



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Cllr Stuart Bray
Hinckley Hub
Rugby Road
Hinckley
Leicestershire
LE10 0FR

Our Ref: LE4398

30 July 2020

Dear Cllr Bray,

Thank you for your letter dated 14th July which I note you have shared through the Council's communications channels and in the local press. I'm sure that you will be happy to post this reply on the Borough Council's website and my team will circulate to local media contacts.

I was pleased to receive your letter as planning is something which constituents raise frequently with me. I am very aware that many local people are concerned about speculative development, and I would welcome the opportunity to set up a positive and focused dialogue with you on the issue.

However, in response to the main thrust of your letter, my position is that national planning policy already contains the tools which Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council needs to control local development; it is down to the Council to use those tools effectively to address the problem. I am most concerned that we are in this situation because of a lack of leadership and direction on the Local Plan from the local political administration.

Constituents have regularly raised local planning concerns since I have been elected. While I am always keen to receive constituent correspondence, I am mindful that the role of a Member of Parliament does not enable me to have a say in local planning decisions. These are rightly devolved to local Borough Councillors and local elections are hotly fought over these topics.

I have had meetings with Ministers and Secretaries of State about national planning policy and I will continue to prioritise this issue in the coming years, especially with a review imminent on the national law concerning planning. However, I am most concerned that a lack of certainty about the plans for future development in Hinckley and Bosworth is eroding public trust in the planning system as my constituents begin to conclude that the Council has lost its ability to ensure that development is located in the most appropriate places through an up to date Local Plan.

I will address your points further one by one:

457 homes per year

Your letter talks about the five-year housing land requirement which you claim is 'based on targets set by the Government.' In fact, the expectation that Hinckley and Bosworth will deliver 457 homes per year comes from Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council's Core Strategy which was adopted on 15 December 2009 by the then Liberal Democrat administration under a Labour Government, as per the council's own website, in the review of the housing land supply as presented to the Scrutiny Commission 12/3/2019 – under paragraph 3.8.

We must also always bear in mind that, while the protection of our precious green spaces is vitally important, we need to ensure that homes are provided for the next generation and those who are currently living in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation. It is a difficult but important balancing act which demands clear strategic planning.

I would like to stress that the need for housing has not changed or gone away even with coronavirus, and as the Local Planning Authority, it is Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council's responsibility to address this. Indeed, the coronavirus lockdown has been extremely challenging for those who do not have a suitable home.

Housing Delivery Test and Five-Year Housing Land Supply

I am mindful that the Housing Delivery Test measures how many homes have been built in the last three years against targets set locally. If a Local Planning Authority is delivering below 95% of their housing requirement, they are asked to produce an Action Plan which will, "identify the reasons for under-delivery, explore ways to reduce the risk of further under-delivery and set out measures the authority intends to take to improve levels of delivery."

The requirement to produce an Action Plan is designed to assist Local Authorities to ensure that the locally assessed housing need is being met as there are individuals living in the local area who are counting upon it. I note that the Government guidance on this can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/housing-supply-and-delivery>

You say in your letter that, even when housing consents are granted, "...we are not seeing delivery." There of course should be an expectation on developers to bring forward approved sites and I would be very interested to see the Council's Housing Delivery Test Action Plan with the steps Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council intends to take to improve levels of delivery. If you believe that there is anything I can appropriately consider doing to assist the Council's work in ensuring that sites which have planning permission are delivered, I would be happy to meet with you and discuss this further.

Rather than pressing for the Government to exclude the requirement for the Housing Delivery Test and the Five Year Housing Land Supply which could lead to an under delivery of homes, I suggest that the most effective way forward would be for the Council to ensure that the homes which already have planning permission are built in a timely manner through the Housing Delivery Test Action Plan.

Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plans

Your letter asks that the Government: "Allow Councils to rely on our current Local Plan Allocations and Neighbourhood Development Plan to direct where development should happen." As this statement deals with two distinct types of plan which are at very different stages of development in Hinckley and Bosworth I will respond on these individually.

Local Plan

Firstly, the Local Plan. I consider the heart of the problems we have with planning locally is that we don't have an up to date Local Plan in place. How can the Council expect to rely upon its Local Plan Allocations when the major allocations within the current Core Strategy have been widely acknowledged as undeliverable and the plan deemed out of date by the Planning Inspectorate? I am particularly concerned about the lack of delivery on the Barwell and Earl Shilton Sustainable Urban Extensions which seem to be stalled indefinitely.

I recently wrote to Luke Hall MP, Minister for Housing and Rough Sleeping to raise my concerns about the current issues with planning in Hinckley and Bosworth, he has told me that:

"I share your views about the importance of getting local plans in place. As you suggest, without a robust up-to-date plan and a five year supply of deliverable housing sites, there is an increased risk of speculative development, with no co-ordination and limited buy-in from local people. In Planning for the Future, we set out that we will require all local authorities to have an up to date local plan by December 2023, and we will prepare to intervene where authorities fail to meet the deadline.

All local authorities will be aware that the revised National Policy Planning Framework sets out that Plans should be reviewed at least every five years to ensure they remain fit for purpose. Hinckley and Bosworth's Core Strategy was adopted in December 2009. Although a review is underway, I understand that the Council's public consultation on a draft version of the Plan, which had been due in early 2020, has not yet taken place."

Please see below the timeframe for the future stages of the development of the Local Plan which I have taken from the Council's own website. I note this was last updated on 18/10/2019?
: https://www.hinckley-bosworth.gov.uk/info/1004/planning_policy/1315/local_plan_review

Future stages

· **Draft Local Plan (Early 2020 - Local Development Scheme to be updated in due course)**
This document is a key stage of the Local Plan preparation. It sets out the council's preferred spatial strategy and preferred policy approach for the emerging Local Plan

· **Pre-submission (May 2020 to July 2020)**
The pre-submission stage of the Local Plan Review is the publication of the proposed document and supporting evidence

· **Estimated examination in public (April 2021)**
*This stage is when the final Local Plan is submitted to the Planning Inspector for examination. Following a successful examination, the Local Plan will be adopted
We aim to have a new local plan adopted in 2021.*

I would be very grateful if you could let me know whether the Council's work on the local plan is currently progressing in line with this timetable. If not, please could you provide me with an updated timetable for the actions above and also ensure that this information is made available to residents through the website?

An up to date Local Plan is also key to ensuring that development which does take place within the Borough has the right infrastructure. It is essential that a properly designed Borough-wide scheme is put together by the Council as part of the Local Plan without further delay.

As the MP, I am doing what I can on issues such as the A5 where I have helped to secure £20m of funding over the next five years for the design of a scheme to upgrade our stretch from single to dual carriageway and address the issue of the railway bridge. However, the Council should be using the expertise and talent within its own Planning Department to ensure that there is a comprehensive infrastructure plan in place to protect local people.

Neighbourhood Plans

I am a passionate supporter of Neighbourhood Planning which is an excellent tool for local people to have a say in how their area develops. I have met with many Parish Councils and Communities who have worked hard over a prolonged period and done the right thing by producing a Neighbourhood Plan.

However, these groups naturally become worried and frustrated when speculative applications threaten to undermine their work and there is no certainty that the Council will have the power to stop this due to the lack of an up to date Local Plan.

My recent letter to you on this subject highlighted my concerns on this issue and asked that the Council give the strongest weight possible to Neighbourhood Plans under the regulations. Indeed, in light of the coronavirus outbreak the Government changed the rules on Neighbourhood Plans to enable all plans in development which have reached the local referendum stage, to be given significant weight in decision making.

You will be pleased to hear that I have already been in discussion with Ministers about the role of neighbourhood plans and how to strengthen them and streamline the process for communities to put them in place, something I hope you will support.

I was very pleased to see that the Borough Council planning officers acknowledged the changing guidance to amend their recommendation to refuse the application at Sketchley Lane in Burbage.

I strongly believe that Neighbourhood Planning should be made simpler and more accessible and this is a policy area which I will be continuing to work on in Parliament. I would like to see our planning system localised even further.

Conclusion

In conclusion, at this stage I do not believe it would be appropriate for me to approach the Government with your requests. The Council cannot expect the Government to change national planning policy in order to compensate for their own failings on local planning.

I would also like to know whether the Council have given any thought to how you will enable residents to participate in the next consultation phase of the Local Plan effectively, given the coronavirus restrictions. I appreciate that it will take new ways for working to ensure that local people are able to have their say on the Local Plan in our current circumstances, but this work is crucial to the future of Hinckley and Bosworth and I would not like to see it delayed due to Coronavirus. Speculative development applications will still continue despite the virus, so it is imperative that progress continues to be made on the Local Plan.

I look forward to the opportunity to appropriately work together to deliver these key local policies and protect our beautiful Borough from speculative development while ensuring all local people are able to find a suitable home to call their own.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'L. Evans', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Luke Evans
Member of Parliament for Bosworth