Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Church Fenton Neighbourhood Development Plan Response. I write in the capacity of the local representative of the National Farmers’ Union in the North East Region with particular interest in planning and economic development in rural areas. Please find below our response:

As you will be aware the farming community continues to face formidable challenges with increasing regulation, volatile markets and fluctuating farming returns. In response to these challenges farmers have had to consider the resources available to them and look at new ways of developing their businesses so that they can grow and remain competitive. Your policies to support the small economy and farm diversification outline offer opportunities for Church Fenton to support this. Diversifying farming enterprises is crucial to meet new opportunities such as, inter alia, business units or tourism. However, in order for farming to continue to sustainably support this rural community, this plan must also allow for all farm enterprises to adapt in order to survive. This might include the need for modern agricultural buildings either to meet regulations or to change the use of existing buildings in order to respond to changing market demand. Our members within the neighbourhood area are no exception and given that the area is largely farmed, it is clear that any form of Neighbourhood Plan must adequately address the issues and opportunities of farming. We welcome your objective to improve broadband connection speeds, with access to high-speed broadband essential for farming businesses.

Our vision for the area is:

*A sustainable rural community underpinned by an innovative rural economy but also a thriving food and farming industry. A thriving food and farming industry which supports livelihoods in the plan area, underpins sustainable and healthier communities, and enhances environmental assets are vital to the county’s prosperity.*

The farming community can achieve this vision, with your help, through the following aims:

1.           Strengthening our farming businesses to help them build profitability, adaptability and resilience

2.           To create thriving localities which meet the needs of their communities, businesses and local environment

3.           Realising the value of the region’s environmental assets

In addition to the plan policies highlighted above, we would see your plan also include the following key priorities (not in order of priority) for farms:

1. Policies which enable the next generation to take on the management of farms and to support this through the provision of affordable housing to allow succession
2. To allow farming enterprises to develop to meet the challenges of food security through modernising and becoming more efficient
3. Developing renewable energy which meets the needs of the farm and are appropriate to the location and renewable resources available

Food production is a key priority for economic growth both nationally but also importantly in such a rural area. In the Government white paper, ‘Local Growth: realising every place’s potential’, the Government makes clear that the first priority “is to return the nation’s economy to health”. This covers creating “the conditions that will help business and gets the economy growing”. This ambition includes the support for farming enterprises so vital to the rural economy and enabling them to remain viable through diversified enterprises. We would expect that with any proposals for developing farms, you will take this into account.

Promoting diversification is in line with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). It provides that local authorities should support a prosperous rural economy, enabling farmers to become more competitive and sustainable and diversify into new opportunities. A key message within the NPPF is the need for economic growth. “Decision-makers at every level should seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible”.

In the NPPF the government also makes a number of very important statements relating to the development of renewable energy. Paragraph 147 states that: *‘*The planning system should support the transition to a low carbon future in a changing climate…. and support renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure’. Renewable energy represents an important opportunity for farms to reduce their energy bills and also to create revenue that can help support farming activity. We understand that this can be a contentious issue within communities and are aware that early consultation with those that are either impacted or likely to gain is crucial.

I would also like to raise your attention towards the proposed “local green space 7” of St Mary’s Church environs, it was noted that the parcel of land towards the rear of the church is agricultural in nature. This parcel of land is currently under the ownership of the Bradley family, who have not agreed to this potential designation. They have achieved outlined planning permission for this area but fear this potential local green space designation will unfairly forfeit their application. We request that you consult with the Bradleys and if requested, remove this area from the designation.

On a broader level, we have developed some principles which we believe will help Church Fenton plan shape any activity in the area and to help guide any work. These are:

* Food security is a crucial issue for now and the future and any actions must ensure that we do not compromise our ability to feed ourselves
* Encouraging increased farm productivity and decreased impact on the environment.
* Achieving sustainable development in rural areas through the integration of environmental, social and economic objectives.
* Meeting the needs of a diverse rural population and ensuring equal opportunity.
* Maintaining and enhancing the area’s natural asset base.
* Always consulting and listening to farmers and landowners with regards to developing the area.
* Supporting sustainable growth in the rural economy.
* Sustainable farming will support the wider community.
* Not one system of farming is the answer and all should be supported to maximising the benefit to society and the environment
* Encouraging links between rural areas and urban centres.

Many thanks for the opportunity to respond to this consultation and we hope that these comments are helpful and will be taken into account.