

figures in response to the new methodology, said Lowe, mentioning South Tyneside Council's delayed publication of its new draft local plan as an example.

Some councils have reviewed their targets in response to the standard method but are still being ambitious, said Cristina Howick, partner at consultancy Peter Brett Associates. Leeds City Council, for example, is proposing to reduce its housebuilding target in its revised core strategy as a result of demographic changes in the district, according to a report approved by its executive board last month. However, the 52,000-home target now proposed in the 15 years up to 2032 is still 10,000 more homes than was suggested by the standard method, chief city planner Tim Hill pointed out. He said the council was concerned that the government's need figure did not reflect affordability issues in parts of the city. Leeds also requires additional housing to support its economic growth.

Other economically ambitious authorities are similarly proposing housing targets well above the government's housing need figures. Lowe mentioned Sunderland City Council, where the proposed submission version of its local plan includes a requirement that is 26 per cent higher than the housing need figure generated by the standard method. A note in the plan states that the government's new methodology would provide an "insufficient number of dwellings to support economic growth within the city".

Another example cited by Howick is Doncaster Council, whose emerging local plan proposes 920 new homes a year, almost double the housing need figure of 585 homes a year under the standard method. The latest draft plan says this is "to meet the future needs of the existing population and the needs that will arise from planned jobs growth".

Such councils will not be penalised if they don't achieve the higher figure, Howick said, pointing out that their five-year land supply and the new housing delivery test will be based on the housing need figure, even if their target is much higher.

## NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS

# How a neighbourhood plan allocated sites for greenfield homes

by Joey Gardiner

**Fears of speculative development and a potentially higher housing target meant a village in South Oxfordshire went for a pro-growth approach in its neighbourhood plan.**

Residents in the historic village of Watlington in South Oxfordshire have just voted four to one in favour of a neighbourhood plan that allocates land for up to 260 homes on three large greenfield sites. These allocations go beyond the 238 homes required of the parish in the emerging South Oxfordshire local plan. Consequently, the plan's examiner, Andrew Ashcroft, praised the document in his report for its "positive and proactive approach" to housing growth. However, recent research from consultancy Lichfields found that just one in 20 neighbourhood plans allocate more homes than required. So why did the Watlington plan take such an approach and how did it manage to get such widespread support?

Residents of Watlington, which sits partly inside the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, voted on 28 June in favour of the plan on a high turnout of 47 per cent. But despite 81 per cent of parishioners voting in favour, Matt Reid, chair of Watlington Parish Council, doesn't pretend the scale of development was what they wanted. In fact, an earlier version of the neighbourhood plan with much lower housing numbers of less than half the final number still proved controversial locally.

However, Reid said villagers began to realise that South Oxfordshire Council's lack of a five-year housing land supply put them at risk of speculative

development, while at the same time the authority's emerging local plan tripled Watlington's housing target. "When we saw what had happened in neighbouring boroughs with developments it put the frighteners on," he said. "We could see the wolves were at the door."

The allocations therefore aim to protect the village from speculative development, with a small buffer. Significantly, they also safeguard the proposed route for a relief road designed to take traffic away from its congested centre: a big local concern. Neighbourhood plan examiner Nigel McGurk, director of consultancy Erimax, said only by making site allocations was it possible to justify requiring infrastructure such as a relief road. The three sites were also deemed to have the least visual impact.

After the controversy with the first version of the plan, a community organisation independent of the parish council was set up to consult and then deliver a revised version. Reid said this move was vital in garnering support by separating the issue from local party politics. "A lot of communities start off with a fairly negative response," said Gary Kirk, managing director of neighbourhood planning consultancy YourLocale. "But as soon as you start the process and explain the issues, people become more aware and better informed and the conversation changes."

In his examination report, Ashcroft said the plan's "co-ordinated approach" to achieving housing growth but in a way that accommodates the proposed bypass route "sits at the heart of the localism agenda". McGurk added: "This is absolutely what neighbourhood planning is about. People accept development because they see the plan comes from people working and living in the community."

Chris Bowden, founder of consultancy Navigus, said the kind of compromise demonstrated in the Watlington plan between accepting housing growth in return for infrastructure improvements is becoming more common. "In the early days, many groups were trying to limit development but communities have seen what's happening and become more aware. And sometimes they're making these kinds of brave and difficult decisions."

### Northern councils that have lowered or said they will review their local plan housing targets in 2018

Local authority	Drop in target*	Plan stage
Blackburn with Darwen	-75%	Review announced
Bradford	-33%	Review announced
Calderdale	-25%	Draft plan published
Durham	-15%	Draft plan published
Leeds	-14%	Draft plan published
Northumberland	-27%	Draft plan published
Rossendale	-20%	Issues and options
South Tyneside	N/A	Review announced
Wakefield	-32%	Issues and options

\* Reduction in housing requirement from earlier version of plan (if indicated). Source: Turley/Planning research



Brave decision: Watlington's residents voted to accept the plan to fend off speculative development threat