

Let's have a good water supply

I am disappointed but not surprised that a few warm days without rain and the water industry is already saying we need to be careful about use. Hosepipe bans are being introduced in some places.

This winter January, March and April all saw rainfall well above average. It was a wet and cold winter, with February and March well below average temperatures of the last 40 years. I remember urging the industry to collect enough of the large quantities of rainwater and snow melt that we experienced just in case we got a hot summer.

From the forecast and the temperatures so far this is not going to be re run of the very hot and dry 1976 nor of the even drier 1995. It is a bit more like a hot summer of yesteryear than some more recent overcast and cooler summers. We need to plan for these events, as they are well within our range of experience. Water is a glamorous growth product. As people get better off so they want to use more water to wash their cars, water their gardens, fill their children's paddling pools and take more showers when it's hot. As water is an entirely renewable resource, the industry needs to put in enough capacity to meet our needs. The industry needs to remember that in parts of the country like the south east the population is growing quickly, which means the need for more piped water.

Housing Supply – Response from Wokingham Borough Council

Following my recent blog on planning, I have now received the enclosed statement from Pauline Jorgensen, the Executive Member for Housing on Wokingham Borough Council:

"We recognise that there is continuing demand for housing in the South East, and particularly in Wokingham Borough.

"This is partly driven by the Borough being recognised as one of the best places in the country to live, work, and raise a family.

"But we believe that the Government's targets for Wokingham Borough are too high, and other areas need to take their fair share of new homes.

"In order to get a true measure of available housing in an area, we would like national housing policies to take into account homes which have planning permission but which developers are holding back on building.

“We call on the Government to allow local authorities to decide where it is most suitable to build houses, rather than letting appeal inspectors in Bristol overturn planning refusals for applications that are in breach of local planning policies.

“Nonetheless, we believe in a property-owning democracy in which people have a high-quality place to live and the chance to buy their own home.

“We continue to build affordable homes in suitable locations, via our wholly owned local authority housing companies, to enable more people to rent or buy, and particularly for young people to get onto the housing ladder.

“Last year we delivered over 500 affordable homes and are ambitious to continue and grow this activity in future years.”

The Chequers meeting

There should be two options on the table for the discussions on Friday. There is the World Trade option, which does not require consent from the EU. This allows us to take back control of our laws, our money, our borders and our trade policy as promised on 29 March 2019. It avoids the uncertainty of a long transition and saves us a lot of money. I would advise that the extra £13bn of tax collected as tariffs on EU goods – prior to trade adjusting to more home production and non EU sourcing – should be given back to UK consumers as a tax cut.

Then there is the Free Trade Agreement option. This is much in the EU’s interest. If they thought it was a simple choice of a Free Trade Agreement or WTO, they would be likely to choose the Free Trade Agreement. Whether they do or not depends on how sensible they are, and on whether they believe we will otherwise simply leave with no agreement.

Under both these options the EU will try to argue it creates a border problem between Northern Ireland the Republic of Ireland. I do not see why it should do so. That complex border today works fine, even though it is a currency, Excise, VAT and people movement border. All the UK need say is it has no plans to put up watch towers or to delay trucks whilst they work out the VAT and customs dues. IT would then be up to the EU what it intends to do on its side of the border.

Some will seek to invent or reinvent some kind of Customs partnership or EEA membership as a third option. These variants fall foul of the PM’s promises to leave the single market and customs union, and delay or prevent taking back control of our laws, our trade policy, all our money and our borders. The PM was quite clear in the Commons on Monday that she does intend to take back control as required by the referendum vote. She was equally clear Northern Ireland leaves the EU in the same way as the rest of the UK does.

We are told to expect another White Paper on Brexit. The last one was clear and fairly detailed. It stated that "We will bring to an end the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the EU in the UK". "We will design our immigration system to ensure that we are able to control the number of people who come here from the EU. In future the Free Movement Directive will no longer apply." "The government is clear that no deal for the UK is better than a bad deal for the UK" The government should repeat those decisions.

Reforming planning – a five year supply of land

The biggest planning issue that confronts my constituency of Wokingham is that surrounding the pace of housebuilding.

The government and planning system lay down that Wokingham Borough, not the same boundaries as my constituency, has to allow the construction of 900 new homes a year. To do this the Council needs to set out in a local plan where the homes should go, and has to grant sufficient planning permissions to allow this to happen. The government planning system requires a Council to make available a five years supply of residential plots. If the Council does not do this, there is every likelihood that additional planning permissions will be granted in the Council area on appeal by Planning Inspectors. Failure by the Council to make 5 years available gives the Inspectors the right to override the Council's local plan, and to grant additional permissions elsewhere.

Wokingham has granted 11,000 permissions for individual new homes that have not yet been built. Commonsense tells you that this means the Council has made available a 12 year supply of land for the 900 a year build rate. Until recently the planning establishment took the view that Wokingham had a supply lower than five years. They came to this conclusion from looking at the actual build rate achieved, rather than at the outstanding permissions. Developers were also suggesting they could not build and sell at the required rate from the four main areas for housing expansion in the local plan and reflected in the permissions granted.

It is possible for a developer to get substantial permissions granted on one site in a given district, to build out at a slow rate, and to gain planning permissions on appeal on other sites it has acquired in the same district. Or it may be that some other landowner benefits from the slow build rate. Sometimes it may be true that the developer cannot build and sell at a fast enough rate. Other times it could be gaming the system, deliberately going slow on an agreed site to win permission on a contested site.

I am currently in discussion with the government over how this system can be reformed. A local authority like Wokingham which is co-operating fully with

the national policy aim of increasing housebuilding should not be undermined by grant of permissions on appeal elsewhere in its area outside the local plan. The whole point of a local plan is to set a sustainable pace of building, and to concentrate the development to make it easier to provide the additional roadspace, schools and health facilities a growing community needs. Such planning is more difficult and dearer if the Council loses control of where the bulk of the new homes will be.

Universal credit goes to work

I visited the local Job Centre on Friday to see how they are getting on with Universal Credit.

I was impressed by the office. The staff were generally positive about Universal Credit, seeing it as an improvement on the previous system. They reported a generally smooth transfer so far. That would reflect the evidence of my postbag, where there has been very little concern or complications with the transfers.

The Job Centre reports good progress in helping people into work. Local job generation remains strong, making it a bit easier for people to find suitable work.

I thanks the staff for all their efforts to carry through the changes, and to help all those in need of income top up and assistance to find work.