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## **UPDATE ON OUR LOCAL FORESTS**

In the House of Commons today, Caroline Spelman, Secretary of State for the Environment, made a statement in which she announced the termination of the consultation process on the future of forestry and the withdrawal of the Government's proposals. I know that the vast majority of people in East Hampshire will welcome this, as do I.

I believed there were a number of unanswered questions and very understandable anxieties locally about the impact the proposals could potentially have on our own much loved forests, including Chawton Park Woods, Bushey Leaze, Queen Elizabeth Country Park and Alice Holt. I had made interim representations to the Minister and put a number of questions, pending my formal submission after the public meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> March. We have also had a number of debates and meetings on this subject in Parliament at which I and colleagues conveyed the strength of feeling we were hearing on key parts of the proposals.

Candidly, I must say I always expected the consultation to run its course. The fact that it has been stopped early is a measure of the weight of opinion and the effectiveness of the campaign and I pay tribute to all locally who have contributed to this. I must say as well though that I am encouraged by how the Government has responded to this clear expression of public opinion. I do not at all subscribe to the view that it is a sign of weakness to change your mind, rather I think it is a sign that the Government is prepared to listen.

Specifically, Mrs. Spelman's statement today covered three actions – first to end the consultation, secondly to remove clauses on forestry from the Public Bodies Bill (currently at Committee Stage in the House of Lords) and thirdly to establish an independent panel to consider forestry policy in England and to see how we can enhance protections for our woodlands. This Panel is to include representatives of key environmental and access organisations, as well as representatives from the forestry industry. Its membership and terms of reference are yet to be published. I will, of course, be taking a close interest in the Panel's work and, based on the large amount of feedback and input I have had from constituents, I will be making a submission to them.

In a Q & A session today in the Commons, the Secretary of State also made clear that submissions already made to the consultation can also be considered by the Panel.

I still plan to go ahead with a public meeting on Friday, 11<sup>th</sup> March, (at the Maltings Centre in Alton starting at 7.30) but would now envisage broadening the subject matter to include both forestry and any other topic people would like to raise on government policy or local issues.

My apologies once again for the slightly impersonal nature of this message. I am very grateful to everybody who has got in touch with me on this important subject. It has become clearer than ever through this episode that throughout the country our forests and woodlands are a hugely appreciated and much loved resource. The experience of the last few weeks has elevated the importance of protecting access, amenity and biodiversity even more.