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Environmental Audit Committee, National Planning Policy Framework

Date: 12th October, 2011

Time: 3:50pm

Location: The Thatcher Room, Portcullis House, Westminster

The Communities and Local Government Committee announced in early October that it would undertake an inquiry into the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), and called for evidence on particular issues including the way sustainable development is addressed. It was agreed that the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) would examine the NPPF and that evidence received by the EAC on that issue would be shared with the CLG Committee.

The aim of the EAC is to conclude its brief inquiry in time to inform the CLG Committee's inquiry. To that end, the Committee held a one-off evidence session yesterday with evidence being given from Campaign to Protect Rural England, the National Trust, Town and Country Planning Association, Friends of the Earth; Home Builders Federation, British Property Federation and the Rt Hon Greg Clark MP.

It became clear early on in proceedings that the session would be dominated by the terminology of the "presumption in favour of sustainable development" and what it would actually entail in tangible policy.

CPRE: "We cannot afford confusion about what the purpose and direction of planning is"

Friends of the Earth: "Unless you have clarity in that definition there is going to be a lot of argument about how to deliver it".

The National Trust added that defining sustainable development is "the start point but not the only point". The debate would then have to move onto how the framework will actually be implemented.

Further agreement between the environmental bodies was on the financial considerations that were written in to the Localism Bill and enshrined in the ethos of the NPPF. The New Homes Bonus should not be given such precedence in the draft legislation as is being currently suggested; the CPRE said that "at the moment the document is unacceptably weighted towards economic growth at any cost".

Greg Clark began his session by stating that a "lively debate is to be welcomed".

Clark said that the Government's overriding aim was to put local people in charge of planning, which was to be welcomed after the "imposition" of top down targets that had brought the planning system into "disrepute". The Minister agreed that financial considerations should not "subvert" the planning system, that was absolutely not the intention of the Government he said, but that local

communities had too often not been able to share in the proceeds of growth that previous developments had brought. The New Homes Bonus was designed, he claimed, to go some way to alleviate this.

Clark did admit, however, that the emphasis on economic priorities in the NPPF was “an appearance some people have detected - but is not intentional”. Clearly seeking to ease the Committee’s concerns, he continued: “The economy had always been part of the definition of sustainable development, but homes and jobs need to be in the right place and not to the detriment of future generations.

Under detailed questioning by Zac Goldsmith MP, following on from pressure from the National Trust and other green lobby groups, Clark stated that the Government would not consider a second draft of the NPPF for consultation.

Clark said: “We will put together a final version and publish it before it is adopted.”

He added: “We have been clear that there is a need for a presumption in favour of sustainable development - this has to be in there. We will consider points in good faith. But we need to accept that some of the evidence has been nostalgic for the regional approach.”

– Ends –

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