

“I am so sorry that I can’t be with you all tonight in person. As you’ll be aware, I have been a huge supporter of local communities that come together to develop their own Neighbourhood Plans, and I am pleased that several such plans have already been adopted here in Mid Norfolk. A number of other great plans are also being worked on – as is the case here in Saham Toney.

Many hours of tireless work and collaboration, largely from volunteers, goes into these Plans and I applaud and congratulate all of those who have been involved in your Plan to date. For too long, planning has tended to be something done TO communities rather than BY them – often leading to large, inappropriate applications that are out of keeping with our rural identity here in Mid Norfolk being dumped on our towns and villages, without the necessary infrastructure and facilities required to make them sustainable in the long term. Rural constituencies, like our own, are facing unprecedented pressures from aggressive ‘out of town’ developers and that’s why I have been so vocal in encouraging communities to work together to put in place Plans that set out how THEY would like to see their towns and villages grow over the next fifteen to twenty years – and why I have been so active, both locally and in Parliament, in working towards strengthening the Neighbourhood Planning powers set out in the 2011 Localism Act. Communities, like you, that embrace the spirit of ‘Localism’ and put the effort in to develop a Neighbourhood Plan, deserve to have a greater say in their own future.

Back in January, I secured a Westminster Hall debate on Town and Village Plans, bringing together MPs and Ministers to highlight the importance of strengthening Neighbourhood Planning, and particularly the need to reform the Five Year Housing Land Supply Rule. It’s clear that this rule (which was designed to prevent so-called ‘Nimby’ Councils from ignoring the housing requirements in their own Local Plans) is being used to railroad inappropriate development through, against the wishes of local councils and communities, and to the detriment of sustainable planning, and trust in the planning system.

In the months since then, I have regularly liaised with Ministers to reiterate my calls and, in June, I joined a group of MPs that met with the Prime Minister in person to discuss issues affecting rural and Neighbourhood planning in great depth. I have also attended, and spoken at, a subsequent debate with MPs about the Five Year Housing Land Supply Rule and continue to make the case, with parliamentary colleagues, to the new Housing Minister as to how we can strengthen Neighbourhood Planning further.

Of course, I continue to assist local communities in opposing highly inappropriate and unsustainable developments, as and when they arise, and I am firmly committed to continuing with this going forward, and offering my advice and support to anyone interested in or already working on their own Neighbourhood Plan.

As you can tell, I am a major advocate of the spirit of ‘Localism’ and I am delighted that you have all decided to work together on this worthwhile local cause. It was a pleasure to meet with the Neighbourhood Planning team back in April to discuss how your Plan is coming along, and I took their feedback with me to Parliament as part of my ongoing campaigning in this area.

Again, I want to congratulate you for your efforts to date and I am very much looking forward to joining you all at your next Neighbourhood Planning event in December as part of my ongoing desire to help Saham Toney develop a Plan that it is proud of.

George”