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Beckett**  
Leader of  
the Council

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The Rt Hon John Healey MP  
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4 November 2009

Dear Minister

### **Housing Delivery in Winchester**

I write following a meeting of the City Council's Cabinet to request a meeting with you to discuss the iniquitous position Winchester has been placed in by current planning guidance.

Winchester City Council is responsible for a largely rural district of some 250 square miles, with a population of around 110,000. Under the Hampshire Structure Plan we were required to deliver some 486 new homes a year, a figure we exceeded. With the adoption of the South East Plan that figure jumped to a requirement of 612 homes per annum, 'backdated' to April 2006.

The City Council have accepted that we must meet that requirement, and are making plans to do so as we prepare for submission our LDF Core Strategy. However, because of the way in which your Government's planning policies impact upon us, we now find ourselves being advised by Council Officers that we have no option but to approve the release of several medium sized sites in sensitive greenfield locations.

At the heart of our problem lies the apparent inflexibility over the interpretation of the requirement that the Council has a five-year supply of land for development adequate to meet our targets. Our LDF will identify several major sites across the District which will deliver in total some 7-8,000 homes, along with medium sized sites which could realise a further 800-1,000. There is also a consistent history in the District of small to medium sites not identified in our Local Plan steadily being brought forward.



Our ability to sensibly plan and manage development in this historically and environmentally sensitive area is hampered by what I and my colleagues at the Council regard as unnecessarily rigid interpretations of planning rules:

- Much of the planned development in Winchester is, as I say above, on larger sites, which require careful planning and close liaison with developers if they are to be genuinely sustainable additions to our communities. We have a good reputation with major housebuilders for a constructive approach to development but that process cannot be rushed, and so it is inevitable that the development trajectory will be 'lumpy' and not provide an even flow of homes over several years. I am advised that the requirement for a five-year supply must assume an average annual requirement and so allows us to take no account of the reality of delivering large sites.

The position is exacerbated by the fact that we face a major recession at present. Whilst house-builders are still seeking to build in Winchester, they will only build what they can sell and those inevitable (and hopefully short-term) delays are further disrupting the delivery of the smooth trajectory we are apparently required to achieve.

- As I also note above, there is a history in Winchester of delivery through smaller sites – back gardens, larger plots which can be sub-divided and so on – so called 'windfalls'. Our SHLAA identifies the larger sites which are expected to come forward but we have found that it is impossible to accurately identify small sites (5 or less dwellings) in advance. In the past five years we have seen over 500 houses built on these small 'windfall' sites and, with no material change to our policies expected, we see no reason why this level of delivery should not continue. Once again, I am told by my officers that the 'rules' on calculating 5-year land availability do not allow us to recognise the reality of our local circumstances and take account of these developments.

Over the life of the South East Plan, and indeed in the next ten years, I have no doubt that we will achieve our target for delivery of new homes. However, local circumstances mean that it is impractical to achieve a metronomic 612 houses a year over the next five years when the preponderance of major development sites, combined with the impact of the recession, mean our trajectory is likely to peak in the middle part of the LDF period. The task is made doubly difficult when we are not permitted to take into account windfall development which has been a reality here for many years.

My officers advise that these circumstances leaves us with no option but to release further greenfield sites, which are not, in our view, in appropriate locations. Nor are they acceptable to local communities. Moreover, there is a real possibility that we end up over-delivering against targets by being compelled to accept unsuitable development. The people of Winchester are not nimbys, but they do not expect to have unsuitable developments imposed which generate totals not deemed necessary by the South East Plan or our own assessments.

I and my colleagues, both in my Party and across the Council, do not wish to impose more houses on Winchester than we are required to by the South East Plan. That would be more than we consider necessary to meet local need and more than our local economy can support. Nor do we wish to lose control of development and be subject to planning decisions taken by appointed Inspectors with no local knowledge. It seems, however, that a rigid interpretation of Government policy is forcing us down that route. That is not good for the credibility of the planning process nor, more importantly, for the residents of Winchester.

For these reasons, I request a meeting with yourself to discuss how Winchester can secure the development we need, and the South East Plan requires, but avoid overdevelopment through bureaucratic inflexibility.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George Beckett". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the "Yours sincerely" text.

Cllr George Beckett  
**Leader of the Council**