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PROPER PLANNING MAKES FOR PERFECT PERFORMANCE

The Planning and Energy White Papers published recently will affect the lives of us all. Independent Planning Commissioners, not local authorities or government planning inspectors, will take major infrastructure planning decisions which should help to speed up decision making on vital projects. Homeowners will be able to reduce the 27% of the country's carbon dioxide emissions from domestic buildings by fitting renewable energy generation devices without planning consents. The Papers will certainly change the way we plan, but we must make sure we create a better system which still accounts of real local concerns on the major projects and does not allow uncontrolled small scale developments ruin local landscapes.

The White Papers rightly focus on proposals for making the existing housing stock more environmentally friendly, by 'incentivising' energy saving and increasing 'home-made' energy from renewable sources. The headlines, however, shouted more on the proposals to speed up planning decisions about major infrastructure proposals - by passing the powers from local authorities and ministerial enquiry to a panel of Independent Planning Commissioners.

The aim is to get a balance between efficiency and democracy in decision-making, by appointing experts who will make faster decisions, on airports or motorways for example, without getting bogged down by competing local agendas.

Business opinion has tended to welcome the change, pointing to examples like the seven years it took to get the final decision on the new Heathrow terminal, but others are concerned about accountability when ‘experts’, not politicians, take important decisions, in a process that could make it more difficult for local voices to be heard. The nuclear power stations proposed in the Energy White Paper represent a particularly controversial type of infrastructure project, which could be decided by the experts, but where local opinion must be fairly heard.

But behind all this is the housing story, about which we will hear more and more. The government is driving the development of ‘zero carbon’ new houses; houses which have no net carbon emissions as they are highly energy efficient and generate much of their own power, mainly from wind and solar sources. Leading-edge housing developers are now incorporating this renewable technology to supply energy for developments, increasingly marketed as ‘eco-homes’.

Making all new houses more environmentally friendly will help reduce emissions, but the main problem is the emissions from the existing stock. The proposals of the Planning White Paper mean that, in future, you will not need planning permission to install a wind turbine, solar panels or other ‘gadgets’ to produce energy without carbon emissions.

Similarly, the Energy White Paper has proposals to boost energy saving. For example, energy companies will be required to sell both energy and energy saving measures, such as cavity wall insulation.

We are now into the consultation period on all these proposals. Let's hope everyone will take the opportunity to respond, as many vital issues are raised; we need to think very carefully about whether we are prepared to exchange freedom to install energy generating gadgets for less local influence on major infrastructure developments perhaps?

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SECBE - South East Centre for the Built Environment

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