



with Paul Grant

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The need for speed in Planning

Like them or loath them, Council Members of local authorities are voted for by the local population to deal with a wide range of responsibilities including making decisions on major planning applications. This will change when the Government's latest attempt to speed up the Planning system in the form of the Planning Bill becomes law. At the time of writing this article the Planning Bill was about to be passed to the House of Lords for further consideration and possible amendment.

For major infrastructure proposals, such as new Power Stations, Major Roads, Airport runways or Port Extensions an application will go directly before a new Infrastructure Planning Commission made up of members appointed by the Government to make a decision. The decision is intended to be taken without the debate going to a public inquiry and with regard to National Policy Statements, which are written by the Government specifically concerning the infrastructure that is the subject of the application, and their appropriate location. Despite last minute attempts to amend the Bill, the final decision on such proposals will not be taken by a Government Minister.

For more standard planning applications, decisions will still be taken by a local authority's planning officers or Council Members, depending on the type of application.

The Government has been tinkering with the Planning system for a number of years now. The aspiration of ensuring that the new system is faster will probably result in a system which has serious question marks over its accountability. On the other hand there is an urgent need for the quicker delivery of major infrastructure, for example, given the Government's targets for renewable energy and the need to be less dependent on fossil fuels.

Weighing up the balance between speed and democratic accountability is key in delivering a planning system that is interested in the merits of an application. It will be interesting to see whether the new legislation achieves that aim and it is clear that there are hard decisions to be made. The main concerns with any new legislation are whether it will provide a solution to the problems it is designed to solve without creating new ones, and dealing with the unintended consequences of reform. These consequences may be a lack of opportunity for public participation, decreased public confidence in the planning process and an increase in judicial review of decisions made by the new Infrastructure Planning Commission on planning applications.

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