

**BLAKE STEPHENSON MP**  
Member of Parliament for Mid Bedfordshire



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

**The Rt. Hon. Rachel Reeves MP**

Chancellor of the Exchequer  
HM Treasury  
1 Horse Guards Road  
London  
SW1A 2HQ

Dear Rachel,

I trust this letter finds you well.

I am writing in advance of the Budget to set out some of the priorities that people, businesses and organisations across Mid Bedfordshire have asked me to raise with you. I should declare at the beginning of this letter that I am a Councillor in Central Bedfordshire in addition to my duties as a Member of Parliament.

***Support for Pensioners***

Firstly, you will no doubt be aware of my deep reservations about the impact of your decision to cut universal Winter Fuel Payments on vulnerable pensioners in my constituency. Pensioners with a monthly income of less than £1k and no capacity to earn additional income – many of whom have significant health challenges – face a stark choice between heating and eating this winter as a direct result of the Labour Government's decision which will create a black hole in their household finances.

That isn't right and I would urge you to re-consider your decision and ensure that all pensioners can put their heating on this winter without fear of the financial implications.

I am also deeply concerned – and have written separately to the Work & Pensions Secretary – about the description of the Household Support Fund by Labour Ministers as a mitigation for the loss of winter fuel payments. Per pensioner, the East of England will receive some of the lowest funding levels from the Household Support Fund – less than half that received by London – and if the Fund is intended to mitigate the impact of this decision, I would urge you to immediately review the funding allocations to ensure that they are fair and equitable for pensioners in my constituency.

Pensioners also rely on free bus passes to get around – including in some of the remote and rural communities in my constituency. I am troubled by reports that you are considering axing these bus passes in the Budget and I would urge you to re-consider if that is your intention.

Whilst I welcome the Government's retained commitment to the Triple Lock, I have been contacted by constituents concerned that the increase in their pensions without a corresponding increase in the tax allowance could soon push them above the tax-free allowance. The Conservative manifesto on which I was elected set out a plan for "Triple Lock Plus" that would have seen the tax allowance for pensioners rise with pensions and I hope that you will consider adopting this (or a similar policy) so that the state pension is never taxed.

Finally on support for pensioners, I would urge the Government to resist any suggestion that it should abolish the single payer discount for council taxpayers. In Mid Bedfordshire, many constituents rely on this discount to afford to live in their homes alone in their older years – and for many first time buyers it is a vital lifeline when financing their first home.

### **Investing in Capital Funding**

In Mid Bedfordshire, we have taken our fair share of development. But investment in infrastructure has not kept pace with the delivery of new homes. And that has left communities short of the vital services they need. In particular, the new town of Wixams remains without a GP surgery because of a lack of capital available to deliver the building required – with our local Councils being asked to put the money in upfront at a time of financial challenge for them.

With your Government's plans for more housing over the course of this Parliament, I believe we must act urgently to reform the way that we provide capital for the infrastructure that accompanies it. Specifically, in this Budget I would like the Government to commit to providing capital funding upfront to deliver new healthcare provision, which could then be claimed back by the Government from the Council once Section 106 payments are received from developers. I would urge you to consider this solution to ensure that our communities get the infrastructure they require, without forcing our Councils into the red to pay for it.

Another significant and ongoing challenge in Mid Bedfordshire is the move from a three-tier education system to a two-tier education system. Given the evidence that this move is in the best interests of pupils, I would welcome an intervention from Government to put in place a clear capital funding plan to support Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough (and indeed other Councils going through this process) to deliver this complex re-organisation.

### **Flooding**

As you may be aware, Mid Bedfordshire was recently the scene of devastating flooding, impacting people right across our rural communities – including my own home – and forcing a long closure of the A421. There are several actions which Government should take to provide a long-term solution to flooding, which I will be outlining in my Adjournment Debate on Flooding in Bedfordshire. I have included a list of those with financial implications for your consideration in the Budget:

- Implement a scheme which recognises and remunerates the contribution of our farmers to flood prevention in allowing their fields to flood.
- Release funds to compensate local households, businesses, farmers, and Councils following the recent flooding in Bedfordshire.
- Provide adequate funding for a new statutory duty on local authorities to clear drains and culverts regularly.
- Review the funding arrangements for Internal Drainage Boards.
- Ensure that the Environment Agency has sufficient revenue funding to pro-actively maintain river channels and other water conveyancing infrastructure.

### **Tourism, Leisure & Hospitality**

Working with industry, one of my priorities as Mid Bedfordshire's Member of Parliament is to grow our local economy, including through tourism – bringing in new customers to support our fantastic local leisure and hospitality sectors and showcasing the beauty and heritage of our constituency. There are several areas where Government can support us in growing this industry – helping us to help the Government achieve its goal of growing the economy.

Firstly, the single biggest potential driver of economic growth in Mid Bedfordshire is the eagerly anticipated Universal Studios resort at Kempston Hardwick, in Mid Bedfordshire. Universal Studios is the key to unlock billions of pounds for our local economy and I urge you to do everything possible to help secure this vital investment.

Beyond Universal Studios, there are several ways that the Government can support economic growth in Mid Bedfordshire. These include extending Small Business Rate Relief, make it viable for hundreds of local small businesses across Bedfordshire to continue to serve our communities; and maintaining the freeze on alcohol duty, supporting local village pubs across my constituency.

## **Farmers**

Farming and agriculture are crucial to our rural economy in Mid Bedfordshire. I have been contacted by several local farmers ahead of the Budget to ask that you consider two key policies.

First, some local farmers are concerned about the prospect of changes to the Agricultural Relief for Inheritance Tax. This is a vital support for so many farming families whose farming businesses have spanned generations in Bedfordshire. I would urge you to avoid making any changes to this relief that would adversely affect the ability of farmers in my constituency to hand down their farms to their children and grandchildren.

Second, farmers have also expressed concern about the current size of the agricultural budget. Farmers do some fantastic work protecting our food security, helping us to achieve net zero and supporting our environment. They deserve all the support that Government can offer them, and I would ask that you consider whether funding could be increased alongside providing a multi-year settlement to improve certainty.

## **Other points to note**

As you will no doubt recognise, our local Councils face incredibly difficult challenges to provide increasingly complex services for residents. I would like to see this Government commit to increasing Council funding for next year and set out a clear forward plan for Council funding over the term of this Parliament. This will help Councils like Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire to plan to deliver great local services over the short and medium terms.

A number of my constituents have contacted me to ask me to urge you to continue to freeze fuel duty. At a time of continued economic difficulty for many families in Mid Bedfordshire, I hope that you will consider maintaining this freeze to provide an important lifeline for those who need their cars to get around our rural area.

Finally, I understand from press speculation that you are currently considering increasing Employers' National Insurance as this is not covered by your manifesto commitment not to raise taxes on working people. If true, this is a deeply misguided decision – not least because, all things being equal, an increase in employers' National Insurance is a tax rise on all the hard-working small business owners in our country who want to employ people. I trust that you would not want to do them the disservice of suggesting that they are not working people.

Increasing Employers' National Insurance is a job-cutting policy that will damage our economy. And I urge you to honour the letter and spirit of your manifesto commitment not to raise National Insurance.

I look forward to receiving your reply.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Blake', with a horizontal line underneath it.

**Blake Stephenson MP**  
Member of Parliament for Mid Bedfordshire