



East of England

All Party Parliamentary Group

Co-Chairs: Jess Asato MP & Pam Cox MP

Vice-Chairs: Blake Stephenson MP & Marie Goldman MP

Meeting note

Strengthening the Rural Economy in the East of England

3 to 4:30pm on Monday 15th June

Committee Room 6, House of Commons

Welcome & Introductions: Pam Cox MP, Co-Chair, APPG

- Pam Cox MP welcomed attendees and noted that she was chairing the meeting in place of Jess Asato MP, who was unable to attend due to a Department of Health and Social Care engagement in her capacity as a departmental adviser on violence against women and girls. She also welcomed speakers, parliamentarians and stakeholders in attendance, and noted the apologies of Marie Goldman MP.
- Pam referred attendees to the APPG's recently [revamped website](#), where the minutes of the previous public meeting on clean energy, together with subsequent correspondence with the Minister, had been published. She encouraged those present to review the material, noting that it formed part of the APPG's wider work on issues of strategic importance to the East of England.
- She explained that, as the Minister due to speak on the rural economy was delayed by business in the House of Lords and expected to join later in the meeting, the session would begin with contributions from Jack Abbott MP on Invest East, followed by an update from Ben Feeney-North on the refreshed campaign for Ely Junction improvements, before hearing briefly from the panel. Pam added that remarks made before the Minister's arrival would be passed on.

Rebrand of the campaign for Ely Junction Improvements: Ben Feeney-North, England's Economic Heartland

- Ben Feeney-North provided a short update on the renewed case for Ely Junction improvements. He said that, although the outcome of the previous spending review had been disappointing, partners had chosen to respond by relaunching the campaign rather than allowing momentum to fade.
- He noted that England's Economic Heartland, working with Transport East, had recently taken a refreshed vision for Ely and related East Anglian rail upgrades to UKREiiF in Leeds,

where an updated brochure had been launched. He explained that this built on the substantial work already undertaken, while seeking to present the case in a clearer and more compelling way.

- Ben said the next phase of work was focused on three main areas. The first was building a stronger coalition in support of the scheme, bringing together local government, businesses, parliamentarians and other regional partners around a common advocacy effort. He argued that the level of support for the project was already significant, and that a more coordinated voice would strengthen the case for delivery.
- Secondly, he said there was scope to articulate the benefits more effectively, particularly by placing greater emphasis on the passenger service improvements that Ely and related interventions could unlock. He added that this should be linked more clearly to the wider case on economic growth and housing, while continuing to make a strong case for the freight benefits of the scheme, including its importance to Felixstowe and the growing ports on the Thames Estuary.
- Finally, he said work was also under way with Local Government East to explore whether private or other third-party funding sources could help support the case and strengthen future bids for government investment.
- Responding, Pam Cox MP said the revised approach reflected the need not simply to restate the scheme's technical merits, but to present it in a way that connected more effectively with decision-makers. She noted that the updated material had already been circulated with the agenda and suggested that the reworked case now looked and felt more persuasive.

Invest East Prospectus - Update on Launch at UKREiiF: Jack Abbott MP

- Jack Abbott MP provided an update on the launch of the Invest East prospectus at UKREiiF and situated it alongside the wider effort to strengthen the East of England's case for investment. He noted the close relationship between this work and the renewed campaign on Ely and Haughley, arguing that both reflected the need not only to make a strong technical case, but also to improve how that case was presented and supported across the region.
- He said it had been encouraging to see such a substantial East of England presence at UKREiiF, including strong participation from Suffolk, Norfolk, local government, transport bodies and private sector partners. In his view, this mattered because the region was in active competition with other parts of the country for both public and private investment, and needed to demonstrate ambition and coherence if it was to succeed.
- Jack explained that Invest East had been established as a new inward investment vehicle for the region, building on the earlier prospectus work launched through the APPG. He said its purpose was to attract private investment into large-scale projects, generally with a value of £100 million and above, and to present the East of England as a credible destination for major regeneration and infrastructure funding.

- He reported that the latest prospectus brought together around eight projects, with a combined value of approximately £5.6 billion. These were described as major regeneration opportunities across locations including Watford, Great Yarmouth, Ipswich and Norwich, with the potential to be economically transformative for individual places as well as for the wider region. He stressed that the intention was not simply to promote ideas in the abstract, but to bring forward projects that were sufficiently developed to be presented to investors as realistic and deliverable propositions.
- Jack added that Invest East was intended to provide support throughout the year, particularly to help local authorities develop projects to the point where they were investment-ready. This included helping partners strengthen the commercial basis of schemes, refine proposals and build the relationships needed to attract backing. He suggested that part of the value of the initiative lay in supporting councils and regional partners to bring forward stronger, more market-facing propositions over time.
- He concluded by arguing that the East of England had a strong story to tell on growth, delivery and sectoral strengths, including energy, agritech, logistics and telecommunications, but that the region had not always made that case with sufficient confidence. Invest East, he suggested, was intended to help address that by giving the region a stronger and more consistent year-round presence in the investment market.
- In response, Pam Cox MP said the East of England's profile at UKREiF appeared noticeably stronger than in previous years and suggested that this reflected the wider progress being made in presenting the region more confidently and coherently to investors and decision-makers.

Strengthening the Rural Economy: Panellists' Contributions

Caroline Harriott, Regional Board Chair for the East of England, NFU

- Caroline Harriott set out the NFU's main priorities for strengthening the rural economy in the East of England, beginning with water security. She described the region as the most water-stressed in the country and said increasing pressure from housing growth, urban expansion and environmental requirements was already affecting agricultural production, particularly fruit and vegetable growing. She noted that farmers were seeking to improve water efficiency and invest in winter storage reservoirs, but said such schemes were costly and could take several years to design and deliver.
- She also highlighted broader concerns about business resilience across the farming sector. Caroline said many arable businesses in the region were continuing to adjust to the transition away from area-based support towards newer environmental land management schemes, but argued that the new system had been undermined by uncertainty, administrative difficulties and problems with payments. Set against the effects of climate change, including wetter winters and drier summers, she said this had contributed to lower productivity, higher production costs and very low levels of confidence across the sector.

She added that the impact was being felt not only by primary producers but also by the wider agricultural supply chain, including machinery dealers and other rural businesses.

- Turning to safety and crime, Caroline said farm safety remained a major concern, with accident rates in agriculture still significantly higher than in other industries. She also raised the continuing problem of rural crime, including hare coursing and machinery theft, and said many farmers felt isolated and insufficiently protected, particularly where police responses were seen as inconsistent or inadequate.
- On infrastructure and planning, she said landowners across the East were facing growing pressure from major infrastructure schemes, including reservoirs, rail, pipeline and solar developments, in some cases involving compulsory purchase. At the same time, she noted that many farmers were trying to diversify their businesses and invest in new or repurposed buildings, but still often experienced the planning system as a barrier. She added that local food infrastructure, including modern local abattoirs, remained important to the long-term viability of the sector.
- Finally, Caroline drew attention to plant and animal health, animal welfare and biosecurity. She said changes in the UK's relationship with EU sanitary and phytosanitary arrangements created both opportunities and risks, including around veterinary medicines, disease control and border processes. She also stressed the need for government to address illegal meat imports, arguing that these posed a serious biosecurity threat and could have significant consequences for British agriculture and the UK's reputation in domestic and export markets.

Dan Green, Director of Agriculture, British Sugar

- Dan Green introduced British Sugar as a major part of the rural economy in East Anglia and the Midlands, noting that three of the company's four factories are located in the East and that around 63% of the sugar beet it processes is grown in East Anglia. He said the business works with around 2,000 growers and supplies roughly half of UK sugar demand.
- He argued that the sector had a strong story to tell on investment, innovation and decarbonisation. Dan said British Sugar had invested more than £350 million over the previous eight years, including around £140 million specifically on reducing carbon emissions and energy use across both farming operations and factory sites. He also highlighted the East of England's strength in agritech, pointing in particular to the research base around Norwich and the opportunities this created for industry collaboration and innovation.
- A central focus of his remarks was precision breeding. Dan explained that virus yellows remained a major threat to sugar beet production, particularly as crop protection products were withdrawn, and said British Sugar was using new techniques to develop more resilient varieties through targeted genetic edits. He noted that grant funding had already supported the development of a transformation platform and said the next stage would be to move towards commercial application. However, he cautioned that regulatory alignment with the

EU on sanitary and phytosanitary matters must not undermine the progress made in this area, arguing that the UK currently had an important advantage in research and development which should be protected.

- Dan also referred to recent work commissioned from the Andersons Centre on the ten-year outlook for farming. He said the analysis suggested that agricultural output was likely to come under increasing pressure, with competition intensifying and further consolidation across the sector. In that context, he argued that government needed to provide clearer long-term certainty for farming through a roadmap developed with industry, so that businesses had the confidence to continue investing.
- He suggested that this should include a stronger policy framework around food production, safeguards to ensure trade deals did not disadvantage UK agriculture, and support to help farmers adapt to climate change and structural change within the sector. He also called for greater public investment in agricultural research and development, continued support for knowledge-sharing across the industry, and protection for gene editing and related innovation as future UK-EU arrangements evolved.
- Finally, Dan stressed the importance of promoting careers in agriculture. He said the sector needed to do more to attract new entrants, particularly as fewer young people now grow up with direct links to farming, and argued that the East of England should present agriculture as a modern, worthwhile and rewarding career path.

Jade Uko, Chair, Federation of Small Businesses

- Jade Uko spoke from the perspective of small firms across the East of England and said that the region's rural economy was fundamentally a small business economy. She noted that the East had nationally significant strengths in sectors including agriculture, food production, energy and tourism, and that the overwhelming majority of firms in the region were SMEs, many of them micro-businesses, family enterprises and local employers whose success was closely tied to the wellbeing of their communities.
- She said that, despite the resilience and entrepreneurialism of these businesses, confidence had fallen sharply and was now at its lowest level since the pandemic. Drawing on examples from across the region, she argued that many rural businesses were increasingly reliant on diversification simply to remain viable. In one case, she described a farming family on the Blackwater Estuary that now depended on glamping, hospitality and visitor experiences to sustain the wider business, not because those activities were intended to replace farming, but because farming itself was no longer generating sufficient returns. More broadly, she said many businesses were being forced to work harder simply to stand still, in the face of rising costs and weak margins.
- At the same time, Jade stressed that there were also strong examples of success where businesses had been able to diversify and invest. She referred to a long-established family business in north Essex that had expanded from arable farming into tourism, weddings and holiday accommodation, with a small vineyard developing into a successful rural enterprise

that supported jobs, local trades and visitor spending. In her view, this demonstrated the scale of opportunity that existed when rural businesses had the confidence and conditions to grow.

- She argued that the main problem was not a lack of ambition, but the persistence of structural barriers. Reliable broadband and mobile connectivity remained a major issue, she said, and were no longer optional in a modern economy. Weak transport links also continued to create daily difficulties for rural firms, affecting the movement of staff, goods and customers. Alongside this, she pointed to the cumulative impact of rising business costs, including energy, transport and employment costs, which could be felt particularly acutely in rural areas.
- Jade also highlighted planning as a recurring obstacle to growth and diversification. She said many small businesses wanted to expand, create jobs and invest locally, but were too often delayed by complex and uncertain planning processes, leaving them tied up in administration rather than focused on delivery.
- She concluded by setting out the Federation of Small Businesses' broader priorities for government. These included reform of business rates, support for employers, action on energy costs, prompt progress on legislation to tackle late payments, improved digital connectivity, faster planning for rural diversification, more affordable rural premises, stronger skills pipelines and continued investment in green growth and productivity. Overall, she argued that the East of England was already a high-performing region with substantial untapped potential, and that the central challenge was not to create growth from scratch, but to unlock the growth that was already present in its rural economy.

Gavin Lane, President, Country Landowners Association

- Gavin Lane spoke from both a representative and personal perspective, noting that the Country Land and Business Association represents around 28,000 rural businesses across England and Wales. He said his own business in Norfolk was broadly typical of many in the East of England, combining arable farming with environmental land management, holiday accommodation, residential and commercial property, new poultry facilities, natural capital income streams and renewable energy proposals. He noted that, despite this breadth of activity, the business remained relatively small in employment terms and still fell comfortably within the SME category.
- He said this degree of diversification was increasingly necessary because returns from farming alone were often insufficient, and because many rural businesses were now operating under significant financial pressure. In particular, he pointed to the weak returns currently being seen in cereal farming, which underpins a large part of the East of England's agricultural economy. He noted that the region produces a substantial share of the UK's cereals, but argued that yields had effectively stalled since the 1990s and were now beginning to decline, with climate change and more unpredictable weather adding further pressure.

- Gavin also expressed concern about the shift in government support for farming. He said the transition towards more sustainable farming practices had been disrupted and restarted on a more constrained basis, creating uncertainty at a time when many businesses were already under strain. In his view, this risked leaving some farmers with a level of support not seen for many decades. He added that the UK had imported record volumes of cereals in 2024 and suggested that this trend was unlikely to reverse without a clearer and more stable approach to domestic agricultural policy.
- In terms of solutions, Gavin called for a long-term plan for farming that avoided repeated changes of direction and gave businesses greater confidence to invest. He also argued for a regulatory framework that would allow private natural capital markets to develop more effectively, so that individual farmers and groups of farmers could participate with greater certainty. Alongside this, he said the sector needed a tax environment that rewarded long-term investment, continued support for agricultural innovation, and a planning system that was more practical, proportionate and easier to navigate.
- He placed particular emphasis on planning and infrastructure, noting from personal experience that lengthy and costly planning processes could be a major barrier even to relatively straightforward rural development. He suggested that permitted development rights should be used more widely where appropriate, including for infrastructure such as on-farm reservoirs. He also called for a clearer code of practice governing how developers engage with landowners and businesses affected by nationally significant infrastructure projects, so that expectations and processes were better understood by all sides.

Sharon Payne, Regional Rural Mobility Manager, Transport East and Lead, Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence

- Sharon Payne gave an overview of the Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence's recent work to strengthen the evidence base on rural transport across the region. She said the Centre, hosted by Transport East, worked closely with local authorities, academic and health partners, and with government departments including the Department for Transport and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on policy relating to rural mobility.
- She began by highlighting some areas of progress. Sharon said that the national fare cap for buses, together with associated funding, had made a meaningful difference in parts of the region by making journeys more affordable, particularly where passengers needed to change buses. She pointed in particular to increased bus use in Norfolk. She also noted examples of employers intervening directly where public transport was not meeting workforce needs, especially in rural manufacturing areas and for shift-based work, with some businesses commissioning transport for staff in order to secure reliable access to employment.
- She referred to the DigiGo demand-responsive transport service in Essex as a positive example, noting that a substantial proportion of journeys made during the pilot had supported access to work and education. She said the service had generated significant

social value and that many of those journeys would not otherwise have been made. She also highlighted the popularity of the Tiger pass for young people in Cambridgeshire, and pointed to pilot work supported by Innovate UK to enable businesses to share private electric vehicle charging infrastructure rather than each bearing the full cost independently.

- Turning to the Centre's research, Sharon said two recent strands of work had focused on post-16 access to education, training and employment, and on the visitor economy, including how workers in that sector travel to jobs. A recurring theme, she said, was that transport continued to shape access to opportunity. In particular, young people were often discouraged from pursuing construction, infrastructure or other skilled roles simply because they could not see how they would get to often remote worksites or training locations. She argued that this meant some were not choosing their preferred routes, but were instead forced into second-best options because of limited transport provision.
- She added that this had wider implications not only for employment and skills, but also for confidence, social development and long-term life chances. In relation to the visitor economy, Sharon said the research suggested current transport planning did not sufficiently reflect seasonal labour patterns, with services often designed around year-round assumptions when demand in sectors such as hospitality could be far more concentrated and variable.
- In closing, she said the car would continue to have an important role in rural areas, but stressed that reliance on private vehicles imposed a disproportionate financial burden on rural households, which typically spent a higher share of their disposable income on transport than those in urban areas. Overall, she argued that transport should not be treated as a standalone issue, but as a central enabler of the wider rural economy, with implications for access to jobs, skills, services and growth across the region.

Strengthening the Rural Economy - Keynote Address: *Baroness Susan Hayman of Ullock, Minister for Biosecurity, Borders and Animals at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*

- Baroness Hayman thanked the APPG for convening the discussion and said the East of England provided a particularly useful lens through which to consider the rural economy more broadly. She noted the region's importance in terms of productive farmland, agritech, tourism, clean energy and small businesses, and said strengthening and growing the rural economy was a clear priority for the Government. She argued that rural areas should not be seen simply as places to be protected, but as places of enterprise and growth.
- She acknowledged that many of the barriers facing rural economies were structural and often shared across different parts of the country, even where the local context varied. In the East of England, she said, these pressures included coastal erosion, flooding and wider environmental change, all of which had direct implications for business confidence, investment and long-term growth. She emphasised that effective rural policy therefore required a more joined-up approach across government, rather than treating rural proofing as a narrow or isolated exercise. In particular, she said departments needed to work

together more effectively so that policies on skills, transport, housing, infrastructure and business support functioned properly for rural communities as well as urban ones.

- Turning to farming, the Minister described it as foundational both to the rural economy and to national resilience. She reiterated the Government's view that food security should be treated as part of national security, and said this underpinned its decision to commit substantial funding over the course of the Parliament to support sustainable farming and food production. She said certainty was critical for the sector and pointed to the Government's work on a long-term farming roadmap to 2050, together with the farming profitability review led by Baroness Batters, as part of the effort to give farmers a clearer basis for investment and planning.
- She also referred to the new Farming and Food Partnership Board, which she said was intended to bring together voices from farming, food, retail and finance in order to support productivity and profitability across the sector. This, she suggested, was particularly relevant in regions such as the East of England, with their strong horticultural, arable and food processing base. More immediately, she noted the reopening and development of schemes including the Sustainable Farming Incentive, capital grants and the Farming Innovation Programme, and said these were designed to support sustainable production, technological improvement and lower-cost, more resilient farming.
- The Minister also highlighted the recently published Land Use Framework, describing it as an important attempt to think more strategically about the competing pressures on land. She said this included a commitment to food production and work to update land classification systems so that high-quality agricultural land remained central to decision-making.
- On climate resilience, she accepted that extreme weather was already having a serious impact on farming and rural communities. She said adaptation would therefore need to play a much larger role in future policy, including through better water management, nature-based solutions and stronger protection for infrastructure and communities. Water, in particular, was identified as a critical issue. She said government was looking at long-term supply through measures including new reservoirs, reduced leakage and wider reform, and added that further work was under way on agricultural water supply, including how to enable more farm reservoirs while protecting the environment.
- Beyond farming, Baroness Hayman said the Government's small business plan was intended to help SMEs grow and scale up, including through action on late payments, improved access to finance and support through institutions such as the British Business Bank. She also noted the importance of high streets, hospitality and tourism to rural communities, and said wider growth strategy work would include consideration of how best to support coastal and rural visitor economies.
- Finally, she addressed skills, transport and connectivity as essential enabling issues. She said rural employers needed better access to the workforce and services on which local economies depended, and pointed to work on post-16 education, employment support and careers policy. She agreed that transport was especially important in rural areas, both for

employers and for individuals trying to access work, and said this was one reason why bus reform and related measures mattered. She also acknowledged the continuing importance of digital connectivity, noting that progress had been made but that further improvement was still needed.

- In closing, the Minister said that the challenges facing rural economies needed to be understood as part of a wider whole-system question. She suggested that the East of England illustrated both the opportunities and the complexity of that task, and said government would need to continue working with regional partners to ensure the area had the support it needed.

Q&A with the Minister

- **Water resilience and reservoirs:** Discussion focused first on water security and the particular pressures facing the East of England. The Minister said the current water system required fundamental reform and pointed to the need for new reservoirs, reduced leakage and a more strategic national approach to water management. She also referred to more specific work on farm reservoirs, including discussions on permitted development rights, proportional regulation and local resilience planning, with the aim of making it easier for farmers to store water and improve long-term productivity.
- **Planning, diversification and rural investment:** A second major theme was the difficulty rural businesses faced in securing planning permission for diversification and investment. Attendees highlighted the delays, cost and uncertainty involved in projects such as farm shops, reservoirs and other business development, arguing that this was damaging confidence and discouraging investment. The Minister accepted that the planning system was often a significant barrier and said Defra was continuing to work with MHCLG on reforms intended to make the system more supportive of rural enterprise.
- **Agricultural innovation:** There was also discussion of agricultural innovation, particularly precision breeding. Contributors stressed its importance to productivity, resilience and food security, and raised concerns that future UK-EU sanitary and phytosanitary arrangements could undermine recent progress. The Minister said the Government recognised the strategic value of precision breeding and the investment already going into it, and confirmed that the issue remained under active discussion in negotiations with the EU.
- **Transport, skills and access to opportunity:** Transport and access to education, training and work were raised as a further priority. It was argued that young people in rural areas were too often unable to reach colleges, apprenticeships or workplaces, with the result that transport constraints were limiting both skills development and career choice. The Minister agreed that this was a significant issue and said better coordination across departments would be needed if rural communities were to benefit fully from skills, education and employment policy.
- **Joined-up government and delivery:** A wider point running through the discussion was the need for a more joined-up approach across government and public bodies. Attendees

argued that rural businesses and new technologies were often being dealt with through fragmented systems and under-resourced agencies, especially in planning and regulation. The Minister acknowledged those concerns and said government was trying to improve coordination across departments, while also addressing practical capacity problems that could slow delivery.

General Q&A:

- **Food security, land use and farming confidence:** Discussion returned to the wider question of what kind of rural economy and land use pattern the country wanted to support in future. Daniel Zeichner MP reflected that debates about food security needed to go beyond short-term pressures and address more fundamental questions about the best use of highly productive land, the balance between food production and other demands on land, and the long-term shape of the rural economy. He suggested there was a need to think more strategically about how rural areas could support both food production and other forms of economic activity, including high-skilled employment.
- Other contributions reinforced concerns about farming confidence, particularly in relation to volatile global markets, rising input costs and limited water infrastructure. It was argued that many farmers could not continue producing key crops at a loss, and that there was a risk of productive land being diverted away from food production without a clear national strategy for maintaining domestic output. The point was also made that imported produce was not always subject to the same standards as UK-grown food, adding to pressure on domestic producers.
- **Water management and productive use:** Water management emerged again as a central concern. It was noted that significant quantities of water were still being pumped away in parts of the East, even though shortages were likely elsewhere later in the year. This was described as an increasingly unsustainable position, particularly in a region facing growing pressures from housing, industry and agriculture. Discussion suggested that future water storage would need to be considered not only for food production, but also for wider economic uses including housing growth, data centres and energy projects.
- **The wider rural economy:** The discussion also broadened beyond agriculture. Jade Uko noted that most rural businesses were not farms, but service-sector and local trading businesses such as printers, hairdressers and other small employers. She argued that these businesses also needed to be recognised as part of the rural economy and included in discussions about growth, support and infrastructure. It was similarly observed that other sectors, including defence-related activity in rural areas, were part of the same wider economic picture but were not always considered alongside farming and land-based industries.
- **Skills, transport and policy alignment:** A final theme was the need for better alignment between industrial strategy, rural economic priorities and the skills system. It was argued that there remained a disconnect between ambitions for growth in key sectors and the

funding and structures available through post-16 education and training. Transport was again cited as a practical barrier, particularly where access to colleges, training opportunities and employment remained difficult in rural areas. The discussion concluded with a shared sense that rural economic policy needed to be more joined-up, strategic and realistic about the interaction between land use, infrastructure, skills and business viability.

Conclusions and next steps: Pam Cox MP, Co-Chair, EE APPG

- In closing, Pam Cox MP thanked the Minister, panellists and attendees for their contributions and noted the strength and range of issues raised during the discussion. She said the APPG would reflect on the points made and follow up in writing, with the aim of drawing out a more focused set of issues on which responses could be sought from Government.
- She also announced that the APPG's next meeting would take place on Monday 6 July and would focus on the defence dividend in the East of England. She noted that this would also be relevant to those interested in the rural economy, given the connections between defence, infrastructure and regional growth, and encouraged attendees to join that discussion.

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