

Speech

1. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I'm delighted to have been reappointed to Defra, and to once again be the Minister responsible for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks. I very much look forward to working closely with you over the coming months and years to take forward the ambitious Government priorities set out in the Environment Bill and programmes for nature recovery, sustainable land management, and green recovery, including Prime Minister's 'Ten Point plan for a Green Industrial Revolution'. In particular, to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030 and protect 30% of our land and sea for nature by 2030.
2. Please accept my apologies for not being able to accept your kind invitation to meet you in person, such opportunities have been few and far between in the last year and as you can imagine I am disappointed at missing out on visiting this wonderful part of the country. I was very much looking forward to seeing more of Dedham Vale, particularly some of the iconic areas of Stour Valley so beautifully represented by John Constable.
3. I want to start by addressing the main concerns represented by Robert Erith at length in correspondence and in a meeting early this year. Robert has explained that National Grid's published its informal consultation in March and that this included a renewed proposal to overground the stretch of the transmission line running outside of the Dedham Vale AONB into the Stour Valley. The reasons offered for the change in direction offered by National Grid was that - notwithstanding the cultural and scenic heritage of the area - it has yet to be formally designated as an AONB, and so it was reasonable to consider whether

the additional cost of undergrounding the cables in this area was justified.

4. Let me assure you that I share your passion for protecting this magnificent landscape, and I will continue to follow this matter very closely.
5. The government is clear that we must protect our precious national landscapes, whilst also pursuing our significant commitment to achieve 40 GW of electricity generation from offshore wind by 2030. Our offshore wind sector is crucial to our efforts to tackle climate change, which in turn will benefit our natural environment.
6. I have also included in my written response to Robert my expectation that in its formal consultation planned for later this year - and in its application for a Development Consent Order next year - National Grid should present all options, including the case for undergrounding the full stretch of the proposed Bramford to Twinstead transmission line. The evidence presented for each of the options will have to show how they have considered the relevant planning protections on both the AONB and its surrounding settings.
7. I have let Robert know that I am happy for him to share my letter widely to support the Dedham Vale's Society's case for fully undergrounding the transmission line in the Stour Valley to protect its cultural, heritage and scenic beauty; and also, to uphold the statutory purpose of the Dedham Vale AONB as it too may be adversely affected by not doing so.
8. As part of one of my first announcements following my re-appointment, we were pleased to announce in June an ambitious new designation programme to create four new AONB protected landscapes –included

the creation of new Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England's most iconic landscapes, the Yorkshire Wolds and Cheshire Sandstone Ridge; together with extensions to the Surrey Hills and Chilterns AONBs. These areas have been prioritised for their potential to make a significant contribution to nature recovery.

9. I understand you have been disappointed that Dedham Vale AONB extension was not included in this initial programme. However, it will be included in Natural England's all-England strategic assessment which they will be starting this year. This assessment 'map' will identify additional conservation and enhancement needs, including any remaining places suitable for future National Park or AONB designation and places where alternative forms of action may be more appropriate and wanted by local communities.
10. Many of us have personally felt the impact of the pandemic over the last year which has heightened our appreciation and understanding of the benefits of spending time outdoors. Our experiences certainly reinforced that we need to do more to connect communities to nature, enable more children and adults with health conditions, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and those who live in low-income areas to receive the huge health and well-being benefits that natural places provide.
11. As such, I have also been pleased to work with Ministers from the Treasury and Department for Health in recent months, including hosting a roundtable of external experts, to take forward the Government response to the Dasgupta Review, notably the need to enhance our accessible green spaces and harness them to improve public health. We hope to share further plans on improving access to the outdoors with you and other stakeholders later this year.

12. I am aware that Dedham Vale Society provide considerable support to the Dedham Vale AONB Partnership, including with successful campaigns to protect it from the threat of inappropriate development.
13. I hope that you will also be able to extend your support in helping the Dedham Vale AONB Partnership to take forward Government's ambitious programme to deliver on our 25 year environment plan and meet our net zero target. This will include taking forward the number of proposals from the independent Landscapes Review, published in September 2019, to improve nature recovery and public access in protected landscapes. The Environment Secretary's written ministerial statement in June confirmed support for the Review's ahead of a formal consultation on the draft proposals later this year.
14. The Farming in Protected Landscape programme, launched in July, will run until 2024 and will help farmers and other land managers in protected landscapes in England to make improvements to the natural environment, cultural heritage and public access on their land. I look forward to hearing about the projects that Dedham Vale AONB supports through this programme. I hope that the programme offers the opportunity for you to build greater relationships with the farmers and landowners in your Landscape to help you deliver your local priorities.

Concluding remarks

15. I am disappointed I could not be with you today. I am aware everyday how fortunate I am that National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are once again part of my portfolio as a Defra Minister. I will assure you that I will continue to do my utmost to secure a bright future for all protected landscapes.

16. I will also assure you that I will continue to monitor the progress of National Grid's current plans and ensure both Defra and Natural England officials fully respond to National Grid's forthcoming formal consultation exercise ensuring compliance with the planning legislation and guidance.

17. I will end by expressing my gratitude for all the work you have done in protecting Dedham Vale and the Stour Valley. It is clear that you care passionately about this area and want the environment protected and enhanced. I look forward to continuing to hear of your successes.

Words – 1,203