



FAO: Chair of Planning

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Date: 18 August 2014
Our Ref: JM/Planning

Dear Chair of Planning,

Re: Changes to the Planning System - Letter to Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles

Sefton Council has resolved at a meeting of the full Council in July to write to Mr Pickles raising serious and wide ranging concerns about the impacts of the numerous changes to our national planning system. These changes are affecting our communities in many ways and often result in ourselves as local decision makers being faced with very difficult decisions for developments that our residents simply do not want. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) favours developers. The Localism Act raises hope and expectations in our communities only for our residents to find again and again that there are no planning reasons for us to reasonably refuse unpopular developments. When we have tried this we lose on appeal. Now there is the additional pressure to avoid poor performance in appeals and the threat of special measures - potentially loosing the right to determine major applications locally. This is surely not in the spirit of localism. The move away from full planning applications to prior determinations, the increasing numbers of permitted changes of use - without real consideration of impacts - are all examples of changes that do not embrace localism - they effectively mean our residents have very little, or no, opportunity to influence many new developments in their communities.

I have included below the minutes from our Council meeting - setting out my motion that was unanimously supported by Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservatives and Independent councillors. I write to ask you to consider doing the same in your own Council and to write to Mr Pickles raising your concerns.

Kind regards,

Councillor James Mahon
Sefton Council

33. NOTICE OF MOTION SUBMITTED BY COUNCILLOR MAHON

It was moved by Councillor Mahon, seconded by Councillor Veidman and Unanimously RESOLVED:

That this Council:

Calls on the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Mr. Eric Pickles M.P., to examine the changes the coalition Government has made to this country's planning system to see if they are working for the benefit of the communities. Some of the issues are detailed below.

The National Planning Policy Framework

There is a body of opinion that sees this as a 'Developers Charter' where the rules have shifted in favour of allowing much more development.

Prior Notifications

Several kinds of developments can now progress without the need for full application and full assessment of impacts. In most cases these don't include highway issues and ignore issues that many residents may be concerned about. Types of development covered by these changes include large house extensions, changes between different uses, changes of agricultural buildings to many other uses like hotels etc. Councils still need to determine these prior notifications, in many instances with no fee and with reduced timescales for decision making.

Changes to the Use Classes Orders

Now a much wider range of uses than ever can change to another use without the need for planning permission. These include shops to residential - what will this mean for our town centres? Restaurants to offices, shops to building societies or credit unions. These are only a small number of the changes of use that are now possible without needing planning permission.

Localism Act - Neighbourhood Planning and Community Right to Bid

Neighbourhood Planning could be a positive tool to support our own local plans. The process has been designed so that communities can help plan their local areas, but only if they accept the same, or more, development than our own Local Plan.

Community Right to Bid - this is in danger of becoming a tool to stall development proposals months when key assets come up for sale. This does not provide certainty and speed for new developments - it provides the opposite.

Abolition of Regional Planning

This was intended to bring more effective local decision making through the removal of a whole regional tier of control and influence in strategic planning. This has resulted in each local authority now having to prepare their own evidence and their own estimates about how many houses they need to build in their area. This has, in effect, introduced a huge new area of controversy and uncertainty for councils.