

Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
Westminster
London
SW1P 4DF

28 February 2018

Dear Mr. Javid,

Joint Letter on the Statement of Common Ground

We write as a collective group of organisations with a strong interest in place-making which supports strong local economies and sustainable communities. We believe that, as currently drafted, the proposed Statement of Common Ground does not go far enough to mandate joint working across all tiers of local government. This is increasingly important in the context of the Industrial Strategy, focusing on reducing infrastructure gaps and ensuring that everywhere in the country has the same opportunities to encourage more balanced economic growth.

The importance of infrastructure

Infrastructure, and how it is used, is crucial in delivering sustainable development, which meets the needs of existing communities and helps them build for the future. It is also critical in making land development-ready and suitable for housing which is vital for boosting support. However, in two-tier areas some of the infrastructure planning, delivery and management is the responsibility of the county council whilst planning for housing is the responsibility of district council.

The Statement of Common Ground (SOCG) announced in the Housing White Paper offers a real opportunity to bring together the different district and county council responsibilities. In two-tier areas, the SOCG could underpin the integration of infrastructure, economic growth, education and social care functions with housing and planning functions, which then feeds into the local plan. This would allow all authorities to work together to identify the required infrastructure and its sustainable management across the local authority areas, and indeed across county boundaries where necessary, and develop a clear strategy for collecting contributions that allows that infrastructure to be delivered.

This approach would have the added benefit of giving a broad spatial element to the planning system, linking people to jobs and new homes to vital services – an incredibly important part of sustainable growth.

The importance of joint working

In evidence to the CCN's Devolution report, the Royal Town Planning Institute stated that their 'current research into strategic planning around England suggests strikingly few places where agreement has been reached on housing' and that 'there is a need to overcome the current weaknesses in the level of co-operation. Our diagnosis of this is that there is not enough reason for planning authorities (in particular) to cooperate, and often strong reasons not to'. All organisations that have signed the letter have submitted consultation responses to recent consultations calling for a strategic approach to planning and infrastructure. This is fundamental to delivering the government's ambition for housing development. Government should take a strong stance with the SOCG and ensure that all local partners work together from the outset, so that it doesn't fail in the same way the duty to cooperate has.

The importance of joint working in areas outside the city-regions has been recognised in the latest housing deal for Oxfordshire which was announced at last month's budget – the first step of which is to agree a SOCG between Oxfordshire's five district councils with support from the county council. This is something that we would like to see replicated across the country in two-tier areas.

This could be easily achieved by amending guidance and explicitly stating that, in two-tier areas, authorities should work together on the SOCG setting out how they will work together to join up planning for housing, infrastructure, education, climate change and social care, and that all parts of local government should be signatories of the SOCG. Guidance should make clear that SOCG must engage the public so that there is greater community ownership of the major decisions which shape places.

Finally, strengthening the SOCG would also be beneficial in areas where there are sub-national transport bodies such as the Midlands Engine, or where areas are part of a rail franchise such as West Midlands Rail. This would allow central government investment into additional capacity on strategic transport networks to be aligned with local strategic spatial planning, which could include large urban extensions and new settlements, providing a good return on investment. This would support Government's agenda of building new garden towns and ensuring that local authorities capitalise on opportunities that new infrastructure presents.

Promoting the alignment of planning for housing and infrastructure at higher spatial levels will assist in meeting the economic challenges that county areas face, increasing high value jobs and increasing productivity and rebalancing the economy meeting the aims of the Government's Industrial Strategy and promoting sustainable growth across the country.

Yours sincerely,



*Cllr Philip Atkins
CCN Vice-Chairman and Spokesman for
Housing
Leader of Staffordshire County Council*



*Sue Percy
Chief Executive
Chartered Institute of Transport and
Highways*



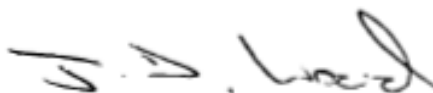
*Kate Henderson
Chief Executive
Town and Country Planning Association*



*Andrew Whitaker
Planning Director
Home Builders Federation*



*Simon Neilson
President
Association of Directors of Environment,
Economy, Planning and Transport*



*John Wood
Lead Advisor, Housing, Planning, and
Infrastructure
Association of County Chief Executives*

cc Dominic Raab MP
Minister of State for Housing, MHCLG