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Caroline Spelman MP
Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
House of Commons
London SW1 1AA

19th October 2009

Dear Ms Spelman,

Conservative Party Policy on Regional Planning

I am writing to you in response to your recent policy paper, Control Shift and your subsequent letter on the Abolition of Regional Planning. I convene the 'Highbury Group' a working group of experts from public, private and independent sectors on housing and the credit crunch. The group includes a number of individuals who have extensive experience from the last housing crash and earlier of maintaining housing output in a challenging economic climate.

Our main aim is to suggest appropriate interventions to ensure the continuation of the development of housing and we have drafted papers on appropriate interventions, which have been discussed with the Homes and Communities Agency. Myself and other members of the group had a useful meeting with Tim Collins, adviser to Grant Shapps MP, in July.

The last meeting of the group asked me to write to you to express our concerns on your proposals to abolish the current system of regional planning.

We welcome the proposals in your policy document 'Control Shift' to provide new financial incentives to local authorities, which enable housing development. However we consider that these should be seen as supplementing the current system of regional planning rather than substituting for it.

The group considers that the current three tier structure of national, regional, and local planning, if operated as intended, is an effective way of ensuring that new housing is distributed appropriately in terms of meeting both current and projected housing demand and needs and in accordance with the policy objectives of delivering

sustainable communities – sustainable in terms of economic, social and transport infrastructure as well as environmentally sustainable. The group considers that the current three tier structure of national, regional, and local planning, if operated as intended, is as an effective way of ensuring that new housing is distributed appropriately in terms of meeting both current and projected housing demand and needs and in accordance with the policy objectives of delivering sustainable communities – sustainable in terms of economic, social and transport infrastructure as well as environmentally sustainable. It can do so in a way that does not ride roughshod over local aspirations, but recognises that there will be occasions when local preferences will have to take second place to the wider needs of society.

A Regional Plan is however necessary to provide confidence to investors and planning authorities. There is a danger that new initiatives will be stifled without a definitive framework because schemes could otherwise be challenged at a late stage leading to considerable delays and abortive costs. A Regional Plan also provides the necessary framework for the large national energy providers and water authorities to make their investment decisions.

We recognise that there is a limit on the sites where sustainability criteria can be met. However, if the needs of the current and projected population are to be met, there needs to be a set of criteria which are applied consistently across the country and for setting appropriate house-building targets for individual local authority areas. These criteria should of course take into account local factors such as the availability of transport and social infrastructure and the potential to enhance such infrastructure as well as the existing character of an area. We are however concerned that your proposals to leave the setting of targets entirely to each individual planning authority will not ensure the development of the most appropriate sites and not necessarily ensure that the needs of the population, both existing and in the future, are met in the most appropriate manner. In fact there is a risk that a narrowly 'localist' approach will act to reinforce existing social polarisation and inequalities, through protecting better off areas, including suburban areas, while leading to overdevelopment and unsustainable densities in some inner areas, where housing pressures and market demand tend to be most acute.

We are therefore writing to ask you to clarify how your proposed policies will deal with the concerns we raise and how a balance will be achieved between meeting the overall needs of the future population of the country as a whole and the delivery of sustainable communities at a local level. We would be interested in meeting either yourself, Bob Neill MP or your advisers to discuss this issue further.

Yours sincerely

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