



Campaign to Protect
Rural England

Parliamentary News: March 2011

Localism Bill: Update

Radical reform of planning is a key part of the Government's 'localism' agenda. The Localism Bill, central to this reform, is now moving quickly through its parliamentary stages. MPs not on the Bill Committee will soon get their chance to consider the Bill as Commons Report Stage could occur before the Easter recess.

CPRE was pleased to see MPs of all parties give full attention to the planning parts of the Bill at Second Reading in January. Many MPs drew attention to the present imbalance in the planning appeals system, with five calling for a limited **3rd Party, or Community, Right of Appeal**, one of CPRE's key 'asks'. With both governing parties making pre-election pledges to introduce a community right of appeal, it is the missing piece in the localism jigsaw. A new clause on this subject has been tabled by Liberal Democrats on the Bill Committee. We hope MPs of all parties will support such an amendment to the Bill at Report, so that communities will be able to appeal against large scale developments which have been approved contrary to locally-agreed plans.

Community Rights of Appeal - what you can do to help:

1. Let CPRE know you back our campaign on community rights of appeal.
2. Write to the Minister, Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, to ask him to include a right of appeal in the Bill.
3. Speak in favour of a community right of appeal at Commons Report stage.

CPRE welcomes the Government's aspiration to get local people more involved with planning, and support the proposal that **neighbourhood plans** with sufficient local support will become part of the local plan. To be successful, those developing neighbourhood plans will need to have access to a sound evidence base. The plans will also need to be user-friendly and meaningful if communities are to get involved. It is welcome that the Bill addresses planning enforcement and restores democratic accountability for decisions on major infrastructure. The Bill needs further safeguards to ensure that a proper balance is maintained between social, environmental and economic interests in planning, and a clearer framework is needed on how councils should work together to achieve this.

Planning Reform – other strands

The **National Planning Policy Framework** is another vital part of the Government's reform package, alongside the Localism Bill. The Government is now consulting on a consolidated, streamlined framework. Planning policy plays a critical role in shaping development across the country. When a draft NPPF is published for consultation later this year, MPs and Peers will need to make their voices heard if they want to see continuing protection for the Green Belt, appropriate housing built in the right locations, priority placed on urban brownfield regeneration, a 'town centres first' policy, and better protection for productive agricultural land.

A New Homes Bonus scheme is to be introduced by the Housing Minister in place of regional targets to incentivise new housebuilding. CPRE remains concerned that linking planning permission to a cash incentive could lead to judicial review. We also fear that the NHB does not do enough to promote well-designed, affordable new homes in the most appropriate locations.

Finally, **Local Enterprise Partnerships** have been promoted as a way for councils to collaborate at the sub-regional level. But LEPs currently have a narrow economic remit and are business-led. It would be wrong for them to have a role in planning, at least without a requirement to consider wider social and environmental concerns and being made more democratic and accountable.

High Speed 2 Consultation

The first and only public consultation into the plans for High Speed 2 (HS2) is due to take place between the end of February and July. Having long campaigned against damaging road and airport expansion, CPRE supports the growing political consensus to make rail the long distance travel mode of choice.

We are very concerned, however, that this consultation comes at such a late stage in the development of the first phase of the route between London and Birmingham. The Government claims the route announced in December has been changed for 'over half its length', yet these changes were mostly minor. The route is essentially the same as that outlined in March 2010 and will have serious impacts on tranquil open countryside.

Time to think long term on forests

CPRE welcomed the decision by the Government to end its consultation on the sale of the public forest estate in England and establish an independent Panel to consider the future direction of forestry and woodland policy, including the role of the Forestry Commission. We had argued that the Government needed to give much stronger guarantees on access, wildlife protection and other benefits of our public woodland – including tranquillity – than it had done through the consultation.

The Panel will now be able to consider how to fulfil the Prime Minister's ambition, stated in the Commons on 16 February, 'to increase access to our forests, and the biodiversity within them'. The Panel should reflect the strong public voice that spoke out against the proposed sales, as well as non-landowning charities such as CPRE that are able to bring a different perspective to this issue to those that manage land. The forthcoming Natural Environment White Paper presents Ministers with a good opportunity to set out how they will manage and improve our woodlands for future generations, as part of their plans for long-term, landscape scale restoration of our countryside.

Pylons on the march?

CPRE's campaign to keep pylons from defacing our most precious landscapes has seen some significant recent successes. The announcement of an independent review of the costs of undergrounding cables and National Grid's new undergrounding policy both follow our criticism of inflated cost estimates. We hope a balanced assessment will enable communities and Ministers to insist on increased undergrounding of transmission cables in sensitive landscapes.

There is widespread concern among MPs and Peers about the downgrading of the status of the Holford Rules – criteria which help to improve the siting of overhead lines – in the Energy National Policy Statements. The ECC Select Committee has supported CPRE's view that NPSs should include strategic, spatial planning to ensure we can minimise the need for new overhead lines.

Major challenges remain. CPRE is concerned that the bigger picture on electricity transmission is being missed. With growing demands for energy transmission from new offshore and coastal locations, the next decade is likely to see the largest transformation of the grid since the 1960s. CPRE wants to see a new strategy from DECC and Ofgem for the shape of our transmission network which takes full account of landscape considerations. Sticking with the current system could mean hundreds of kilometres of new overhead lines.

There cannot be effective public participation in the development of infrastructure proposals when only one option is on the table. An ineffective consultation process could derail the Hybrid Bill that would deliver HS2, as legitimate concerns about the process will become mixed up with the substance of the proposals.

CPRE recently published a report, *Getting Back on Track – Why new thinking is needed about High Speed Rail*, which sets out a different way forward. It is available on our website, together with our latest HS2 press releases and graphics showing its potential impact on the countryside, at: <http://www.cpre.org.uk/campaigns/transport/rail/highspeed2>

We're here to help

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