

Dear Parish Clerks and Councillors,

The Levelling Up Bill will come before Parliament this week. This contains legislation to reform the planning system. I've discussed planning challenges with Councillors and Councils across the constituency. I will speak in the debate but I sense, for this Bill, much of the negotiations and necessary changes will be made outside of the chamber. Today, I joined 20 Conservative MPs who, like me, have concerns and ideas as to how the Bill can be strengthened. We held a private meeting to air these matters with the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, along with the Housing Minister and the Chief Whip. I raised the following concerns/ideas:

- Wealden and Rother have 10,000 housing applications between them which are not built out
- Every year, the two councils have to find a further 2,000 applications
- Developers are building 1,000 homes per year
- In the first quarter of this year, the National Housebuilding Federation reported zero new home completions (recognising that this only accounts for 80% of house builders)
- It's not right to say that Councils can take into account the number of housing applications not built out; in reality they cannot get this past the inspectorate for plan approvals
- We need to allow account to be taken on unbuilt applications and reduce numbers accordingly
- In addition, we need to barrel down on developers to 'incentivise' them to build out where applications are granted by (a) charging Council Tax 12 months from the application being granted and not when it is built out and (b) allowing the compulsory purchase of banked land by the local authority at 80% of the land value if not built by the second year after permission was granted
- In the constituency, the average wage to average house price is a 1:12 ratio
- The granting of shared ownership opportunities for those with a local link is a sound idea but our Housing Association is selling off existing stock in parishes because it maintains it cannot afford to upgrade these to energy standards; this must be investigated and not permitted unless it can be demonstrated that replacement stock is being built in the same Parish

Other colleagues made points about abolishing 5 year land supply, abolishing housing targets and other matters which many of us discussed. I did not repeat but agreed with many. This was a private meeting, so I will not divulge too much, but I did get a commitment that the idea on council tax being charged from permission being granted rather than build-out looks to have been accepted (I submitted this to the previous Secretary of State and have been banging on about it for some time – as have many of you). Indeed, it may even be more aggressive than thought. It was also conceded that there has only been one case where HMI has agreed that a local authority can take subjective constraints into account and reduce its housing numbers. The legislation will make it clearer as to justifications. This is being done to allow more local authorities to successfully reduce their numbers due to, say, AONB or SSI constraints. This would help both Wealden and Rother but the Secretary of State made it clear that targets could not be dropped because there needs to be some way of ensuring local housebuilding demand is met. There was unhappiness at that stance which makes the language of the Bill an important factor so both authorities really can consider local factors.

Concern was also raised that many changes will be made via the NPPF and this will not run alongside the Bill. Reassurance was given that the NPPF would be published in July albeit for consultation. It was made clear that the MPs would not accept the Bill as it was drafted, with the required changes incorporated in the NPPF, if that document was still for consultation and could be changed. We will revisit the timetable on this. The Bill may take months to get through.

The MPs made the point that they wished to work with the Ministers to get these changes tabled in the Bill via reasoned amendments but, if not, amendments would be pushed by the MPs. The meeting was held in a positive manner and it was clear that the concerns needed to be addressed. I will speak in the debate but we are only likely to get 3 mins each due to the numbers of MPs who will wish to speak. I wanted to reassure you that the real work will go on outside the chamber. I am determined to continue to bring forward the challenges and solutions which we have all discussed. I am grateful to you all for the help you give me in this regard. All ideas continue to be welcomed and gratefully received.

With best wishes,

Huw

Huw Merriman  
Chair of the Transport Select Committee  
MP for Bexhill and Battle  
House of Commons  
London SW1A 0AA

Tel: 020 72191852

Website: [www.huwmerriman.org.uk](http://www.huwmerriman.org.uk)

Twitter: @huwmerriman

Facebook: huwmerriman/bexhillbattle