basis of the housing requirement, is subject to public examination in front of an independent Inspector, who will impartially determine whether it is legally compliant and sound. For a plan to be found legally compliant the local planning authority must show that all procedural requirements have been followed, and the local planning authority have complied with the duty to cooperate. Once found legally compliant, the plan is then examined to see whether it is 'sound'. These tests of soundness are set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. For a plan to be considered sound it must be positively prepared, justified, effective, and consistent with national policy, including Green Belt policy, where it is relevant.

Turning to the issue of the use of household projections, as part of our recent changes to local housing need policy, we carefully considered whether to use the 2018-based household projections and concluded at the time that, in the interests of stability for local planning and for local communities, the 2014-based projections would be used. After uncertainty due to COVID-19 it is particularly important to provide stability and certainty for plan-making and decision-making, so that local areas can get on and plan based on a method and level of ambition that they are familiar with.

We would stress that household projections produced by the Office for National Statistics are not a measure of how many homes are needed to meet demand; they simply show what would happen if past trends continue. The ONS has been clear that lower household projections do not mean fewer homes need to be built. In fact, they said that if new additional homes are not supplied then households cannot be formed as there would be nowhere for them to live. There are also other pressing factors at play, including the chronic affordability issues in many areas where demand for housing is high, as well as the historic under-delivery of new homes.

As you are aware, the Government are considering how best to take forward last year's proposals for planning reform, and an announcement on next steps will be made in due course. An integral part of reviewing the planning reforms is considering how they align with and support our wider mission to level-up the country and regenerate left-behind places.

With thanks again for writing in on these matters.

Yours sincerely

**Planning Policy and Reform Correspondence Team**