

Letter to the Chief Planner at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
(sent on the 27th September 2022)

Dear Ms Averley,

GOVERNMENT ADVICE TO PINS ON LOCAL PLANS UNDER EXAMINATION

I am writing to ask for clarification about the implications of the former Secretary of State, Greg Clark's, letter to Sarah Richards, the Chief Executive at the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) of 28th July, 2022. The letter requested that inspectors do not conclude that local plans under examination are unsound or recommend their withdrawal before a new prime minister is appointed, or "until the department advises you otherwise". This letter is quite unprecedented in the opinion of the Council's principal planning officers and has introduced a significant amount of uncertainty into this Council's local plan making process.

The pause in decision making on local plans currently at examination could last well into the autumn, taking into account the party-political conferences in October; and a newly appointed prime minister and cabinet needing time to assimilate their briefs and make their own decisions on the future direction of planning policy. There has to be a reason for the Secretary of State to take such unprecedented action. Both elected members and officers of this Council are concerned that the letter presages significant alterations in Government planning policy, particularly with respect to matters such as assessment of housing requirements, affordable housing and release of land from green belts.

Tandridge District Council has spent to date some £3.1M of council tax-payers money on preparing its emerging local plan. An additional £1.3M is estimated to be required for the further work the examining inspector has identified is required to move the local plan forward for consideration for adoption by December 2023.

Tandridge District Council like all local authorities is facing real challenges financially. Adding to these existing challenges are levels of inflation and rising energy costs not previously anticipated. The Council has to act in a financially prudent way and ensure value for money in all expenditure. The uncertainty raised by the Secretary of State's 28th July letter to PINS causes the Council real concern that if major central government planning policy changes are afoot there could be wasted expenditure. This could arise either because not all the work identified to complete the local plan may be needed or the work that is needed will have to be approached in different ways to before.

Furthermore, the Council is concerned about the implications of the former Secretary of State's letter for the Government's target of having adopted local plans in place by December 2023. The letter introduces uncertainty, and thereby delay, in progressing local plans already at examination, which is the position with the emerging Tandridge Local Plan. Local authorities are not responsible for that uncertainty and delay. This raises the question of whether the December 2023 date should now be extended.

The Council would be extremely grateful if you could provide clarity about the implications of the Secretary of State's 28th July letter and whether the Council is right to anticipate changes in central government planning policy that could have financial consequences for this Council in terms of incurring further significant expenditure in moving the local plan forward.

Yours sincerely,

David Ford
Chief Executive