Amanda Milling, Cannock Chase 4:13 pm, 20th October 2016

I congratulate my hon. Friend Chris White on securing this afternoon’s debate. I would like to focus my contribution on one of the points the Minister made—the role of local bodies in the delivery of industrial strategy at a regional level.

The Government’s focus on industrial strategy, and their continued support for regional development in areas outside London, are welcome news in my constituency. The timing is also incredibly pertinent. The closure of Rugeley B power station in the summer was a real blow to the workforce and the community. It was a real turning point; for decades, Rugeley has had an economy based on the energy industry, being home to mines and power stations. For a long time, that was the main source of employment. The closure of Rugeley B is the end of that industrial heritage, and the question I am regularly asked is, “What next for Rugeley’s economy? What next for the next generation?”

The closure of the mines and Rugeley A power station saw the creation of industrial estates, business parks and housing, and the area is home to one of Amazon’s fulfilment centres. However, the redevelopment of the Rugeley B site presents a real opportunity to develop a strategic vision that creates a long-term sustainable local economy in Rugeley that creates skilled jobs and opportunities.

In creating a strategy for Rugeley, we need to consider other land sites that will become available for development in the coming years, including the site that is currently home to JCB Cab Systems and the land that could be developed once the flood defence scheme has been completed. In short, there is a need, and a real opportunity, to create a more strategic plan for Rugeley. I am calling on all the relevant bodies, including Cannock Chase District Council, Staffordshire County Council and the two local enterprise partnerships, to look at the Rugeley B site, not just in isolation but in the context of other land sites. The vision needs to be ambitious and strategic, taking account of the growth in new industries and technologies, and sectors of growth. There is a great danger that we fall into a trap of just doing “more of the same”. This is where the Government’s industrial strategy can help us scope an exciting new vision for Rugeley.

My hon. Friend the Minister referred to innovation. Rugeley was at the heart of innovation in the energy industry. I have mentioned before in the House that the four cooling towers are in two different colours of brick because people were trying to decide which was the most likely to blend into the countryside; they failed completely. Rugeley is ideally placed to home new industries, including digital and technology industries, given the infrastructure that already exists. Indeed, there is a connectivity crossover where fibre-optic broadband and the national grid meet. This makes the area particularly well placed to home data centres, as well as an innovation hub. The Minister also mentioned advanced manufacturing, where the region has real strength. I am very fortunate to have companies such as ATP Electronics and Gestamp in my constituency. I hope that we will build on companies such as these.

That is not to say that we should be turning our back on our energy heritage. Only this morning in the BEIS Committee, we met stakeholders from the energy industry who highlighted the importance of the sector. With the closure of coal-fired power stations, there is a desperate need to build gas-fired power stations as part of our mix of energy sources. As the national grid infrastructure is already in place, Rugeley is ideally placed to home a gas-fired power station. Earlier in the debate, the Chair of the Committee, Mr Wright, made the important point that industrial strategy needs to be cross-departmental. I have previously raised with Ministers issues about the cumbersome process for securing planning for a gas-fired power station on sites where there had been coal-fired power stations. This is not a change of use. I ask BEIS Ministers to review this with their colleagues from the Department for Communities and Local Government.

The redevelopment of Rugeley is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. I believe that all bodies involved in the planning process are strategic and visionary, and bold and ambitious, and that they can create a home for successful and innovative businesses that create real, skilled jobs and opportunities for the next generation. An industrial strategy that has productivity at its heart, encourages entrepreneurship and innovation, and creates opportunities for young people could provide the framework to ensure that we create an exciting future for Rugeley.