



Select Committee: National Planning Policy Framework

Date: 10th October, 2011

Time: 4:20pm

Location: The Grimond Room, Portcullis House, Westminster

Attendance: Dr Adam Marshall, Director of Policy and External Affairs, British Chambers of Commerce, Jessica Baulby, Head of Infrastructure, Confederation of British Industry, and John Rhodes, Director, Quod Planning; Paul Cheshire, Emeritus Professor of Economic Geography, London School of Economics and Political Science, Dr Hugh Ellis, Chief Planner, Town and Country Planning Association, and Alex Morton, Senior Research Fellow, Policy Exchange

The House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee were invited by the Minister for Planning and Decentralisation, Greg Clark MP, to examine the draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The purpose of the Committee's inquiry was to ensure that the document forms an adequate, clear and comprehensive framework of national planning policy.

Mr Rhodes, Director of Quod Planning, was the first of the witnesses to submit evidence to the Committee. He began by saying that some Local Authorities don't see it as their job to meet the housing needs of their communities. The NPPF was designed to combat this, whilst retaining and enforcing existing protections of the countryside and Green Belt. The planning consultant went on to attack the media, stating:

"Paragraph 14 of the draft, which you won't read about on the front page of The Daily Telegraph because it outlines the term of the presumption {in favour of sustainable development}, which is unless the adverse impacts of allowing development would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole.

The debate has become a little extreme in my view. A lot of time and effort was taken to achieve balance."

Rhodes went on to suggest that the caveat meant the NPPF had not taken a "seismic shift" away from the environmental protections in the current planning system.

The Committee, chaired by Clive Betts MP, also questioned Rhodes on why the definition of sustainable development had been left "so open" and had been expressed differently to the 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy.

Rhodes said it is "almost a holy grail trying to identify what sustainability really means," adding:

"What the NPPF has to do is outline how the planning system needs to operate to enforce sustainability." Rhodes admitted the government's draft had "not been clear" when compared to

the original drawn up.

Hugh Ellis, chief planner at the Town and Country Planning Association, criticised the draft framework for its lack of definition of sustainable development: “Planning has never been so deregulated or subject to so much uncertainty,” he said.

Heidi Alexander, Labour MP for Lewisham East, said the current draft NPPF could present a “blank cheque for planning lawyers” because the vagueness of the wording would trigger appeals from lawyers trying to get big developments past planning committees. A similar concern was expressed by George Hollingberry, Conservative MP for Meon Valley, who described it currently as a “businesses’ charter with nice amorphous definitions into which you can justify anything”.

There was some robust defence of the, current and future, planning system, however. Adam Marshall, director of policy and external affairs at the British Chambers of Commerce, told the committee: “You see the extraordinary safeguards that we have built in in the British system, partly as a result of domestic law and partly as a result of European law. Things aren’t going to change: there is greenbelt designation which is not going to be affected.”

He added that the “planning system is there for the overriding benefit of this nation”.

The Committee is meeting on consecutive Mondays to hear evidence from a variety of organisations, experts and professional bodies.

– Ends –

The Committee plans to hold three further oral evidence sessions, covering the following aspects of the debate:

2nd oral evidence session – Monday 17 October, 4.20pm, Grimond Room, Portcullis House

- Different perspectives on the NPPF

Witnesses: Home Builders Federation, British Property Federation and the National Trust

- The views of planning practitioners and planning authorities

Witnesses: the Planning Officers Society and the Local Government Association

3rd oral evidence session – Monday 24 October, 4.20pm, the Grimond Room, Portcullis House

- The treatment of specific policy areas in the draft NPPF
- The views of environmental groups

Witnesses: to be confirmed

4th oral evidence session – Monday 7 November, 4.20pm, the Grimond Room, Portcullis House

- Summarising the major themes of the debate; the views of professional bodies

Witnesses: DCLG Ministers