

NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

The Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local
Government
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2 Marsham Street
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Your Ref:
Our Ref: LP Intervention
Enquiries to: Peter Jackson
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Tel Direct: (01670) 623452
Date: 30 January 2018

Dear Mr Javid

Local Plan Intervention

Thank you for your letter dated 16th November 2017. I very much welcome the opportunity this has afforded my Administration to review our plans and to further challenge the timescales that we have set. Please be assured that the Council is committed to producing a sound and deliverable Local Plan for Northumberland in the shortest timescales possible.

You have asked me to outline the exceptional circumstances which justify the failure of the Council to produce a Local Plan, and to provide information about the measures that we have taken, or intend to take, to accelerate plan publication. My response will provide assurance that:

- Significant progress with plan-making in Northumberland has been made, as evidenced within the previously submitted Core Strategy and the work done since its withdrawal. In addressing this point we will demonstrate the clear and compelling reasons for the withdrawal of the previously submitted Core Strategy in favour of a more appropriate and comprehensive Local Plan;
- We are taking robust action to ensure that the Northumberland Local Plan is supported politically and by Northumberland's communities and our wider regional partners;
- We will ensure that our plan-making actions are proportionate and reflect the strength of evidence already available to us;
- We have measures in place to ensure that plan production is prioritised and well resourced, with strong officer and political oversight in place to ensure that all actions are closely monitored and remain on schedule.

In reviewing our plans, we have enlisted the support of the LGA's Planning Advisory Service and are grateful to them and to officers of your own Ministry for the very helpful and constructive advice that they have given. Their recommendations to us are reflected in this response and in our revised plans.

Progress with plan-making

The Council recognises your concerns over the lack of an agreed Plan. You will be aware that the Council submitted a draft Core Strategy and supporting evidence base to your Department for examination in April 2017. In deciding to withdraw the Core Strategy in July 2017, the Council considered that there were material changes in respect of population projections subsequent to the submission of the Core Strategy, and that significantly lower levels of housing growth were required to support and sustain economic growth in Northumberland. The Council felt that the Government's planned consultation on a standardised methodology for calculating housing need would have a material bearing on future housing requirements.



Councillor P A Jackson, Leader of Northumberland County Council

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Finally, the Council considered that a review of the Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy would allow the Council to ensure that the plan directly supports the economic ambitions in the North of Tyne area as described in the emerging plans for a North of Tyne Combined Authority.

Following the withdrawal of the Core Strategy, the Council immediately put in place a Position Statement to guide and assist those interested in development proposals. Preparation of a new Local Plan for Northumberland also began immediately, with the early stages including a review of the options for preparation of a new Local Plan as well as an internal review of the evidence base documents. A further independent review of the evidence base, commissioned by PAS and undertaken by IPe, has concluded that “a substantial proportion of the existing evidence remains current and valid”. It is our intention to minimise the number of changes to the Local Plan and supporting documentation, whilst ensuring that this is brought up to date and reflects the changed circumstances that led us to withdrawal in July.

The Northumberland Local Plan Local Development Scheme (LDS) for 2017 to 2020, which sets out the timetable for the preparation of the new Local Plan, was approved at Cabinet on 23 November 2017 and measures have been put in place immediately to ensure this is strictly adhered to. The Council has since taken advice from PAS/IPe over whether any areas of the timetable can be condensed and whilst their review states that “there is nothing to suggest that it should be further revised in response to the Secretary of State’s letter”, they have made a number of helpful recommendations which are expected to lead to a shortening of the overall timetable.

An updated Position Statement was approved at Cabinet on 23 November 2017. At the same time, in order to ensure that housing takes place in a sustainable manner and to resist speculative development schemes and defend against subsequent appeals while a new Local Plan is being prepared, the Council agreed the Northumberland Five Year Housing Land Supply of Deliverable Sites 2017-2022 report, identifying housing land supply in Northumberland equivalent to a 6.5 year supply.

We are now working towards a single Full Local Plan which will set the strategic planning policies and include detailed land allocations and designations as well as development management policies. This will provide clarity and certainty to communities and developers about where development will take place in order to deliver the Council’s development strategy. Not only is this essential in a Northumberland context but also in the context of the recently announced North of Tyne ‘minded-to support’ Devolution Deal and Borderlands Growth Deal, where the Northumberland Local Plan will be key to supporting delivery of an ambitious vision across multiple local authority areas in the shared pursuit of greater productivity and economic growth, acceleration of new housing, and the delivery of key infrastructure provision.

The PAS/IPe review considers that in taking this approach, the Council can demonstrate that it is “ahead of the curve” in that we will have “one of the first Local Plans, at least in the North East of England, that reflects the revised national policy and guidance whilst responding to strategic Northumberland and cross-boundary issues ... in a way that can be moved forward quickly”.

Preparing an acceptable Plan

We are clear that we need a Local Plan that supports the delivery of the economic and productivity aspirations of the County and the wider North East region. This means enabling sustainable growth and development, ensuring a robust and deliverable housing supply whilst protecting our unique heritage and natural environment. We are taking robust action to ensure that the Local Plan is supported politically and by Northumberland’s communities and our wider regional partners.

Political support - there is a strong political commitment across the Council to deliver a sound Local Plan for Northumberland as soon as reasonably practicable and this is supported by at least two of the county’s four Members of Parliament. Plan development is overseen by an all-party Local Development Framework Member Working Group which meets frequently to progress the work on the Local Plan, discuss key issues arising and agree approaches in policy formulation and direction. The Portfolio Holder for Planning &

Housing sits on this group and provides the link to the wider Administration. Regular progress updates are provided to Cabinet Members. We recognise the valuable contributions of all 67 elected Members of the Council and have established five Local Area Councils (LACs) to ensure that they have a meaningful role in considering locality and neighbourhood matters. We propose to engage with LACs as the Plan develops.

Community support - we are committed to working with local communities to deliver a Plan which local people want. To achieve this, the Council will consult on the Plan at the various stages of its preparation and will also continue to work closely with Parish and Town Councils and Neighbourhood Plan Groups to ensure there is no conflict with adopted and emerging Neighbourhood Plans. Our timetable for plan production has been adjusted, following advice from PAS, to adopt a more interactive approach to consultation aimed at testing out the broad principles of the plan. This is intended to broaden the reach of the consultation and to engage different groups of people at an early stage, before we undertake the more formal and detailed Regulation 18 / Regulation 19 consultations that are required.

Partner support - the Council already works effectively with neighbouring authorities in the preparation of the Local Plan, and in particular with Newcastle City Council and North Tyneside Council, our Combined Authority partners following the announcement on 22 November 2017 that the Government was minded to enter into a devolution deal with the three North of Tyne authorities. The North of Tyne deal sets out the headline terms of the proposed devolution, which will support the North of Tyne in delivering its ambitious vision for the social and economic prosperity, and wellbeing of its communities. The deal will ensure continued strong working between the three local authorities, as well as with the North East Local Enterprise Partnership and beyond, in the shared pursuit of greater productivity and economic growth. Regular duty to cooperate meetings are held with all of our neighbouring local authorities and the Northumberland National Park Authority to ensure that existing positive relationships are strengthened and support is obtained for the new Northumberland Local Plan at regional and sub-regional levels.

Preparing a proportionate Plan

We are not starting preparation of the Northumberland Local Plan from scratch and will instead be carrying forward large sections of the withdrawn Plan and its supporting evidence base. We are grateful to PAS and IPe for their review of our full evidence base, and for assisting in establishing where additional work is genuinely required. This has helped us to shorten the production timescales for a number of the planned evidential and policy updates, whilst ensuring that we develop a robust Plan within LDS deadlines. The PAS / IPe recommendations regarding our evidence base and Local Plan Timetable (appended) are being reflected in our revised plan with the express intention of accelerating plan production where possible.

Updates have already begun on some of the key documents supporting the previously withdrawn Core Strategy where we know that the evidence is no longer reliable. This includes Strategic Transport, Sustainability Appraisal, Whole Plan Viability, and Housing and Economic Growth options work - a key piece of work given the reasons for withdrawing the Core Strategy.

Delivering the Plan

The Council has a competent Planning Policy Team, with experienced members of staff capable of delivering the Plan. We have, through the availability of additional planning fee income, been able to add capacity and resilience by way of additional fixed term posts including a Principal Planner and three Planning Officers. Our in-house expertise ensures consistency and timeliness of delivery when compared to external consultancy support, although we do recognise that external expertise is required in some circumstances and will commission consultants to undertake discrete pieces of work where necessary. We have made a commitment to fund such support as is needed for plan delivery but would welcome the opportunity to discuss additional funding to mitigate the risk of delay due to staff changes outwith our control.

We have commissioned additional plan-making support from Planning Officer Society Enterprise (POSE) to assist with specific policy issues within the emerging Plan and are arranging additional project management

and critical friend support from outwith the Council to ensure that the plan-making process is challenged in the correct way and the timetable that we are working towards is strictly adhered to.

We have arranged with PINS for a Senior Inspector Advisory visit and are working towards this before the Local Plan enters the committee cycle at Regulation 19 Stage. Further contact will be made with PINS in May 2018 in order to discuss progress on Plan preparation and to agree dates for an Inspector's visit to critically review the work undertaken up until that time.

We have increased the Officer and Member oversight of progress with Plan development and have clarified to Officers the priority that must be given across the council to Plan production. There is a clear understanding that timescales will not slip from those advertised through the LDS, and that opportunities to compress the delivery schedule should be taken where it is appropriate to do so. Regular assurance updates are programmed with the Council's Executive Leadership Team of senior Officers to ensure that any inter-departmental actions and dependencies remain on schedule. We have arranged for frequent Cabinet briefings to reflect the progress being made and to check that Plan development remains aligned with the decisions taken by the Council. Submission of the Northumberland Local Plan for independent examination will take place during the summer of 2019.

I hope the above summary provides assurance that the Council is committed to delivering a sound Local Plan for Northumberland as soon as reasonably practicable. The Council is confident that it can deliver a Local Plan which meets the needs and aspirations of the communities of Northumberland, more quickly than if it was managed by an external source. The attached appendices provide further assurance that the Council will deliver a Local Plan to the timescales set out within our published Local Development Scheme.

The Council looks forward to hearing from you and, in the meantime, should you wish to discuss any of the information provided in this letter and accompanying appendices please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peter Jackson".

Councillor Peter Jackson
Leader of the County Council