

Local Authorities third National Conference on NSIPs

Cllr Richard Rout cabinet member for Devolution, Local Government Reform, and Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects - opening address

Good morning and welcome to the Hold and this year's NSIP conference.

It is undeniable that this is a consequential moment for the delivery of major infrastructure, and it's apt that we're meeting the day after the government announced further financial backing for Sizewell C.

With the backdrop of NSIP reform and the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, I recognise there is genuine desire on the part of the current government to drive forward development, and their willingness to make radical change in order to do so.

This has been defined, or shaped, by many within the government, as being, "builders versus blockers". And, while the objective of driving forward development is sound, from the perspective of a local authority at the sharp end of that delivery, many of the proposals coming from government are fundamentally misguided and will make their goals – whether one agrees with them or not – ultimately harder to deliver.

Delivering complex change, at pace, in a democracy is not easy. The consenting of new infrastructure or housing, through the planning process is essentially an act of mediation between competing interests, to arrive at acceptable change.

Therefore, the rhetoric that says you are either with us or against us entirely fails to understand what the planning and consenting process is, and the fundamental need to shape change through negotiation.

Communities here in Suffolk, and across the UK, are being asked to accept transformative change; but, without a system for making change which builds trust, and confidence, new infrastructure will not be delivered, rather, the hardline blockers, as the Prime Minister might describe them, will find ready recruits to their cause.

Local authorities are political organisations, but sometimes our officers brace themselves when I talk about the politics of NSIPs. But nothing is more political than permanently changing the places people live, and work, and the places they love.

My experience as a councillor is that most people recognise the need for change and development, even if they're uncomfortable with it; but they do want reassurance, they do want to be able to find out more about what is proposed, and they do want to be confident that the building process will not be a blight on their lives.

Furthermore, and I know we all recognise this, they care about the place they live and their environment for a fundamental reason, because it is their home.

This is why, in a democracy, consultation, and genuine engagement with communities, about change, is essential

I have seen the impact of bad projects and bad consultation close at hand, produce stress, anguish, and social division. These are inconvenient truths, which so many project promoters and consultants wish they could overlook.

At the same time the process of change, particularly for major infrastructure, is seen as something for experts, specialists, and bureaucrats, and about which the public has little meaningful say. Given the huge amount of change that will be necessary to deal with the challenge of a changing climate, adaptation to that change, and the demand for housing and economic growth, a mechanism for change in which the public have no confidence cannot be sustainable.

On top of all this the process of change is turned into an industry, which is overwhelming communities, and the local authorities who represent them. In 1989 the Environmental Statement for the original version of Sizewell C, that was proposed by the Central Electricity Generating Board was around 300 pages long, in total.

The current version of Sizewell C had an Environmental Statement which filled an entire meeting room at the Council's offices in Ipswich

There is clearly a need for change, I would even agree that there is a need for increased pace in the process, but the changes being proposed are damaging, and risk the wider case for change.

The undermining of the mitigation hierarchy, by Environmental Delivery Plans, in Part 3 of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, does not feel robust.

The removal of the Biodiversity Net Gain hierarchy, that is proposed in the consultation on biodiversity net gain for NSIPs, does not feel robust.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the replacement of a statutory duty for pre submission consultation on NSIPs with statutory guidance, does not feel robust. Such is the strength of feeling against this last point here in Suffolk, in a moment of near cross-party unity, our council passed a motion against the change, with only two members opposing it.

Communities and the environment are not blockers to development, they are the place in which a proposal is seeking to make change, and the changes proposed must genuinely negotiate with place and people if they are to be acceptable and successful, for me, that is at the heart of effective consenting an engagement, and is the founding idea of town and country planning, on which the entire approach to delivering change has been based.

It is possible to improve the NSIP consenting process, make it fairer and – indeed faster – but these proposed reforms focus on only one thing, pace, and pace at all costs. As a council, we are eager to engage and work with government on this process, and to improve the proposed bill while we're able, and have submitted various comments to the bill committee. It's in this proactive spirit we intend to go on.

But in my opinion, the reforms as outlined place too much hope in developers acting honourably, in doing the right thing. I think all of us in this room will have mixed experiences of different projects and different teams. Despite objections to aspects of the scheme, we've worked well with Sizewell C, experiences with National Grid have been varied – some teams are excellent, with some leaving more to be desired; but it is in the solar arena that we have seen staggeringly bad practice. It is like the wild west, and a gold rush is going on, brought about – in part – by the accelerated timeline to decarbonise the electricity grid by 2030 rather than 2035. Parking for one moment, whether or not this is achievable, or indeed realistic, the consequences for counties like Suffolk, Norfolk, and Lincolnshire in particular, have been stark.

And these issues have political consequences, electoral consequences – we may have some guests from Lincolnshire in the room who are seeing this play out. Were this a conference just for councillors I'd go further, but this is important to those of you in the room whether you sit on a local authority, work for one, or work in the energy sector. Increasingly, many NSIPs will be seeking consent in increasingly hostile environments. You might say that the government is right then, to want to listen less, to drive things through.

My fear, if the government presses ahead with the removal of section 42 and section 49 of the Planning Act 2008, is that we will see further resistance to decarbonisation and an even firmer shift in our political landscape that may ultimately derail the nation's energy security goals.

The hostility many NSIPs face is a consequence of communities feeling exhausted and ignored. The answer isn't to listen less. The answer isn't to see BNG delivered miles away. The answer is to reform the NSIP consenting regime to yes, deliver pace, but to improve it to better carry communities on the journey.

If there is a message I want you to take away from today, it is that statutory consultation, done properly, improves projects and eases the consenting process. We all want targets to be met, the best possible projects to be consented, and communities to feel the change they're hosting is delivered fairly. Reform, done poorly, makes all those things less likely.