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Thank you for your letter of 14 October to the Rt Hon Greg Clark MP on behalf of the Ponteland Civic Society about the draft National Planning Policy Framework. I have been asked to reply.

The aim of our reforms is to simplify a system that most people agree has become complex and confrontational, and to emphasise the central and critical role of the local plan to decision making. That is why the Localism Bill scraps the top-down regional targets and strategies that every council has had to implement, and the draft National Planning Policy Framework distils over 1,000 pages of national policy into around 50.

While many groups have welcomed the proposals, some have expressed concerns that they could lead to inappropriate development. We are determined that this will not be so. The policies will include rigorous protection for the Green Belt, for National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and give local people the right for the first time to protect other green space that is important locally.

We need homes for young people and for growing families, and we need jobs in expanding businesses. But this must not – and will not – be at the expense of our natural and historic environment. The draft makes clear, for example, that sites of the lowest environmental value – including so-called brownfield land – should be used as a priority.

Similarly the presumption in favour of sustainable development is not a loophole to allow any development. What the presumption says is quite simple: that local plans should set out what is needed in each area, that development in line with those plans should be approved without a delay, and that in the absence of an up-to-date plan, the policies in the draft National Planning Policy Framework should guide decisions – including its requirement for development to be sustainable.

During the weeks ahead we will consider all the suggestions that have been made as part of the consultation and we will ensure that the policy the Government adopts will continue to protect our much loved countryside while also enabling local people to plan for the sensible and well-designed development that provides the homes and jobs on which the future prosperity of their community depends.

Please convey my thanks, once again, to the Ponteland Civic Society for contributing to the consultation.

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