

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Planning Inspectorate and Major Infrastructure Planning

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Greg Clark): I am announcing further detail on the Government's plans to replace the Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) with a Major Infrastructure Planning Unit within the Planning Inspectorate. This unit will examine and make recommendations to Ministers on all major infrastructure applications on transport networks, ports, energy, hazardous waste and water.

Leadership of the Planning Inspectorate

The leadership of the Planning Inspectorate will change from 1 April 2011. The current chief executive, Katrine Sporle, is due to retire at the end of March. Katrine has made a significant contribution to the Planning Inspectorate and was awarded a CBE for outstanding public service earlier this year. I would like to record my thanks to her for her role in building the Planning Inspectorate's reputation and for its successful track record during her tenure.

I am pleased to announce that Sir Michael Pitt, chair of the IPC, has agreed to increase his working hours and take on the additional role of chief executive of the Planning Inspectorate from 1 April 2011. Sir Michael Pitt is an experienced chief executive and I am confident that he will approach his new role with the energy and commitment required to make the transition a success.

Following Royal Assent of the Localism Bill and the closure of the IPC, Sir Michael Pitt will remain chief executive of the Planning Inspectorate. He will oversee the changes to the infrastructure planning regime and ensure that the new integrated Planning Inspectorate delivers an excellent service across its range of responsibilities.

Transitional arrangements for applications in the system

I would like to confirm my intention to retain the current cadre of commissioners appointed to examine major infrastructure applications until September 2014. This will ensure continuity and stability through the transition. They will form part of a single group of professionals that will work across the whole range of applications and appeal casework that the Planning Inspectorate will consider.

By retaining the skills of commissioners, I can confirm that major infrastructure applications in progress at the point of transition will be handled by the same individuals and that they will not be subject to any delay. Moreover, applicants should be reassured that ministerial decisions will be made in line with the existing statutory time scale of 12 months.

These arrangements will offer the strong leadership and valuable stability which will provide applicants with the confidence they need to bring forward applications.

Our continued commitment to the major infrastructure planning regime

The new major infrastructure planning regime is still in its early stages with the first applications under the Planning Act 2008 having only recently been accepted for examination. The Government's commitment to create a Major Infrastructure Planning Unit with all decisions taken by Ministers will restore democratic accountability to the system while retaining the existing approach, expertise and statutory timetables of the current major infrastructure planning system. On this basis we now have the right model to meet the Government's objectives to promote infrastructure growth and security, facilitate investment for the UK economy and ensure that the decisions we make on these large projects have the stamp of legitimacy. This is the right arrangement for a major infrastructure planning system in the 21st century.

The regime will be:

a front-loaded regime with clear opportunities for local communities to engage throughout the process;

a regime where the policy is clearly set out in national policy statements providing certainty and predictability;

a speedy and efficient regime, with in-built statutory timetables, which delivers robust results; and

a democratically accountable regime which allows Parliament to approve national policy statements and Ministers to determine all infrastructure applications of national importance.

This model will ensure high-quality applications come forward that can be examined and determined quickly in line with set timetables. The Government recognise however, that the 2008 Planning Act regime is new and substantially different from the multiple and overlapping regimes it replaced. We are therefore listening to industry, representative groups and others using the system for the first time and will be exploring opportunities for improvement to ensure the system has the right mix of certainty, flexibility and efficiency.