



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

Baroness Taylor of Stevenage
*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing
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2 Marsham Street
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Rt Hon Sir Julian Smith KCB CBE MP
House of Commons
London
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23 January 2025

Dear Sir Julian,

Thank you for your email of 17 December to the Deputy Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP, on behalf of your constituents, who have shared the Community Planning Alliance's Homes For Everyone briefing. I have been asked to reply.

The Government is committed to delivering 1.5 million new homes over the next five years, with the biggest increase in social housing and affordable housebuilding in a generation. We want to deliver the much-needed affordable housing local communities need and the wider infrastructure that will mitigate the impacts of new development. I am grateful to you for setting out the Alliance's proposed approaches for the Government on meeting these aims and would be glad to respond to each in turn.

Green Belt

Green Belt is vital for preventing urban sprawl and encroachment on valued countryside, while enabling towns and cities to grow in a sustainable way. We will continue to expect local authorities to protect the Green Belt through their local plans and planning decisions.

The Government is committed to a brownfield-first approach. We have revised the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to be clear that proposals for brownfield development should normally be approved. We have also expanded the definition of previously developed land in the NPPF to include large areas of hardstanding, better reflecting land that is already developed. The Government awarded £68 million to 54 councils in October 2024 to help them build an expected 6,800 homes on brownfield land.

That said, we know that brownfield alone will not be enough for all the new homes we need. The manifesto was clear that, without changing its purposes or general extent, the new Government will take a more strategic approach to designating land as Green Belt. Consequently, we expect local authorities to conduct Green Belt reviews to identify the right land to bring forward in their areas.

We also consulted to introduce 'golden rules' to ensure that major development on land released from the Green Belt benefits both communities and nature. These will include requirement for a target of 50% affordable housing and provision of appropriate green space and infrastructure (such as new schools, GP surgeries, transport links, care homes and nursery places). Further guidance, to ensure a consistent approach to Green Belt reviews, will be provided early this year.

Protections for spaces such as National Landscapes, conservation areas, and Sites of Special Scientific Interest will not be weakened.

Empty Homes

The Government also wants empty homes to be brought back into use and wants to empower local leaders to reinvest in their communities. Through the New Homes Bonus, local authorities already receive the same level of reward for bringing an empty home back into use as for building a new one.

Local councils also have the discretionary powers to charge additional council tax on properties which have been left unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for a year or more. From 1 April 2024, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 gave local authorities the power to charge a 100% council tax premium when a property has been unoccupied and unfurnished for just twelve months. On properties that have been left empty for at least five years, up to a 200% premium can be charged, and for properties that have been empty for at least ten years, up to a 300% premium can be charged.

Furthermore, councils can apply for an Empty Dwelling Management Order when a property has been empty for more than two years. This is subject to the production of evidence that the property has been causing a nuisance to the community and evidence of community support for the proposal. Local authorities publish local guidance on how they use them.

Similarly, local authorities can use Compulsory Purchase Orders to acquire empty properties. The government recognises the importance of making effective use of land and is keen for authorities to make greater use of their compulsory purchase powers to deliver schemes in the public interest. We are currently consulting on a range of proposals to make the compulsory purchase process quicker, lower costs of the process, and ensure the compensation rules are fairer:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/compulsory-purchase-process-and-compensation-reforms>.

We outlined our intent to strengthen local authorities' ability to take over the management of vacant residential premises in the English Devolution White Paper, published on 16 December, and we will publish a long-term housing strategy this year.

Increasing build-out

The Government wants to see homes built faster, and we recognise the frustrations that stalled or delayed sites can cause to communities. The revised NPPF, published on 12 December 2024, includes policies designed to support increased build-out rates, including the promotion of mixed-tenure development.

Once housebuilders have been granted permission for residential development, meeting local housing needs and preferences, we expect to see them built out as quickly as possible. Local planning authorities have powers to issue a completion notice to require a developer to complete their development if it is stalled. If the developer fails to do so, the planning permission for the development will lapse.

To enhance transparency and accountability in respect of build-out rates, the Government intends to implement provisions in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, following technical consultation, to: require housing developers to formally notify local planning authorities before they commence development and then report annually on their actual housing delivery; and to give local planning authorities the power to decline to determine planning applications submitted by developers who have failed to build out previous permissions in the authority's area at a reasonable rate.

In addition, our New Homes Accelerator, launched in August, has been formed to unblock and accelerate the delivery of large-scale housing developments that have for various reasons become delayed, or which are not progressing as quickly as they could be. More information can be read at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-homes-accelerator-programme>.

Protecting wildlife

The Government agrees that protecting local wildlife sites is vitally important, and the NPPF details the protections in place for locally designated wildlife sites. The presumption in favour of sustainable development does not apply where the plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on a habitats site (either alone or in combination with other plans or projects), unless an appropriate assessment has concluded that the plan or project will not adversely affect the integrity of the habitats site.

The NPPF clearly sets out that, to protect and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity, local plans should identify, map and safeguard components of local wildlife-rich habitats and wider ecological networks, ; promote the conservation, restoration and enhancement of priority habitats and ecological networks, and the protection and recovery of priority species; and identify and pursue opportunities for securing measurable net gains for biodiversity.

In December 2024, we added text to the NPPF to encourage the incorporation of features to protect threatened species, and we welcome any action by individual developers who wish to provide features such as bat boxes, swift bricks or hedgehog highways. The National Model Design Code and Natural England's Green Infrastructure Framework set out how development can incorporate a range of nature friendly features. More information can be found at the following links:

- National Model Design Code: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-model-design-code>;
- Green Infrastructure Framework: <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/greeninfrastructure/home.aspx>.

Underutilised homes

There are many vacant bedrooms in existing properties across the country. I would like to draw your attention to the Rent-a-Room Scheme, which allows owner-occupiers and tenants to receive tax-free rental income if they provide furnished accommodation in their only or main home. The scheme is signposted on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/rent-room-in-your-home>.

I hope you are assured that the Government is taking the right measures to build the homes we need. Thank you again for taking the time to write.

Yours ever,



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Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing and Local Government