East of England
All Party Parliamentary Group

Baroness Hayman of Ullock
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

24 July 2026

Dear Baroness Hayman,

On behalf of the East of England APPG, I'd like to congratulate you on your reappointment as Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

We are writing further to your keynote contribution at the East of England APPG meeting on 15 June 2026, "Strengthening the Rural Economy in the East of England", and to thank you for your time and engagement in what was a constructive and wide-ranging discussion.

As Officers of the APPG, we welcome the Government's recognition of the importance of the rural economy and were particularly encouraged by your comments that rural areas should be seen not simply as places to be protected, but as places of enterprise, growth and national resilience. We also welcomed your recognition of the East of England as a particularly important region through which to consider these issues, given its strengths in productive farmland, agritech, tourism, clean energy, small businesses and rural innovation.

As discussed at the meeting, the rural economy in the East of England is not a peripheral concern. It is a major national asset. The region combines some of the country's most productive agricultural land with nationally significant food supply chains, ports, logistics, energy infrastructure, research institutions, market towns, tourism and a very strong base of rural SMEs. It is therefore central not only to local prosperity, but also to food security, energy security and wider economic growth.

We were encouraged by your acknowledgement that many of the barriers facing rural economies are structural and require a more joined-up approach across government. The consistent message throughout the session was that the East of England has significant potential as one of the country's most important rural growth regions, but that unlocking this will depend on addressing a number of systemic barriers which are currently holding back investment, productivity and confidence.

First, water resilience must be treated as a strategic economic priority for the East of England. The region faces acute and growing pressure from drought, flooding, housing growth, industry and agricultural demand, yet water management remains fragmented across supply, drainage, abstraction and land use. Government should prioritise the East for an integrated water resilience programme, bringing together new reservoirs, leakage reduction, drainage upgrades, surface-water capture, water reuse and farm-level storage. Planning and regulatory barriers to on-farm reservoirs should also be reduced, with proportionate safeguards that enable farmers to invest while protecting the environment.

Second, the East of England's strengths in agritech, plant science and precision breeding should be recognised as a strategic national asset. These technologies are essential to improving productivity, reducing pesticide and water use, strengthening crop resilience and protecting domestic food security. The progress made under the precision breeding framework must therefore be safeguarded in any future UK-EU sanitary and phytosanitary agreement. Government should provide long-term regulatory certainty, maintain support for agricultural research and create a clear route from innovation and field trials to commercial deployment

Third, policy must reflect the full breadth of the rural economy. Rural prosperity depends on farming alongside small firms, family businesses, tourism, hospitality, food processing, logistics, clean energy, manufacturing and market-town services. These businesses face a distinctive combination of rising employment and energy costs, late payments, weak margins, poor connectivity, constrained access to finance and a shortage of affordable premises. The Government's small business measures should be rural-proofed, with clear delivery mechanisms to ensure that finance, business support and action on late payments reach small and dispersed firms. Planning reform should also make it easier for viable rural businesses to diversify, expand and invest

Fourth, rural transport and skills policy must be designed together. Poor transport limits access to apprenticeships, colleges and employment, while preventing employers from recruiting the people they need, particularly for shift-based and seasonal work. This constrains productivity, career progression and labour-market participation across the region. Government should develop a coordinated rural access-to-opportunity approach, aligning transport funding, post-16 education, skills provision and employment support. This should include greater flexibility for demand-responsive transport, employer-led schemes and services designed around rural working patterns rather than conventional urban commuting..

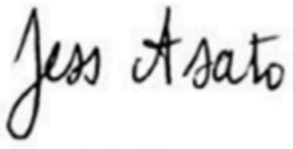
Fifth, stronger delivery will require more effective coordination across government. Water, land use, planning, transport, housing, connectivity, skills and business support are too often addressed through separate departments, agencies and regulatory systems. This fragmentation increases cost, delays investment and leaves rural businesses navigating multiple processes without clear accountability. Government should establish a more coherent rural delivery framework across Defra, DfT, MHCLG, DBT, DSIT and DfE, supported by clearer ownership, stronger local capacity and place-based delivery arrangements. The East of England would be a strong candidate for piloting such an approach because of the close interaction between agriculture, infrastructure, growth and environmental resilience across the region.

In conclusion, the East of England's rural economy has significant untapped potential, but realising it will require a more strategic and practical approach to water resilience, innovation, SME growth, transport, skills and cross-government delivery. The region already has a strong and productive rural economy. The priority should therefore be to remove the barriers that prevent its businesses, communities and institutions from investing, growing and contributing more fully to regional and national prosperity.

We were encouraged by your acknowledgement of many of these issues and your openness to continued dialogue. The APPG would welcome the opportunity to work with you and your officials to explore these themes further, including how the East of England can best support the Government's ambitions while securing long-term benefits for the region. In the first instance, your responses to the five issues highlighted above would be welcome.

Thank you once again for your time and contribution to the discussion. We look forward to continuing this important conversation.

Yours sincerely,



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