

From Nicholas Light, Chairman, Protect Congleton - Civic Society
104 Waggs Road
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To Mrs Fiona Bruce MP, Congleton Constituency
Riverside
Mountbatten Way
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CW12 1DY

2nd April 2013

Dear Mrs Bruce

As you know, it was decided last year to re-form Congleton Civic Society in order to provide a forum for the many residents who are seriously alarmed about the extent to which development is distorting and disfiguring our much-loved Market Town. The town community here, and indeed our rural neighbours, feels strongly about the fact that the local view of how our towns and villages should develop is being over-ridden by aggressive developers and that the government is supporting and promoting this.

Congleton is an old town; its infrastructure, in particular the road system, was already inadequate years ago, because the main development of the town took place before the advent of motorised vehicles. The difficulties of this are exacerbated by the fact that the town lies on a main north/south route. Like any other shire town of this kind, we have cherished green areas where people are used to walking. They provide the kind of "lungs" that the great parks supply in London. Some of these have already vanished under bricks and mortar and the remainder are now threatened by developers who do not hesitate to force through their demands by threats. Even the green areas which separate the town from its satellite villages, and indeed the villages themselves, are under pressure and, unless something is done about it, the essence of the area will be destroyed. The result of this dysfunctional planning rush to build is haphazard. In many cases it is expensive because the community as a whole is expected to pay for the shortcomings of schemes where such issues as flooding and road safety are ignored in order to fulfil a housing quota. There are case studies in this area to support this statement. Above all, green space is routinely being destroyed and local opinion is ignored.

The lack of an adopted Local Plan is being used as a big stick by developers to ensure that planning committees pass schemes which are abhorrent to residents and, indeed, to the planning committees themselves. Equally, where local decisions go against developers the appeals system is routinely used and inspectors agree to development on the thinnest pretexts of so-called sustainability and the grounds that Cheshire East has not achieved its housing quota. This is happening in an area where developers have received permission for thousands of houses, where they are refusing to build, and where there are plenty of unoccupied houses and brownfield sites. At a later stage there will be massive over-development and our towns, villages and countryside will be ruined.

The electorate in Cheshire East voted overwhelmingly against becoming a unitary authority and it is the appeal against this diktat which is the root cause of the lateness of adopting our Local Plan. It seems unbelievable to the community that a government which has proclaimed localism as a policy, and which professes to support democracy, is now forcing through planning schemes against the wishes of the local people. The NPPF is heavily biased in favour of the building and development industry and encourages bad practice from that industry. The public utterances of the Housing Minister make it appallingly clear that the Government is blind to the effects of this policy and also to the bitter resentment felt by those who feel that their stakes in the community are perpetually over-looked and ignored. However much the community understands the government strategy for economic stimulus and housing supply, it seems to us that the mistakes being made now are as heinous and unsustainable as the mistakes that were made during the 1960s and which are now scheduled for demolition in Congleton, as elsewhere in the country. These are expensive errors of judgement and we have no wish to have the same kind of disasters forced on us by our government.

As you know, our group is just one of many in the Borough of Cheshire East and we are forging strong links with the others. We find that, whatever our individual grounds for complaint, the view that we have expressed above is common to us all. Cheshire East returns 5 members to Parliament, all in the Government interest, and it seems extraordinary to us that there is this wide difference between what the electorate here feels and government policy. We believe that the resentment and hostility against this policy which manifests itself throughout the community will be reflected at the ballot box. In Congleton this has already happened as a UKIP representative has now been elected to the local council in what was previously a very safe Conservative seat.

We propose to put forward a petition to the Government that will call for a change of policy and that will be signed by residents throughout the Borough regardless of their political colour. We also hope that the petition will be supported by disaffected and disgruntled members of the voting public throughout the country. We are well aware, though the government does not seem to share this awareness, that this is a major source of disappointment in the government in those areas which are traditionally Conservative.

We feel that it is right that we should inform you as our MP of this depth of feeling and ask you to present our views, as expressed in this letter, to the Government on our behalf.

If you feel that it would be helpful to you to hear more from the people of our part of your constituency who are so angered by this situation, then we would be happy to welcome you to one of our meetings, or should appreciate the opportunity for some of our committee members to meet with you to discuss this matter.

Yours sincerely

Nicholas Light