



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Rt Hon Chris Pincher MP LONDON SW1A 0AA  
Minister for Housing  
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
Fry Building  
2 Marsham Street  
London SW1P 4DF

23 July 2021  
PD32659

Dear Chris,

**CHANGES TO THE CURRENT PLANNING SYSTEM AND THE  
DESIGNATION OF RURAL AREAS**

Thank you very much for your letter of 15<sup>th</sup> April to me in my capacity as Chair of the Rural Services APPG. I very much appreciated the full update set out in your letter. We particularly welcome the decision not to raise the affordable housing threshold as proposed in the original consultation. We would not want to see that position overturned further down the line.

I attach for your information a Briefing Note prepared by our Secretariat, the Rural Services Network, on the Government response to your consultation 'Changes to the Current Planning System'. You will see that it too welcomes both that the threshold was not lifted and the exemption of First Home Exception Sites from designated rural areas. It does, however, point out again that the adopted definition of "rural area" will have a negative impact on the delivery of rural affordable housing.

I have to say – as a former Minister – that I was somewhat surprised by your comment that 'the consultation itself does not give the Government sufficient latitude to make such a policy change (in the definition of designated rural areas) without consideration of the potential effects'. We understand from officials that a large number of responses to the consultation raised this issue and know from the Roundtable meeting you attended with rural interest groups that it was a commonly raised concern. As part of our commitment to Rural Proofing we should be able to find a way to address this, where there is a will there is a way!! It would be better to get the policy right, even if it takes longer to get cross-Government agreement, than to persist with a flawed metric.

Your monitoring of whether First Homes Policy affects the delivery of rural exception sites when it comes into effect, whilst helpful, does not address the question of the rationale for the policy of using a 35-year-old clause relating to the Right to Buy to





determine exemptions to planning rules in 2021 - or address the point of principle that the S157 1985 Housing Act definition will be largely ineffective, because it will not apply to almost 70% of smaller rural communities. You point out, quite rightly, that local authorities can apply to have areas within their boundaries designated under S157 but do we really want to go down that road? It will create a huge burden of work within local authorities but also within your Department.

Representatives of rural interest groups have had some discussions with your officials to understand better what actually was stopping the Ministry from changing the definition. As I understand it the response was:

"You may have seen the Queens Speech which sets out a Bill to modernise the Planning system, so the current focus of Government is centred on this. Given the potential scale of the changes that might result from this, Government doesn't feel that making changes to the existing framework around designated rural areas would be advisable at this point in time."

I regret this is not a convincing response. This concern has been raised with Government since 2014 and can be dealt with outside of the development of the Planning White Paper, in the same way as other changes have been implemented. e.g., First Homes and the extension of Permitted Development Rights.

In your letter of 15<sup>th</sup> April, you refer to the need to find a balance between meeting rural affordable housing and delivering housing numbers. In our view by suggesting waiting 3 years before changing the definition will not allow you to strike that balance - affordable housing will be lost during this period and including affordable housing does not cut delivery of overall numbers, just ensures delivery of right type of homes in the right place.

I would be very happy to explore this with you further and would appreciate being able to take up your offer further of attending a future APPG meeting to discuss the issue further.

Best wishes

Yours sincerely

Rt. Hon. Philip Dunne  
MP for Ludlow