

Thank you for granting me permission to address the inquiry this morning.

Local ward councillors are best placed to comment on the specific applications, but the timing of this inquiry has prompted me to speak because of current events in Parliament.

The Inspector will know that the Secretary of State has indicated that changes to the National Planning Policy Framework document are imminent. The result of those changes, following publication of the government's proposed tracked changes to the NPPF in December, will have significant bearing on these applications and hundreds of other speculative development applications like them. And that is why, today, I am asking the Inspector to seek permission to suspend determination of these appeals until those changes are given effect.

For context, I would like to state that I have provided in writing to this inquiry the joint submission by the Leaders of St Albans District Council, Three Rivers District Council and myself to the NPPF consultation which closed last month.

But let me now turn to the statements by the appellants.

In their statements of case or other supporting documentation, both appellants have referenced the decision of Inspector Masters in the Roundhouse Farm/Bullens Green case in Colney Heath.

The Inspector will of course be aware of the facts of that case. The Bullens Green case is a development of 100 homes, much smaller than the combined applications being considered today, but the Bullens Green development was also refused by the district council.

A key reason cited for refusing the application was the loss of protected Green Belt in Colney Heath.

Unfortunately, Inspector Masters was constrained in his decision by the incongruous position of the Conservative government, and felt compelled to overturn this local refusal and grant permission. That's because the government on the one hand claimed to wish to protect the Green Belt, while until recently doing absolutely nothing to put that claim into practice.

That decision now leaves the nearby village of Colney Heath inundated by further inappropriate applications from similar developers. How could this have been allowed to happen?

Well, back in December 2015, Ministers had gone so far as to issue a Written Ministerial Statement to announce that it was government policy that "unmet housing need is unlikely to outweigh harm to the Green Belt so as to establish very special circumstances" which would permit such development.

But they failed to actually incorporate that policy into subsequent updates of the NPPF.

Accordingly, in the case of Bullens Green, Inspector Masters found that he could attach little weight to that written statement because of the Conservative government's failure to follow through on their stated ambitions.

Local residents may know that on the basis of that incredibly disappointing decision for the St Albans district, I have been at the forefront of the campaign in Parliament to hold the government to their word, and finally put these protections in place.

A debate was granted in November 2021, where I managed again to secure a statement of intention from the Minister at that time, that "most new buildings in the green belt are inappropriate and

should be refused planning permission unless there are very special circumstances, as determined by the local authority”.

But shortly afterwards, when St Albans District Council asked the Secretary of State to “call-in” the application for more inappropriate development on the Green Belt at Harpenden Road in the North of the city, the Secretary of State simply refused.

Then, during the passage of the Levelling Up Bill in Parliament, I tabled a series of amendments.

Although neither the Secretary of State, nor in fact the other MP whose constituency includes part of the St Albans District, chose to back my amendments, they were a catalyst to a more substantial promise of urgent action by the government.

Further detail of my amendment is included in the accompanying letter from myself and Council leaders. In brief it would give effect to the very same policy described in the 2015 written ministerial statement. It would once and for all clarify that not meeting housing need as calculated by the government’s “standard method” could no longer be considered a “very special circumstance”.

I tabled a further amendment which addressed this so-called “standard method” directly. In a previous guise in a short-lived white paper, a variation of this nonsense calculation had even been described as the “mutant planning algorithm”.

The Inspector will know that this flawed formula requires the use of vastly outdated 2014 ONS figures on household projections. My understanding is, that as of today, Planning Inspectors and planning officers are still required to use this data – despite being almost a decade old.

My amendment would have allowed Planning Inspectors to use the most up to date ONS figures when making this calculation. Again, while not getting behind the amendment, Conservatives in Parliament finally woke up and started to smell the coffee.

A rebellion against the Bill as a whole was threatened by his own backbenchers if the Secretary of State continued to turn a blind eye to his indefensible position. The position that he kept repeating, that the Green Belt should be protected, had not been made – even partially – a reality.

Having been dragged kicking and screaming to listen to concerns across the country by a revolt of their own MPs, the government promised and duly delivered a consultation on the NPPF in December, which closed in March.

The Inspector will be aware that the consultation was on a version of the NPPF which included tracked changes. Those specific changes – if they had been implemented in a timely way by the Secretary of State – could have significantly changed the framework that Planning Inspectors had to apply to the applications that are under consideration at this inquiry today.

First, the NPPF - the “bible” for reaching planning decisions - would be clear that Green Belt boundaries are not required to be altered to meet these centrally produced housing targets – however out of date they may be.

Second, those outdated housing targets would have finally been acknowledged in the NPPF as only a starting point and not binding.

This would make it feasible for St Albans to produce a sustainable local plan which prioritised brownfield development; St Albans and the other 60% of local authorities who are currently without a plan.

Put simply, it would curtail the sort of speculative development under consideration today. Developers would no longer be able to take the “cheap and easy” route of bulldozing over our precious Green Belt, countryside and amenity land. They would instead be incentivised to put in the hard graft of developing brownfield sites first.

I am certain that having visited the sites, and heard from my constituents and community representatives just how important the land on either side of Chiswell Green Lane is to their quality of life, that any Inspector would give as much weight as the law permits them to in this case.

So, I would ask that in this limbo period further clarification on the government’s stated intentions is sought before any decision is reached.

But we are in limbo.

The NPPF is in limbo.

The Secretary of State has consulted on changes and is considering the responses – right now.

It cannot be right that the Secretary of State – after much pressure from me and some other MPs - has laid out proposals at long last to strengthen protections for the Green Belt, yet in this intervening period they cannot be relied upon.

Similarly, the government have at last given clarity – albeit in draft form – that their Whitehall generated housing targets are not binding.

Today this inquiry is unable to pay heed to that direction of travel. But in a few weeks, it might be able to.

So I would ask the Inspector to write to the Secretary of State, to seek permission to suspend determination of these appeals until those changes are given effect.

As I say, my district council colleagues can set out today the many compelling reasons that these inappropriate developments should be refused, even under the current NPPF guidelines.

But, pending stronger protections for our environment and green spaces, it would be folly to press ahead to determine these appeals without an unequivocal steer from the Secretary of State on his intended timing.

For the sake of a few weeks delay, it is really not worth destroying some of our precious greenbelt forever.

Thank you again for allowing me to address the inquiry today, and I trust that my request will be given due consideration.