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Communities &
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Dear Philip,

I apologise for the delay in replying to your letter of 16 February. I wanted to ensure that I could give you a full update on the current position which I am now able to do.

As of 1 April 2021, the Government has published its response to our consultation '*Changes to the Current Planning System*' in relation to our First Homes policy. I would like to reassure you that, as you reference in your letter, we have been very clear that we fully intend to retain rural exception sites as a vehicle for delivering affordable housing in rural areas, and that in designated rural areas, rural exception sites will be the sole exception site that can come forward. We have also been clear in the consultation that rural exception sites will still be able to come forward in non-designated rural areas, alongside First Homes exceptions sites. We will publish planning practice guidance on the matter, which aims to assist relevant parties in bringing forward rural exception sites.

The point that you raise about changing the definition of designated rural areas is one that was also raised by a number of respondents to the aforementioned consultation. While the consultation itself does not give the Government sufficient latitude to make such a policy change without further consideration of the potential effects, I do recognise these concerns and the need to strike a balance between ensuring that affordable housing of the appropriate tenure can come forward in rural areas, and the need to encourage housing delivery more widely. We will monitor whether First Homes policy affects the delivery of rural exception sites when it comes into effect. In relation to your point on designating rural areas, I should point out that local authorities can apply to have areas within their boundaries designated as rural, under S157 of the 1985 Housing Act, provided that they meet certain criteria.

Finally, I can confirm that, following careful consideration of the consultation feedback and the situation in the housing market, the Government has set out that we do not think any change to the existing policy on small sites is currently needed and that there are no plans to raise the small sites threshold for affordable housing at this stage. As such, paragraph 63 of the National Planning Policy Framework will continue to apply. This sets out that provision of affordable housing should not be sought for residential developments that are not major developments, other than in designated rural areas, where policies may set out a lower threshold of 5 units or fewer. For housing, a major development is a development where ten or more homes will be provided, or the site has an area of 0.5 hectares or more.

Thank you again for your letter. I hope you find this information helpful.



*Yours Ever
Chris*

RT HON CHRISTOPHER PINCHER MP

