



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Operation of the National Planning
Policy Framework, HC 190

Tuesday 21 October 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

Panel 1 (Questions 839-845)

Department for Communities and Local Government

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Simon Danczuk; Mrs Mary Glendon; Mark Pawsey; John Pugh; John Stevenson; and Chris Williamson.

Panel 1 Questions [839-845]

Witnesses: **Kris Hopkins MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, gave evidence.

Q839 Chair: Good afternoon. Welcome Minister, and welcome to our 11th and final brief evidence session—note those two words, “final” and “brief”—on the operation of the National Planning Policy Framework. Thank you for coming to just answer some brief questions about renewable energy, because I understand that, while planning in general as a responsibility has transferred to Brandon Lewis, you have got the renewable energy part of the brief.

Before we just begin with the questions we shall again, and will do so for both sessions, put on record any interests we might have. I am a Vice-President of the Local Government Association.

Mrs Glendon: My husband is a councillor in North Tyneside and one of my members of staff is too.

Chris Williamson: Two members of my staff are elected members on Derby City Council.

Simon Danczuk: My wife is a councillor and some of the staff in my office are councillors.

Mark Pawsey: I have a member of staff who is a councillor.

John Pugh: I am a Vice-President of the LGA and I have two members of staff who are councillors.

Q840 Chair: When we took evidence from other witnesses there was concern about the renewable sector in general in terms of planning, but particularly with regard to wind farms. The concern was that they were almost becoming politicised, in that, after sitting in the planning system for two and a half years, projects were being called in by the Secretary of State and often were sitting there in the Department for months on end without a decision being reached. Is that not going to destroy investor confidence in the industry?

Kris Hopkins: First of all, thank you for inviting me. To all those members who have councillor friends, I am sure their lives are enriched by that. I am sure they are.

I do not think that is quite true actually. I know there is lots of debate in political parties. Individuals have spoken out in recent times. First of all, no application sits on an in-tray as far as I am concerned. We process those and we have got the information to be able to do that, but I did want to try to give you some idea of figures as well, because the idea that every wind farm has been called in is actually not true. I was looking at the number of applications since October 2013, which is when I became responsible for that particular field: wind farms, 295 applications; solar farms, 449; a total of 744. The number of call-ins since that day: wind farms, three; solar farms, one. Those are facts that kill some of the conversations that have gone on about this.

We do need to distinguish between call-in and recovery, because it is different if a council is minded to vote in support of an application, and I get a request to call it in—those numbers total three at this moment in time, so that gives an idea of context. If a decision has been made by a local authority, which is usually to refuse the application, and rather than it going to the inspectorate, a local authority or a Member of Parliament or a councillor wants to write to me and ask me to recover that, then I will make that decision rather than the inspectorate. To put those figures into context, by the way—and bearing in mind I was talking about 744 applications earlier on—for wind farms the number of recovered applications is 40, and for solar farms it is two.

Although there is much rhetoric in the media at this moment in time, and lots of important discussion and debate about renewables, to reiterate, the number of applications that come under the responsibility of the Secretary of State via call-ins are three wind farms and one solar farm.

Q841 Chair: But if we look at the figures of applications that you have dealt with in the past year—you probably saw the information in the press at the weekend saying this—the Secretary of State has turned down 19 applications. That represented over 80% of the applications that were actually considered, and six of them had been turned down against the advice of the Planning Inspectorate. Now, in the end, that does suggest a political decision was being made on those occasions, does it not?

Kris Hopkins: I just want to absolutely refute that last piece. Each individual application needs to be considered on its own merit, and there is clear guidance around those applications. I spend time deliberating and considering each of those applications, and there is not a political decision there; there is one based upon the evidence that was presented to me. It is important to put that into the context that if they have reached me they are contentious. These are applications that have secured significant recognition and contemplation by councils, members of the public, and by different lobby groups out there, and so they are the most difficult decisions. The fact that slightly above 80% have been declined or refused at this moment in time reflects the fact that they are difficult decisions. As I said before, each one is taken on its individual merit, and I am very confident about the process we have got in place.

Q842 Chair: So just in terms of time, the evidence that we had from RenewableUK was saying that on average it was taking 13 months in the planning system, from beginning to end, to get decisions on these projects. That must undermine investor confidence. Is that a matter of concern? Even if you are saying personally that in the end they are not sitting on your desk or the Secretary of State's desk, is that a concern or an issue that you would want to address?

Kris Hopkins: We constantly review the guidelines and the process, and that is clearly documented in the Secretary of State's written ministerial statement, but we do need to actually think about some of the applications. They are complex. If you have got six turbines on a greenfield site, with the infrastructure that is required to be put in there, the level of public debate that is required, because we have set out that we need a pre-application debate, as well as post-application—councils and councillors invariably want to create a space in which they can debate and discuss these issues. I understand that a

developer who wants to see a return on investment would like to speed the process up, but for me—and I say this as a former councillor as well—democracy needs to play a clear role in this. It gives an opportunity to the public, through the guidance we have laid out there about pre-application consultation and the statutory guidance and timeline for individuals to be able to submit information, as well as going out to third parties such as English Heritage and National Trust—there are a whole range of different people out there who want to make a thoughtful contribution to that debate—and then there is a public hearing where evidence is sought from the public as well.

Q843 Chair: Is there a simple explanation why the level of recovery on projects of this kind is much higher than, say, on equally controversial housing schemes?

Kris Hopkins: I will be honest with you. I will hold my hand up and say I do not know about housing schemes, and level of figures there, but what I will say is that a lot of the rhetoric associated with this has been about call-in, and about me, the Secretary of State, or the Department not allowing a democratic decision, but actually, as I said before, three wind farms have been called in since—

Q844 Chair: In recovery there are a lot more, and a lot more wind farms than housing schemes.

Kris Hopkins: Absolutely, but that is after the local democratic process has had time to make a determination. I think that is appropriate they are able to do that, and we have not intervened up to that point, so the fact is that there is a timeline to delivery of the termination. I am not quite sure what the timeline is to housing, but what I do know is that I look at each of those applications and take into account each of the lines of evidence that are placed in front of us and make a sensible determination on that basis.

Q845 Chair: But in the end recovery is intervention and you are recovering far more of these schemes, as a percentage, than you are of housing schemes, and probably more than any other sort of scheme. Does that indicate a particular issue of concern from Ministers that the general operation of the planning system is not working as well as it should with regard to renewable projects?

Kris Hopkins: I have said before that I do not know what the percentage is of houses that are brought in there, but what I think is important here is that we have had many complaints, prior to the introduction of the guidance, that people did not believe. They were not

confident in some of the outcomes that were laid out there. That is why we have put in place a clear set of guidance and an opportunity for individuals to encourage the Secretary of State to recover those applications. The recovery process itself is not the outcome of any deliberation; it is a matter of making an appraisal of the evidence that is placed in front of you at that moment in time.

Chair: Thank you for that.