

Tuesday 6th September 2011

I am taking the unusual step of writing to all members of Broxtowe Borough Council in advance of Wednesday's debate.

As you will know there has been much comment, and in my view much misinformation, about the Coalition Government's policy on development. I fear there has also been some confusion as to the effect of the Localism Bill which is passing through Parliament and which it is anticipated will become law at the beginning of next year.

Broxtowe Borough Council is quite properly compiling its plan which will determine the future development within the Borough. However, I do not believe there was any good reason for the council to agree to a target figure of new houses. As you will know the figure accepted by the Borough Council means that in order to achieve it, a considerable amount of the Borough's green belt will be surrendered to development.

Last night I spoke to the Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, who expressed his surprise that Broxtowe had accepted a figure, especially given the effect on our green belt. We agreed that Broxtowe should have consulted first and examined all the evidence and then set a figure. This is a process being pursued by Rushcliffe Borough Council and the time frame they have decided on means they will benefit from the Localism Bill which comes into force in less than four months. The Bill makes it clear that local councils and communities are free to determine their own development and planning policies and strategies. This was made clear in Parliament on Monday by the Liberal Democrat Andrew Stunell, who is the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government:

“It is not for central Government to assess local plans. Our planning reforms make it clear that it is for local councils to assess their local needs and to plan to meet those needs in a way that reflects local priorities.”

During the same session in Parliament, the Secretary of State, Eric Pickles was asked a question about the future of the green belt and gave an answer which is as clear a statement of Government policy as you could hope for:

"Let me give him a clear and unequivocal assurance that the green belt will be protected under this coalition Government, unlike under the previous Labour Government, who promised to build on it."

You may know my own view, and I believe it is shared by many of the people I represent, that Broxtowe needs to maintain and continue to protect its green belt land.

I think the decision, which in effect gives the green light to development on Field Farm and on the fields between Toton and Stapleford, before consulting with the people in those communities and at the same time setting a target figure, was most unfortunate. The Localism Bill gives Councils like Broxtowe the power to make their own decisions. It also allows communities to decide what development they want, if any. I do believe there is a real danger the Borough Council is denying itself and its residents the opportunity provided by the Localism Bill to determine its own development.

The Minister of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government, Greg Clark, said in Parliament yesterday.

“We are simplifying the national planning policy framework, as some Members may have noticed. Through the Localism Bill, we are also abolishing the regional strategies, which have placed top-down burdens on every authority in the country.”

Given all the above, I would ask you please to abandon the setting of a target figure and to continue consulting with people throughout the Borough. There may well be communities who want development, even on green belt because of the other benefits it may bring. The Localism Bill gives communities those powers and I am very concerned that Broxtowe is denying people that opportunity. In any event, as you know, my other concern is that by accepting such a high figure we will lose huge swathes of our precious green belt when we do not need to.

With best wishes,

Anna Soubry MP