

My speech during the debate on Planning Decisions: Local Involvement, 21 June 2021

I support the Government's passion for home ownership. They are right that we need to do more to extend that opportunity to a new generation. It was, after all, an opportunity that previous generations took advantage of, enjoying the pleasures that can come from owning one's own home and doing with it rather more of the things one wishes to do.

I support the Government's wish to bring forward more brownfield development, because there are still many sites around the country that could be tidied up and better used. I trust that, within that, the Government wish to ease the planning system sufficiently so that where we need to convert tired or redundant commercial buildings into residential properties there will be no great planning impediment in doing so.

I strongly support the wish of the Government to do something extra to make sure that developers with planning permissions build out the permissions they have under a proper local plan. In the borough of Wokingham, of which I represent a part, we have been afflicted in recent years by some landowners and developers gaming the system. Thousands of planning permissions are outstanding, and yet the local plan, which tries to protect areas, has been overwhelmed at times by people lodging appeals on land not within the local plan for development and inspectors deciding that we did not have enough land because of the slow rate of build against all the permissions that are there.

Above all, we need a planning system that can reconcile our wish to protect the green gaps, the green fields, the farms and the woods—indeed, to expand the woods—and at the same time to make enough land available for housing. The Office for National Statistics has shown that, in the year to March 2020, we welcomed some 715,000 extra people into our country.

Although 403,000 people also left, that meant that there were still 312,000 extra people to house, and not all of those going freed up homes in the right place for the incomers. We need to have sustainable immigration. Of course we need to welcome people into our country, but they should expect decent standards of housing, and the gap is too large. We now have a backlog of demand and need, and if we keep inviting in hundreds of thousands of extra people, we are not going to catch up. I urge the Government to make things easier so that the trade-offs between environmental protection and more concrete for housing are not so difficult.

Finally, on levelling up, which I strongly support, over the years a large number of executive homes have been built in Wokingham and places like it, attracting people with great qualifications—people capable of commanding well above average earnings. We need to provide that kind of housing if we wish to attract companies and the investment to level up, and we should not put all

that housing into the areas that have already been very successful.