

Autumn Statement 2011

The Chancellor's Autumn Statement included the following announcements:

- a review of the implementation of the Habitats Directive in England;
- changes to the planning system
- a National Infrastructure Plan 2011

Review of Habitats Directive

'The European Union's habitats and wild bird directives protect Europe's most precious ecosystems, flora and fauna. The Government strongly supports this objective but is keen to ensure that compliance with the directives does not lead to unnecessary costs and delays in the delivery of important, sustainable infrastructure projects, such as offshore wind developments. In order to tackle problems, the Government is reviewing the directives as currently implemented in England by Budget 2012 and has published terms of reference for this work. In addition the Government will:

- establish a Defra-led problem-solving unit to address blockages for developments where compliance with the directives is particularly complex or has large impacts;
- make it easier for businesses to understand what they must do to comply with the directives by improving Natural England's support and assistance offer to developers and consulting on updated guidance before Budget 2012; and
- give industry representation on a group chaired by Ministers so it can raise concerns deriving from the Directive at the top of Government.

'In addition, the Government can announce progress on a number of projects which have been held back by difficulties stemming from the directives:

- the Marine Management Organisation and the Port of Falmouth have agreed a way forward on a scientific trial to resolve environmental issues around development of the harbour. A decision on the developer's marine licence application will follow if the trial succeeds. If this application is then successful, it is anticipated that development could proceed in early 2013;
- Natural England have confirmed that environmental issues relating to the Habitats Directive need not cause delay to the Able Marine Energy Park, as satisfactory options are available to address the main concerns stemming from the directive; and
- Natural England is working closely with Chiltern Railways to resolve licensing issues at the Wolvercote tunnel by January subject to receipt of satisfactory information from the company.'

National Infrastructure Plan

The National Infrastructure Plan brings together an analysis of the UK's infrastructure networks and sets out a pipeline of over 500 infrastructure projects. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Rt Hon Danny Alexander MP, will chair a new cabinet committee on

infrastructure. This committee will monitor the delivery of the 40 infrastructure projects and programmes most critical to growth. These include HS2, Thames Tideway Tunnel various ports projects.

Planning changes

‘To provide a consistent framework and to send a signal of intent to business, the Government will ensure the key consenting and advisory agencies have a remit to promote sustainable development. The change will be made as soon as the National Planning Policy Framework is finalised, and will ensure that these bodies are alive to the impact of their decisions upon sustainable economic growth and on economically significant projects, as well as the environmental and social aspects of sustainability, and that they swiftly approve consents when it is appropriate to do so.

‘In addition to this, the Government will:

- simplify a number of heritage, highways and environmental non-planning consents, with some scrapped altogether. This will begin early 2012;
- introduce a 13 week maximum timescale for the majority of non-planning consents, to speed up the consenting process and give certainty to developers. This will take immediate effect for Government agencies; and
- make it easier to apply for consents. This will include providing information and links on key non-planning development consents closely associated with planning.’

Further reforms to the role of statutory consultees

‘In addition to the proposals set out in the Penfold Review, the Government has been examining further means of ensuring that statutory bodies’ working practices can be improved to deliver timely, informed and proportionate advice.

‘The Government will bring forward measures to be implemented in summer 2012 to ensure that there is a more effective mechanism for applicants obtaining an award of costs, if there is an appeal against a refusal of planning permission, where a statutory consultee has acted unreasonably. In the longer term, the Government will work to extend this principle to the pre-application phase of the major infrastructure planning process.

‘The Government will bring forward proposals to improve the performance of the key statutory consultees in responding to applications and measures for consultation on strengthening existing time-limits for the provision of responses on planning applications. This will include the key statutory bodies bringing forward an improvement plan by spring 2012.

‘The Government will also:

- accompany the amendments to remits proposed as part of the Penfold Review with a requirement that the bodies demonstrate the role they are playing in supporting sustainable development. The Government will consider provisions to ensure progress is reported back to Ministers;

- strengthen relationship management by the bodies with major developers. The Government will consider proposals to provide a named relationship manager at board level for the largest 25 developers that statutory consultees interact with; and
- increase the transparency of the key statutory consultee bodies. The Government will consider measures to publish staff instructions, increase the detail of performance statistics and increase the use of satisfaction survey.’

High Speed 2

‘The Secretary of State for Transport will announce the Government’s decisions on the proposed strategy for a national high speed rail network and, if appropriate, the preferred route from London to the West Midlands by the end of 2011, in light of all the evidence. Should the Secretary of State decide to proceed with plans for high speed rail, the Government would:

- legislate for the London-Birmingham phase of High Speed 2 by introducing a hybrid bill to Parliament by October 2013;
- prepare the second phase of High Speed 2 (the Birmingham-Manchester-Leeds route), consult and decide on a detailed route by December 2014; and
- work with stakeholders to determine the optimum use of the significant rail capacity released on the West Coast Main Line by the transfer of key long distance inter-city express services to High Speed 2.’

Aviation

‘The Government will develop a long term aviation strategy which will set out how we intend to address the UK's airport capacity challenges, while ensuring aviation plays its part in delivering environmental goals and protecting the quality of life of local communities. The Government will publish a consultation on this strategy in March 2012. This will explore all the options for maintaining the UK's aviation hub status, with the exception of a third runway at Heathrow.’

The Wildlife Trusts
November 2011