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Sue Murray

Thank you for your letter of 28 January regarding the Duty to Cooperate, Local Plans and the National Planning Policy Framework.

The Government is clear that this country has a serious housing need and local authorities have a common responsibility to meet it. We introduced the Duty to Cooperate to require authorities to work together effectively on strategic planning matters that cross their administrative boundaries, including housing. We expect authorities to explore all possible avenues to deliver their own housing needs and to accommodate the needs of neighbouring authorities in the same housing market area where it is reasonable to do so. Local planning authorities are not obliged to accept the unmet needs of other planning authorities if they have robust evidence that this would be inconsistent with the policies set out in the National Planning Policy Framework, for example policies on Green Belt or other environmental constraints.

We are currently finalising the draft National Planning Guidance following feedback and public comment from local planning authorities, including Tonbridge and Malling. The guidance on the Duty to Cooperate has been strengthened to emphasise the importance of effective cooperation between London boroughs, the Mayor of London and councils outside London. The guidance also emphasises the importance of effective collaboration between local planning authorities and LEPs. This message was also made strongly in guidance to LEPs, published in July 2013, on the preparation of Strategic Economic Plans, which will form the basis of the forthcoming Growth Deal negotiations.

I am keen to offer as much support as possible to local planning authorities to ensure that they are planning effectively for strategic matters in their local plans. We are doing this through the Planning Advisory Service and Planning Inspectorate. If your authority would like to access this support please let me know.

In regards to your concerns about neighbourhood plans, local planning authorities have a duty to advise or assist parish and town councils and designated neighbourhood forums that are producing a neighbourhood plan or neighbourhood development order. It will be for the local authority to decide how best it meets its 'duty to support' requirement taking account of

local circumstances, the complexity of the Neighbourhood Plan or Order being prepared and the skills and resources of the local authority and the local groups. The Government provides funding to local authorities to enable them to fulfil their new responsibilities, including advice (up to £30,000 in the case of a neighbourhood plan or order led by a parish council).

On your concerns that the Local Plan requirements are continually changing, we have streamlined procedures through the Localism Act and introduced new regulations, policy and guidance to make planning easier to understand and to do – both for practitioners and local people. Councils have been given the flexibility to decide how best they would provide local plans for their area with the emphasis on ensuring that these plans are kept up to date and are a true reflection of the views of local people.

You also raised concerns that the guidance review being published at a sensitive local plan stage may exacerbate uncertainty and stall plan production, the guidance needs to be up-to-date, relevant and accessible; existing guidance had become bloated and outdated. There is a fine balance between ensuring guidance is fit for purpose and minimising disruption to plan-making and decision-taking underway. In many cases the guidance simplifies and clarifies existing guidance rather than substantively changes the content. I would openly encourage Tonbridge and Malling to work quickly and proportionately in taking account of the new guidance in reviewing their existing Local Plan.

In regards to reviewing the National Planning Policy Framework and Local Plans, although we are currently keeping a careful eye on how the Framework is playing out in practice, and intend to review it formally in due course, there are no immediate plans to undertake a wholesale review of policy or the process for preparing Local Plans.

W. Kent

Nick Boles

NICK BOLES MP