

PLANNING BLOG

Planning under attack at Lib Dem conference

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by Jamie Carpenter

Alexander: planning system a 'major vested interest'

Party conference season has begun and I'm in Birmingham to cover the Liberal Democrat party conference. I've barely been here for 24 hours, but have already heard several speakers – including senior politicians, developers and think-tank chiefs – lash out the planning system. Danny Alexander, the chief secretary to the Treasury, set the tone by using part of his speech on Sunday to hit out at the planning system, which he said is a “major vested interest” standing in the way of economic growth. “Bureaucracy, rules and red tape that mean it takes years to get things done,” Alexander told the conference. “A planning system that can take more than a decade to allow even modest developments to go forward,” he added.

Later on the same day, Ed Davey, the Lib Dem MP for Kingston & Surbiton and minister for employment relations, consumer and postal affairs, ramped up the rhetoric by telling an evening fringe meeting organised by think-tanks Centre Forum and Policy Exchange that the planning system “is completely out of control”. He said: “The idea that the planning system currently is some sort of fantastic creation is just a nonsense. The planning system is completely out of control in my view.” He added: “The planning system we inherited is a disaster and desperately needs reform.”

But perhaps the most pointed criticism so far came from Gary Day, planning director at McCarthy and Stone, the UK's largest builder of private retirement homes and flats. He told a fringe meeting organised by the Town and Country Planning Association that “around two-thirds of my company's planning applications have historically been refused first time by local authorities”. Day added: “My company provides around 70 per cent of all specialist housing for owner-occupiers in this country, so if we're not delivering because we're having problems with the planning system, who is?” Then, to cries of “rubbish” from conference delegates, he said: “My impression over the last ten years has been that most planning officers, when a planning application lands on their desk, it seems to be they are saying to themselves, ‘what can I refuse this for’.”

The fringe meeting organised by Centre Forum and Policy Exchange also saw a spiky exchange between Neil Sinden, policy director at countryside group the Campaign to Protect Rural England, and Policy Exchange director Neil O'Brien. Speaking from the floor, Sinden

– whose campaign group has been one of the most vocal critics of the government’s proposed planning reforms – disputed claims that the planning system was a barrier to delivering new homes. “Frankly, the idea that the planning system is an obstacle to delivering those houses is a nonsense,” he said “There’s a big debate to be had about this, but of course we know the housing market has ground to a halt because of a lack of mortgage finance and the inability to meet their housing needs through the market. It’s nothing to do with planning.”

But O’Brien responded: “It’s not all about supply of credit. This idea that there’s no connection between the amount of something and the price of it is just to not understand anything about economics. You will the ends, but you don’t will the means. You are talking out of both sides of your mouth.”