

To Rt. Hon. David Cameron, MP

September 10th, 2015

Dear Mr Cameron

Maintaining the Localism Agenda through a presumption in favour of Neighbourhood Plans.

The “presumption in favour of sustainable development” has unleashed a chaotic jumble of opportunist development applications at the same time as many communities are endeavouring to bring order and local input to development through a Neighbourhood Plan.

Please can you help Eynsham – and many other communities in your constituency and elsewhere – to redress the balance between uncoordinated house-building and sustainable development so they can complete their Neighbourhood Plan.

We think there may be a simple way for your government to achieve this, as outline below:

Background: Your governments have brought about a significant and positive change in the local planning environment. Eynsham Parish Council and its Neighbourhood Plan team strongly support the idea of local communities deciding how development should take place in our village.

Although a few people in the village just want to say 'No', most people seem to agree that we need more houses in Eynsham and are quite prepared to see the size of the village increase as long as we retain the benefits of living in our community so we can share those benefits with new residents who come to join us.

Given the outright opposition to development in some quarters, we can understand why the last government shifted the presumption towards “sustainable development” but we are now facing many immediate threats to build in ways which we see as quite unsustainable.

In Eynsham we have recently had five opportunistic attempts to get planning consents pushed through under the 'old rules' before we can get our Neighbourhood Plan off the ground. We know that we are just one community among many in your constituency who face multiple applications where the only concern of the land-owners is to maximise their windfall gains before the local community can coordinate development through a Neighbourhood Plan.

In Eynsham we appreciate the efforts of WODC planners in identifying the shortcomings in these recent ad-hoc development proposals and rejecting all of them.

We also appreciate the supporting efforts of OCC in condemning the hopeless road access of some applications which would make traffic in the village even worse than it is now. We also hope that their proposed improvements to the A40 will integrate with our Neighbourhood Plan to improve our traffic situation.

On the other hand, we can't see why OCC are intent on digging a lot of extra gravel nearby, which doesn't appear to be needed according to the predicted requirements, as this just adds more development pressure. The resultant feeling of being 'under threat' doesn't help us maintain a positive attitude to new development in the village.

Our early consultations clearly show that primary and secondary schools are at capacity, surgeries are over-subscribed and the traffic round the village is hopelessly congested at peak hours. Further development won't be “sustainable” unless these problems are addressed as part of an overall plan.

While we are trying to get our Neighbourhood Plan completed, we are aware we are in a race against the land-owners, all of whom are going to appeal as they have little to lose and huge sums to gain if they can get planning consent for their land.

We believe that the promise of localism is being trumped by the opportunist use, or abuse, of the "presumption in favour of sustainable development” and that this is bringing the whole localism agenda into disrepute.

Can anything be done? We suggest one adjustment to the current process to restore some balance between the urgent need to build new homes and the risk that rushed development will simply make things worse for everyone now and for a long period into the future.

Planning inspectors have the technical expertise and impartiality to judge if developments are being rushed through to pre-empt the Neighbourhood Planning process and that there is a good prospect that a more balanced development, benefiting the existing and future community, will emerge in an acceptably short timescale.

Currently the guidance given to Inspectors (according to Annex 1 of the NPPF) is very restrictive as regards refusal of planning consent on the grounds of prematurity to the point where our plan, currently preparing its Sustainability Assessment Scoping report, is unlikely to be considered.

We think this is wrong and at odds with your localism agenda.

Please will you ask for the guidance to be reviewed, so that

- where a community is making genuine efforts to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan and
- there are reasonable grounds to think that the comprehensive approach of a completed Plan will be more sustainable and of more benefit to the local community and
- the LPA has made a valid and reasoned rejection of an application,

inspectors should be able to uphold refusals made by LPAs, either permanently or perhaps for a fixed time period, to allow the Neighbourhood Plan process to reach maturity.

The guidance will not be radically different but the significant change in emphasis will allow Inspectors to give much more weight to emerging Neighbourhood Plans so that local communities can see that the rules are biased towards the interests of local communities and not in favour of predatory developers.

Thank you on behalf of Eynsham Parish Council and Eynsham Futures, its Neighbourhood Planning Team

(signed) Richard Andrews

Copies to: Barry Norton, Leader of West Oxfordshire District Council
Ian Hudspeth, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council