

Maria Caulfield MP meeting with WGOD 18th July 2022

Via MS Teams

WGOD members in attendance:

Miranda Dart, Laughton
Nick Daines, CPRE
Alison Dunbar-Dempsey, Chalvington with Ripe,
Nikos Mikelis, Chiddingly
Karen Nicholls, Hailsham
Geoffrey Sambrook, Isfield

- WGOD was offered the meeting following Maria's receipt of her copy of WGOD's second letter (dated 18 June 2022) to the then Housing Minister Stuart Andrew MP.
- Maria said that planning, local plans, housing development and "savvy" developers were a problem throughout East and West Sussex. She reassured us that all the Sussex MPs were working together.
- She was keen to stress that the standard method for calculating housing need was a guide only and furthermore that the standard method "does not add-up" for Southeast England, which is something that has been acknowledged by the government. She considered that if a local authority can show via evidence that it cannot meet its housing need, then the planning inspectorate will accept this, but not always. When it was suggested that the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) was making it difficult for any LPA to have a number lower than this in their draft plans Maria said that "shadow" planning inspectors were available from PINS to work with LPAs in order to help them come up with a number justified by geographical, landscape or infrastructure constraints which would be acceptable.
- New legislation i.e. changes to the current version of the Levelling Up Bill was coming but not until after the summer recess.
 - It would address the use of the 2014 population projections
 - It would likely scrap the 5 year land supply requirement (not sure if this is only for LPAs with an up to date Local Plan already included in the Levelling Up Bill in?)
 - It would strengthen Local and Neighbourhood plans (Maria stressed the importance of Neighbourhood plans for protecting against over-development).
 - She is pushing to add healthcare providers to being statutory consultees to planning applications in the same way that highways and water are too.

- Not everything has to be spelled out in the Bill which will come into law in 2023. Some changes can be made by Statutory Instruments. Guidance notes can be issued and the NPPF will be updated.
- Maria said that our local MP's will hold ministers to account for these promised changes.
- In response to a point raised by the WGOD that the standard method is designed to achieve an annual housing total of 300,000, Maria said that this number should not be divided between the regions. When told that was how it appeared to be and the affordability factor resulted in the perverse outcome of the more houses being provided resulted in an increased affordability factor, Maria agreed and confirmed she did not agree with the standard method
- The previous Secretary of State, Michael Gove had been keen to remove the development heat from the south east and ditch the algorithm. However, there is now uncertainty.
- A positive message is that two years ago there was no movement, now Maria said that there is.
- Maria did paint a picture of planning decisions being made by overworked planning officers, financially stretched LPAs being reluctant to go to appeal because of the costs, very well-funded developers and politicians calling in decisions after often repeated applications for the same site have already been through the PINS service, sometimes more than once.
- She suggested WGOD investigate water neutrality with Natural England as this has been successful preventing/stalling large developments in West Sussex following an explosion of development around Horsham and Crawley.
- Maria accepted WGOD's point that Wealden did have a local plan after first suggesting that they didn't.
- She also thought it a good idea that WGOD continues to lobby its MPs as it then makes it easier for the MPs to lobby ministers.
- A request was put to Maria that she facilitates a meeting between the WGOD and her group of Sussex MP's. Maria suggested that this meeting takes place when more information about the forthcoming changes is available.
- Odds: she commented that Firlie school is under threat of closure because so many people moving to the area are older. She talked about the significant increase (c70,000 ?? that is a lot) in the population of the mid area of Sussex such that it now requires an extra MP. This underlines that the quantity of housing development is not for local people or to provide new homes for overcrowded or suppressed households, which would not lead to a population increase. The new building was pricing out local families many of whom are being priced out.

- She did conclude with an optimistic note of “promises we have been made in the last few weeks”. These were not spelled out – but could be behind Wealden’s public announcement about the delay to the publication of the draft local plan - and must be subject to a degree of uncertainty due to the change of prime minister.
- There was possible confusion for Maria between new developments having to show “water neutrality” and “nutrient neutrality”

MD/NJD

22/7/22