

Public Bill Committee

Thursday 17 February 2011

(Afternoon)

[Hugh Bayley *in the Chair*]

Localism Bill

The key part of the session focused on Schedule 9 [amendments 159 to 163](#) on neighbourhood planning forums. There was broad cross-party agreement that the provision of these forums, along with the creation of neighbourhood plans, was a step in the right direction – the key was how to implement the policy successfully. A key consideration was what the definition of a ‘neighbourhood’ actually was and how it would fit into local authority jurisdiction. It was, Jack Dromey noted, easy when a parish council had a distinguishable democratic sphere, but what would happen when that was less clear cut?

1pm ([View here](#)) ([Read Hansard here](#))

Jack Dromey (Lab, Birmingham Erdington), Shadow CLG Minister taking through planning amendments in the Localism Bill, began the session by reciting statistics on the state of planning in the UK. He told the committee, 1.76 million households, the equivalent of 4.5 million people, on housing waiting lists in 2009. Housing need will continue to rise steeply in the coming years, and some 258,000 new houses will have to be built each year, every year from now til 2026. The Government’s decision to revoke RSSs had exacerbated the already prevalent problem of chronic under-building of homes and created a damaging vacuum at the heart of the planning system, Mr Dromey argued. Indeed, research conducted by the HBF had discovered that the Government’s directive in May of last year to permit councils to ignore RSS targets had allowed plans for over 200,000 homes to be dropped, with industry experts expecting that figure to rise at least another 100,000 over the course of the next twelve months.

3:15pm

The Bill introduces a new system of neighbourhood planning whereby community groups, including Parish and Town Councils may prepare statutory neighbourhood plans. Groups that are not Parish or Town Councils have to be approved for this purpose by the Local Authority which is also required to approve the boundaries of the area to be planned. The latter most point was clarified by Greg Clark, Minister for Decentralisation, who noted that the original draft of the Bill had not clearly stated what the geographical boundary of a ‘neighbourhood’ was nor that it could only submit planning rulings within its local authority boundary. Local authorities have a duty to support neighbourhood planning through advice and guidance, but are not compelled to provide financial support or undertake actual plan preparation. After an independent evaluation (in which the neighbourhood plan could be rejected) the plan will then go to a referendum of residents of the designated neighbourhood area. If more than 50 per cent of those voting agree, then the local planning authority must adopt it.

The Opposition were particularly concerned about the potentially undemocratic nature of neighbourhood forums. The basic requirements in the Bill are for a body composed of a minimum of just three residents, that is open to all existing or potential residents, has a

constitution and is set up to further economic, social and environmental well-being in the area. The fear is that it may be open to abuse by those with a narrow agenda. Mr Dromey tabled an amendment to seek to get the minimum raised from three to twenty and for one of the members to be an elected councillor.

Neighbourhood forums are seemingly accountable to nobody, David Ward (Lib Dem, Bradford West) noted, with members having no obligation to declare their financial interests. An answer could be for neighbourhood forums to be democratically elected, Mr Ward suggested, but this too would create difficulties such as boundaries and finance. Whilst making clear their concerns, members present, and Mr Dromey for the Opposition, were squarely behind the concept of these plans – with Mr Dromey calling them an “*admirable concept... that [could] really make a difference to neighbourhoods, with local people shaping their future*”.

Winding up the debate for the Opposition, Mr Dromey reiterated that Labour supported the principle of the neighbourhood planning. The increased participation of local communities in the shaping of their environment was “*a thoroughly good thing*”. The Opposition concerns were over the representative and democratic legitimacy of the framework that the Government has presented in the Bill. There was, Mr Dromey concluded, a real danger of creating local, social tension and of creating a two-tier planning system.