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Thank you for your letter received on 22 July to the Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP, on behalf of a number of your constituents, about Local Plans and the National Planning Policy Framework. I am replying as national planning policy falls within my Ministerial responsibilities.

The work on planning reform that the Government has done so far has had two ultimate goals: to protect our countryside and to encourage sustainable development.

As you will no doubt appreciate, there is a need for an increased supply of housing, given demographic changes and a growing population. This requires the building of new homes and the bringing back in to use of empty homes. Let me reassure you that the Government is working tirelessly to get every inch of brownfield land back into use.

Building on the reforms announced previously, which will allow conversion of existing commercial buildings to residential uses, I am pleased that the Government will be going further by making it easier to convert empty and redundant buildings into homes. This will also help rejuvenate high streets and market towns. These measures will complement the hundreds of millions of pounds of investment aimed at bringing empty homes back into use.

Local Plans are indeed a key element of the Government's planning reforms. The overly centralised planning system that the Government is replacing served only to breed a lack of trust in the planning system as a whole. Wherever a Local Plan is drawn up, consulted on and agreed, local residents should expect decisions to be taken in accordance with it, rather than the presumption in favour of sustainable development alone. This is a sign of true localism in action. Local Plans, neighbourhood planning and community rights to build and acquire community assets are bringing planning powers back to local areas.

I understand your concerns about areas that do not yet have Local Plans in place, but let me reassure you that the Framework will ensure that the image of uncontrolled development painted by some will in no way become reality. Even in cases where there is currently no Local Plan, new development will still have to conform to all parts of the Framework, which clearly sets out that development must be well located, well designed and sustainable. Designations like the Green Belt continue to be in force whether or not a Local Plan is in place.

I would also stress that seven in ten councils already have at least a published plan in the public domain and others are making good progress. By contrast, under the last Administration, by the general election – six years after their 2004 Planning Act, only 3 in 10 councils had a published plan.

In order to help those councils who have not yet completed their plans, the Government will continue to fund the Planning Inspectorate and the Planning Advisory Service to provide assistance. Between them, they have already visited over 200 councils to provide help with getting a good quality Plan in place.

The Government made it clear that the transitional arrangements which ended at the end of March 2013 were only intended for the limited cases where pre-existing plans had to be adapted to fit in line with the National Planning Policy Framework.

The Government has also significantly decentralised power over planning, through abolishing the last Administration's Regional Strategies. This is removing top-down plans to delete or undermine the Green Belt in thirty towns and cities across England.

Rest assured, the Government's reforms will protect the Green Belt, promote responsible building and bring power in the planning process back to local communities.



PP NICK BOLES MP

**APPROVED BY THE
MINISTER AND SIGNED
IN HIS ABSENCE**