

STATEMENT FROM WIRRAL GREEN SPACE ALLIANCE (WGSA) REGARDING THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSED HOUSING & PLANNING REFORMS

OUR CONCERNS:

After many years of hard endeavour and collaboration across all local Political Parties and by dedicated Council Officers and Groups mainly led by WGSA, just as the long-awaited Local Plan, designed to Regenerate Wirral's most deprived areas, realising their huge potential and thereby protecting our precious Green Belt and distinct character of individual communities, the new Government, instead of improving the System, comes in with a potential 'wrecking ball'.

Were we are able to get the current Local Plan 'across the line' and 'adopted' in the next few months (as we are in the 'fortunate' position of our Local Plan being in the final 'Examination' stage), our hard-pressed Council would have to commence a Plan Review on the basis of the new mandated regime, involving not the now-accepted figure of **4,500** new homes within the 16 years of the LP Period, not even the inflated figure of **14,000** new homes in our Brownfield-only emerging Local Plan, but over **28,000** additional homes to cater for 60,000+ new Residents, increasing the Borough's Population by over 20%, with no clarity from where such numbers would come or be employed, remembering that between 2011 and 2021 Wirral's Population increased by just **417** people!!

John Heath, WGSA's Convenor, says, "Wirral Green Space Alliance opposes the imposition of this ill-thought-out, mandated, arbitrary, unfairly-allocated, 'one-size-fits-all' strategy, prepared in haste, encouraged unsurprisingly by the land-owning and developer sectors, which has Wirral amongst the worst-affected local authorities (LAs) and is estimated to require around 12,000 new dwellings on Wirral's Green Belt, losing the character and separate identity of distinct communities, and hampering the decades-overdue, desperately-needed Regeneration of Wirral's most deprived areas where the disparity of life-expectancy, not to mention life-chances, is now shockingly over 12 years".

"This is not assessing and delivering what is needed, it's a 'do what I say' approach from the Centre".

What is worse is that there is a growing expert consensus that the new approach simply will not work or achieve the Government's stated Aims. The so-called 'Grey Belt' would make only a marginal contribution: significant Green Belt development would be required to help deliver the huge numbers. As such, developers would choose to develop on Green Belt for ease of delivery and profitability; and then 'cherry pick' the best sites and only develop a number which would keep prices high (and land-bank the rest). The Regeneration areas would be side-lined, putting more pressure on the Green Belt option, where a desperate Council would have to give way on supplying 'Affordable Housing'.

Despite this, WGSA will, in addition to opposing the proposed 'Changes', suggest arguments and measures to mitigate the awful excesses and improve the Approach; and will be calling for Public support once more. We will provide further information and assistance as well as submitting our Groups' own Responses to the ongoing Consultation (**Deadline: 11:45pm, Tues 24th September**).

Meanwhile, a first step could be to visit the Consultation website where 3 Documents explain the Changes and Process, show the marked-up proposed changes to the NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) Guidance, and the list of Local Authority existing and new Housing Targets. Also shown are the means of Responding: Online Pro-Forma, Email or by Post. The LINK is: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system>

Wirral Green Space Alliance is calling on the 4 Wirral MPs to back and promote Wirral's Brownfield-only, Regeneration-led emerging Local Plan AND to oppose the Government's Proposals to apply an ill-thought-out, 'one-size-(doesn't)-fit-all' strategy to the whole Country, which would be particularly inappropriate and destructive for Wirral, and overload already hard-pressed Public Services.

BACKGROUND:

Over several years, WGSA has been working with the Council, local Stakeholders and the Public, supporting the 'Brownfield Only' Local Plan, which has the support of the entire Council, including Councillors of each main Party and the vast majority of the people of Wirral Borough. It focuses housebuilding where regeneration is most needed, while sparing our precious Green Belt at a time of climate and ecological emergency.

However, just when we thought that the Borough's Green Belt might be safe, and after all the significant amount of time, effort and money put into the Local Plan by the Council, Local Stakeholders, WGSA and the Public, the new Government has published its proposed housing and planning reforms. It is a SHOCKER FOR WIRRAL BOROUGH with an ASTONISHING 141% increase in the number of additional homes being required.

The Local Plan is due to be signed off imminently, with the Inspectors agreeing to the Brownfield-only approach and a housing delivery of 835 homes pa (13,360 over the 16-year Plan). The current 'Standard Method' for calculating the 'Housing Need' figure is based on outdated 2014 ONS (Office for National Statistic) Data and gave a figure of 728 dpa for the Borough. WGSA had argued that, if the 'Housing Need' calculation were based on more up-to-date figures and projections, the figure would actually only be around 275 dwellings per annum.

It had been hoped that when the new-Government came into office it would update the NPPF and the housing calculation 'Standard Method' (SM) using the more up-to-date Census population figures and projections – so that houses are built where and in the quantity actually needed. Instead, they have changed the Calculation Method so it is simply based on a percentage of the existing Housing Stock number. This illogical approach (as it does not capture 'Need') is accompanied by political manipulations that see London, for example, where there is a massive housing crisis, having its target reduced from 100,000 to 80,000 and reallocated. It is why LAs across the Country, such as Wirral Borough Council, are now seeing their precious Green Belt targeted in the middle of a climate and ecological crisis, for homes that are in the wrong place and not needed.

Implications for Wirral are stark! Despite the Population only growing by 417 people between 2011 and 2021, the new Government is proposing that Wirral Borough now needs to build 1,755 homes pa – that is 28,080 new houses over the Plan Period. On average household size, that means another 60,000+ people, a 20% rise.

During the election campaign Labour promised they would introduce "a better system, that builds homes local people can afford, delivers new infrastructure and improves green spaces." They also promised to redefine parts of the Green Belt as 'Grey Belt', which would include "lower quality" land such as petrol stations and carparks. It now appears that 'Grey-Belt' could include previously undeveloped Green Belt next to a Settlement or Road, or any land which a Developer successfully argues is so-called 'weakly performing' Green Belt, a term undefined in Legislation or Planning Guidance but used by developers and their advisers.

Steve Anderson, Chair of The Heswall Society (part of WGSA), says "Developers will try to claim any section of Green Belt that they wish to build on is 'weakly performing' and this puts any of Wirral's Green Belt in danger".

The new Government proposes that any development on Grey or Green Belt should include 50% "Affordable" Homes but their proposed Planning reforms do not include any change to the definition of 'Affordable Homes' as being those at 20% below the local market rent or value. i.e. this is still massively unaffordable to most. However, we suspect the 'big developers' will find their way around this requirement anyway, as previously.

What Wirral Borough and the Country generally needs is genuinely affordable homes: i.e. Social Housing. We fear that the Government's ill-thought-out plans will only continue helping Developers destroy green spaces by building the most profitable homes that those in most need cannot afford. For our Borough, the Government's proposals will put the Council's current Local Plan in great jeopardy. Instead of a Local Plan which directs Developers to build and regenerate where it is most needed, Developers will now be concentrating their resources on developing the more profitable Green Belt areas, building homes UNAFFORDABLE to most.

In his Election campaign, the new Labour Wirral West MP, Matthew Patrick, stated "Unsuitable development, not right and not welcome has threatened our Greenbelt. The community has stopped it and we must be ready to stop it again." We expect Matthew Patrick and others to keep to their Election promises.

Alison McGovern MP has previously said "We need to build homes in Wirral that are climate friendly, meet social need and deal with dereliction, not making life easy for those who want to build on green fields. I will always fight to protect our green belt and have supported residents in Thornton Hough and Storeton against the developers who want to change the character of these villages against the wishes of residents." Also, Angela Eagle MP and Justin Madders MP have voted for action to tackle Climate Change/environmental emergencies.

We expect all 4 Wirral MPs to back WGSA and call for the Government to rethink their housing proposals, and urge as many people as possible to object to these proposals. For more information, follow us on Facebook.

WGSA is a non-political grouping of over 30 local Environmental, Historical, Community and Green Belt/Space Campaign Groups, including 'The Wirral Society', co-founders of CPRE (Campaign to Protect Rural England).