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Annual Report – May 2016 - April 2017

I was delighted to be re-elected as your Member of Parliament in 2015 and hope I have continued to be a strong voice for residents and businesses. This report is not a party political broadcast but very importantly, whilst I automatically cease to be an MP on Wednesday 3rd May due to the impending General Election, I can continue to use my team to undertake urgent casework. Constituents can still contact me through the House of Commons by letter or email.

I was pleased to be invited by the Prime Minister, Theresa May, to serve as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs following the EU Referendum. Being the MP for Suffolk Coastal has proved to be an invaluable apprenticeship for the role of Environment Minister and Rural Life Opportunities.

I led a small delegation of MPs to meet the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, to press the case over the extraordinary business rate rises. I also held meetings with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and local businesses. The Chancellor has introduced a £300m discretionary business rate relief fund to help small businesses hit with large increases. I am encouraging the councils to focus on the small, independent businesses affected the most in receiving the support they need.

On Sizewell, EDF's stage 2 consultation came to end on the 3rd February 2017 and I responded with my views. The construction of Sizewell C is extremely important for the UK's future energy supply and will benefit the local economy here in Suffolk, with the creation of thousands of jobs. That said, it will also create significant disruption to local communities and the transport network, especially during the construction phase. I was robust in challenging EDF to do more work before the next phase of consultation, especially in relation to improvements to the road network and campus site. You can read my full response to the consultation on my website.

Broadband minister and fellow Suffolk MP Matt Hancock updated me recently on the progress of broadband rollout in Suffolk Coastal. Since 2010, 22,996 homes have been connected thanks to investment by the government and Suffolk County Council. Suffolk has contracted with BT for the next stage of the roll out, which will see broadband available to 95% of properties by 2019. I recognise it is incredibly frustrating for those who do not yet have superfast broadband which is why the Government has legislated for the Universal Service Obligation through the Digital Economy Act.

The fruits of my lobbying the mobile network operators are starting to show as more mobile networks are adding and upgrading phone masts. There are still a handful of notspots, I will keep up the pressure. Specifically, EE have upgraded many areas to 4G throughout Suffolk Coastal.

On education, the government consulted on changes to the school funding formula. Their proposals would have seen an average increase in funding across Suffolk – good for local pupils. I have written to the Education Secretary to consider increasing the basic sum per pupil for all children and schools and to look at the proportion of funding suggested for local deprivation indices to be considered alongside the substantial funding that schools already receive for the pupil premium.

On health, I have had robust exchanges with the Chief Executives of East Coast Community Healthcare and the Great Yarmouth and Waveney CCG concerning Patrick Stead and Southwold Community Hospitals and the replacement services. I will keep the pressure on this as I do feel let down by what has happened since.

I organised several meetings in Parliament for Eastern MPs to scrutinise the Chief Executive of the East of England Ambulance Service, Rob Morton, on the performance of the service. Despite an increased demand, an improvement in response times for the most urgent calls has been made. This improvement can also be seen within Suffolk Coastal.

On transport, our long campaign to improve rail services is now paying off. Abellio were awarded the new contract to provide rail services in the East Anglia with a pledge of £1.4 billion worth of investment in new carriages, faster journeys and free WiFi. This started in October. I do not expect new trains to arrive before 2019 and more likely 2020, as they are built to order. While this will be a huge upgrade for travellers it's also great news for Suffolk as a whole, opening us up to more investment to further boost our growing economy.

Following the successful campaign, Network Rail put on hold their planned closure of the barrow crossing at Halesworth and new gates are in place. Level crossing closures will continue to happen but I will work with parishes and towns if the proposals do not seem sensible.

Finally, last summer I undertook my annual constituency tour, visiting each town and parish in the 302 square miles of the Suffolk Coastal constituency speaking to residents and business owners. The number of people raising issues such as broadband and mobile phone signal was significantly lower than previous tours, with most issues raised relating to local councils as well as some other interesting national ones.