The Planning White Paper — the faults of the current system

There is much to support in the Planning White Paper. I have long advocated a map based approach where each area designates which places are to be green space or farms, which can be developed for housing and which have general commercial use. Speedier decisions, Local Plans only one third of the current length and a simpler approach to an Infrastructure levy or contribution on developers are all welcome.

The present system is complex, expensive and frustrating to developers and local communities alike. It often does not allow a local community to protect areas from housing development if they are not specially designated as Green belt or SSSIs. Whatever the Local Plan says, determined and well funded developers hire expensive lawyers and keep on with appeals and changed submissions until on national appeal they overturn the local Plan and get their way with a further planning permission. Developers have to allow for many years of battles, have to pay big fees to planning consultants and lawyers and enter a variable negotiation over developer contribution.

Local Councillors often are dragged from seeking to protect a piece of land from development which is not designated for development in their approved local plan, by the appeals process. They seek a deal with a determined developer on the advice of their planning officers. They are told if they do not do a deal the Council will lose out on a Section 106 Developer Contribution Agreement, as they will lose on appeal and one may not be awarded. They are also told they may land the Council with large planning and legal fees trying to defend their local plan, only to lose and have to explain why they wasted all that money.

The Councillors who give in then become very unpopular with the local community who sometimes suggest unreasonable collaboration with the developer, when in most cases it is the run of official advice and the likelihood of loss in the system that causes the about face. The local community wants the Council to defend green spaces and keep local communities apart from continuous urban sprawl.

The government wishes to hit high targets for future housebuilding. As the White Paper acknowledges, the problem is often poor build rates despite large numbers of outstanding planning permissions. Landowners and developers can game the current system by building slowly on land with approvals in order to persuade Planning Inspectors to allow more planning permissions where the local community wants to keep green space. The government should also as part of this policy exercise improve its control of our borders and set a sustainable figure for economic migrants as past Conservative governments did or promised to do, to ease some of the development pressures.

In future blogs I will look at more of the detail of the proposals in the White Paper in preparation for putting in my response to this consultation

document. I look forward to hearing from constituents in particular about how this might affect us in Wokingham and West Berkshire.

[Broadband provision in the Thames Valley area](#)

I have received this update from the Government:

Dear John,

Thank you for your correspondence of 18 May, in which you request details of the government's plans to improve broadband provision in the Thames Valley area. I am replying as the minister responsible for this policy area and I apologise for the delay.

The government has invested heavily in Berkshire, with over £5 million of central government funding allocated. Delivery is managed by our local delivery partner, Superfast Berkshire (http://www.superfastberkshire.org.uk/). Through their programme and through commercial intervention, 97% of premises in your constituency have access to superfast broadband — up from 61% in 2010. 70% of premises in your constituency have access to gigabit-capable connectivity.

This infrastructure is providing fast, reliable, and future-proofed technology and these figures will increase as the government strives to meet its ambitious broadband targets. However, if constituents are still suffering from slow speeds, I would recommend that they contact Superfast Berkshire who will hold the most up to date plans and timeframes for delivery.

For those premises in rural areas of your constituency, constituents may be eligible for the Rural Gigabit Voucher Scheme. Businesses can claim up to £3,500 and residents can claim up to £1,500 to contribute towards the cost of installing gigabit-capable infrastructure when part of a group project. It is also possible for residents to pool their vouchers together, bringing the cost of installing gigabit-capable connectivity down for all of those involved in the project. It is worth noting that at least two connections will be required to be eligible for the scheme. Further details can be found at the following address: https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/.

The government has made a commitment to deliver nationwide coverage of gigabit-capable networks as soon as possible. Much progress has already been made by the government, working with the telecoms industry. The government will continue to take action to remove barriers and to ensure that those in the hardest to reach areas are not left behind. For example, we have already introduced the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Bill into Parliament, which will make it easier for network builders to access

blocks of flats where there is an absent or unresponsive landlord.

Improving our digital infrastructure will be instrumental in boosting productivity across the UK. This government will deliver on its promise to commit £5 billion of public money to make sure the hardest to reach areas are not left behind. We will do this via a so-called "Outside-In" approach, where we focus on those areas that have received less commercial investment. With this funding, we can deliver world-class connectivity in rural areas at the same time as it is deployed to our cities, to ensure that a connected, 21st century Britain is a reality for all communities across the UK.

I hope that this information is helpful.

With best wishes,

Matt Warman MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Digital Infrastructure

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[Rescuing the health sector](#)

The last figures for UK output and incomes from the ONS take us to end May. They revealed an 18.9% drop in service activity in the 3 months to end May. Unsurprisingly eating and drinking out and the motor trade led the falls, given the lock down impact. Less predictably the other two sectors the ONS singled out as the main drivers of the collapse were health and education, down 31.4% and 37.8% respectively. Many other private sector service areas had much smaller declines thanks to working from home, using remote technology and identifying key workers to keep the service going.

Getting health and education back to where they were should be a priority now. Ministers have said they want the full range of treatments to be available again on the NHS, and to see the backlog of delayed operations and treatments being tackled. So far the NHS has struggled to get back to anything like the capacity before the virus. It has also been unable to fill the private hospitals contracted to support it.

It is now policy to either have isolation hospitals for CV 19 or to have isolated and sealed parts of hospitals to contain CV 19 patients and those helping them. This should enable normal infection control procedures to resume for all the other work the NHS does. Some of the shortfall in work has been patients reluctant to attend medical centres and hospitals for fear of catching the virus when they already belong to an at risk group. The isolation strategy needs to reassure them.

Remote technology has allowed many private sector services to continue as before, substituting remote communication for the previous client and

customer contact that was common. The NHS is learning to use this technology for primary care and for consultations with hospital doctors. Where treatment needs contact in a hospital between staff and patient then the hospitals have expertise in infection control and the staff must have access to high quality protective clothing and equipment.

The private sector is still willing to offer capacity to the NHS to help with the backlog. This coupled with the extra money many available for CV19, winter pressures and other issues should enable the health sector to recover more quickly.
It is important the government defends the proposition that choice is an important driver of innovation and Quality. Private hospitals can offer good service and extra capacity which the NHS buys into when it needs to.

Emergency assistance grants to local Councils to help those in need

West Berkshire is receiving £103,352 and Wokingham £77,342 to make grants to people struggling with food bills and the cost of other essentials.

Payments under this scheme can be made to those already in receipt of normal social security payments, and getting help from the Covid Summer Food fund.

The government is determined no-one need go hungry, and leaves it to Councils to use their skills and knowledge of local deprivation to distribute money where needed.

Reviewing the extent of the state

Government activity has expanded massively as a result of the decision to lock down the country to combat the virus. It is time to roll back many of these areas to bring budgets back towards balance after a huge borrowing splurge.

 9 million people are now effectively additional employees of the state thanks to the Furlough scheme. Most of their wages are paid by taxpayers with the express requirement that they must not work for their employers whilst being so paid. It is important as the government has indicated that rapid progress is now made with getting these people back into full time or part time working with their employer, to save the jobs and slash the costs to government.

The state has paid to control the workload and actions of the private health sector. During the height of the crisis there was an understandable surge in NHS spending, but there was also a drop in health output. Most private sector medicine stopped altogether, and most non urgent treatments stopped in the NHS. As a result health GDP fell. We need to get health output up to at least the levels it was at in January, and return to a system where private money as well as public comes in to cover the costs.

There are also an number of other areas where the state procured resources and capacity by contract to deal with the emergency, where it could now review those contracts, save some money and free capacity for others.

The state has taken upon itself paying to sustain the full level of costs of public transport when it was carrying three or four times as many people as it is today. There needs to be some thought of what demand for the next two or three years is likely to be and what level of fare revenue is likely. It would be unrealistic to carry on recruiting people to the railway for example when the forecast demand is going to be so much lower than last year. Current loss levels are unsustainable for any length of time, and thought needs to be given to a pathway for winning back lost passengers.