



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
South East

The Autumn Statement

Uninstalling greenest government ever... 99% complete. These words, tweeted by environmental commentator @leohickman, succinctly sum up the unanimous reaction of the green movement to George Osborne's speech on Tuesday.

Osborne inevitably gave a bullish defence of planning reform in his speech to the Commons. In the face of this and the growing marginalisation of the Communities department in planning policy, we must now expect a National Planning Policy Framework that is barely changed from the controversial consultation draft. In the coming months, planning rules are to be further loosened, with faster appeals so that local decisions can be overturned more quickly. Developers and local authorities are also being encouraged to suggest new towns and urban extensions to the government, though ministers have not yet said what Westminster's role in such schemes might be in an age of localism.

At a time when farmland birds are at their lowest ever recorded level—news slipped out quietly yesterday—biodiversity is set for a further beating from a Chancellor who has habitat protection in his sights. As ministers try to find ways of avoiding the obligations in EU directives, they are giving developers a seat at the top table to ensure that their needs are paramount. English Heritage and English Nature are reeling from staff cuts, but they must now take on a new obligation to promote sustainable development as well as deliver faster comments on proposals. Our built heritage is also looking increasingly vulnerable as simplification of the consent regime opens doors to bending protection rules. Nothing announced on Tuesday will, of course, stop the march of pylons and turbines. We also now know that a new generation of telegraph poles is due to stalk through villages and across fields in the green belt in a move to cut the costs of broadband rollout. Rural communities will face a stark choice. More poles or no broadband.

The Autumn Statement was not all bad news. The Rural Growth Network pilots will help promote entrepreneurship in rural areas. But this scheme will be a major test of the ability of local enterprise partnerships to think and act rural as few LEPs are structured to understand the small businesses and the social enterprises that are at the heart of the rural economy.

*Should anyone have harboured any doubts before Tuesday, the Chancellor's statement has put on record that environmental aims will always come second to panics about the economy within the coalition government. Ministers have dived into the bear trap that has destroyed the environmental credibility of government after government. **When the economy doesn't look so good, kill the environment.***

The Statement



The Chancellor George Osborne delivered his autumn statement to a packed House of Commons. As always, the major consequences for landscapes, communities and the environment lay beyond the populist headlines. Defra, Business (BIS), Transport (DfT) and Culture (DCMS) also issued Autumn Statement reports that affect planning and environmental matters.

- ◆ Main Treasury report: <http://bit.ly/u2yFVL>
- ◆ George Osborne speech: <http://bit.ly/sfERnS>
- ◆ National Infrastructure Plan: <http://bit.ly/v4VNwo>
- ◆ Defra review of EU environmental directives: <http://bit.ly/vx61BX>
- ◆ DCMS on proposals for heritage & broadband: <http://bit.ly/rYEa3c>
- ◆ BIS summary of proposals & progress of the Growth Review: <http://bit.ly/vL06C8>.

Although the Communities department presumably still has planning policy among its responsibilities, it issued nothing concerning planning policy on Tuesday.

Reaction. In the Guardian, Damian Carrington said: "Osborne has chosen the slash-and-burn route, bloating our environmental debt, just as his failure to create growth has bloated our economic debt, and rejecting the industrial opportunities of green leadership" (<http://bit.ly/ul0R39>). For some of the other reaction, see the Telegraph: <http://tgr.ph/vLsX5c>.

Planning

Infrastructure. George Osborne published the second National Infrastructure Plan (<http://bit.ly/v4VNwo>). He announced an extra £5 billion of government funding for projects, taking the commitment to £10 billion, along with up to £20 billion from pension funds through a new Insurers' Infrastructure Investment Forum. In some cases, the government will be prepared to underwrite the risk of infrastructure projects put forward by the private sector. There will be a 'light touch' review of the regime for nationally significant infrastructure projects by summer 2012, to "build more flexibility into the new major infrastructure planning process, particularly in the pre-application phase". A new Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure, chaired by the Treasury Chief Secretary will monitor the delivery of the forty infrastructure projects "most critical to growth". The Regional Growth Fund for England will be increased by £1 billion and extended to 2014-15.

Appeals. A review of planning appeal procedures will make the process faster, more transparent, and improve consistency from summer 2012.

S106 waiver. The government is to consult on allowing reconsideration of planning obligations agreed prior to April 2010, for sites where the development has stalled.

New towns and extensions. The statement promises the government will support new development, “which could include modern garden cities, urban and village extensions”. The government will invite proposals from developers and local authorities for these new developments, though they must have clear “local support” (community support is not mentioned).

Environment & Heritage

EU environmental directives. The Chancellor blamed the Habitats and Wild Birds Directives for creating “unnecessary costs and delays” to development and said that “we will make sure that gold plating of EU rules on things like Habitats aren’t placing ridiculous costs on British businesses”. Industry representatives will join a review group chaired by ministers to enable them to “raise concerns deriving from the Directives at the top of Government” (Defra: <http://bit.ly/vx61BX>). Ahead of that review’s conclusions, Defra will issue new guidance on the directives and will establish a “problem-solving unit to address blockages for developments where compliance with the directives is particularly complex or has large impacts.” The RSPB fumed: “Weakening these regulations will lead to a reign of environmental destruction that we have not seen in a generation” (Telegraph: <http://tgr.ph/v1p5Kx>; RSPB: <http://bit.ly/si9TaS>). The Wildlife Trusts expressed exasperation at the changes (<http://bit.ly/s1NHS>) and Plantlife complained the government is mugging England’s wildlife protection (<http://bit.ly/tA8AGQ>). The Air Quality Directive, National Emissions Ceilings, and the freshwater legislative framework are also in the Chancellor’s sights for review. (See also **Logistics** below.)

Penfold implementation. The business department published a report on implementation of the July 2010 Penfold Report on non-planning consents. The BIS report makes a number of significant recommendations about heritage consents, rights of way and the duties of agencies to promote sustainable development (<http://bit.ly/penfoldbis>). More details below.

Conservation bodies to promote economic growth. Osborne announced the key consenting and advisory agencies will have a duty to promote sustainable development as soon as the NPPF is finalised. This will mean that the Environment Agency, English Heritage, English Nature and the Highways Agency (plus the Health and Safety Executive) will have to take a more proactive approach to supporting development. The definition of sustainable development will that given in the final National Planning Policy Framework. The new remit “will extend to decision-making on development consents and on providing statutory advice and would be in addition to the other statutory remits these agencies have, including promoting the environmental and social aspects of sustainability”. Osborne also announced a 13 week maximum timescale for the majority of non-planning consents and award of appeal costs against agencies. Alongside the planned heavy staff cuts, these policies are set to distort the priorities of conservation bodies away from protection to economic growth. CPRE said the moves will emasculate environment and heritage watchdogs (Telegraph: <http://tgr.ph/t0yY7n>; 24dash: <http://bit.ly/vmSNhl>).

Listed buildings. There are several changes which simplify consents but will also open the potential for reduced control over heritage assets:

- ◆ The government will remove the need to apply for consent to alter a listed building, if the work does not impact on the parts of a building that contribute to its special interest. English Heritage will update its listings providing more details of special interest, beginning with twentieth century buildings.
- ◆ Potential developers will be able to obtain a Certificate of Immunity from scheduling or listing at any time, and it will last for five years.
- ◆ Owners of listed buildings will be able to enter into Statutory Management Agreements to avoid seeking listed building consent.
- ◆ The government will consult on introducing a system of prior-approval for specified works to listed buildings. Listed Building Consent will be deemed granted if the local planning authority does not request a full application within a specified time period.
- ◆ It will also consult on allowing certification of applications for Listed Building Consent by accredited independent agents rather than conservation officers.

Conservation areas. There will be no requirement for Conservation Area Consent when demolishing unlisted buildings, planning permission will suffice. Demolishing an unlisted building in a conservation area without planning permission will become an offence.

Rights of Way ‘reforms’. The government intends to reduce the duplication between Rights of Way consents and the planning system. “These proposals will be part of a wider consultation package of rights of way reforms on which an announcement will be made in due course.” (See also **Rural** below.)

Energy & Transport

Energy. The Department for Energy and Climate Change will produce updated estimates of the potential exploitation of shale and other unconventional resources for gas supplies. The government will introduce new permitted development rights for non-domestic micro-generation of electricity. Despite giving £250m to cut the energy bills of energy intensive industries, the Treasury said it is “absolutely not backsliding on our target to cut emissions 80 per cent by 2050” (Business Green: <http://bit.ly/vY2FvG>).

Aviation. Osborne told the Commons: “We will explore all the options for maintaining the UK’s aviation hub status, with the exception of a third runway at Heathrow.” There is no mention of this commitment in the printed Autumn Statement and Osborne’s comment is being interpreted as support for Boris Johnson’s push for a new airport in the Thames Estuary (Boris Island) or in north Kent (News Shopper: <http://bit.ly/rNC23A>; Kent Online: <http://bit.ly/skEb9d>).

Local transport schemes. £170 million will be made available for twenty local schemes (<http://bit.ly/tZUdgy>). There are no schemes of significant interest or threat in the South East.

Roads. Osborne announced new and accelerated funding for motorways and road schemes, including the M1/M25 junction and a fund to ease local pinch points (Construction Index: <http://bit.ly/rGYK7H>).

Roads continued. The Chancellor committed to build a new crossing across the Lower Thames to link Kent and Essex. Three options will go to consultation in 2013 and the Silvertown option is specifically mentioned in the Autumn Statement. Ralph Smyth for CPRE said: "These new plans to build old road schemes have clearly been picked off a dusty shelf without time for much thinking. A return to building new roads in the name of job creation will lead to more traffic, move bottlenecks along rather than solving them, often at an irrevocable cost to the local environment" (<http://bit.ly/tJ5ANE>).

Rail. The main interest for the South East is confirmation of £270 million for the new rail link between Oxford and Bedford, a line that backers eventually hope to link to Cambridge (Oxford Mail: <http://bit.ly/t87eLA>). An implementation plan for the project will be announced before July, but the go ahead will be subject to local contributions and a full business case. Several other schemes were announced (Construction Index: <http://bit.ly/rGYK7H>). The Chancellor made no mention of High Speed 2.

Logistics. The DfT published its logistics growth review alongside guidance on strategic rail freight interchanges (SRFIs). It says the predominantly road-based system of logistics in the UK does not represent an economically or environmentally sustainable model for the future. The review calls for a network of SRFIs, complemented by other freight interchanges and terminals, to support longer-term development of efficient rail freight distribution logistics. The EU Habitats and Birds Directives are accused of "causing substantial compliance costs for ports and delaying key development projects" (Review: <http://bit.ly/t11ILJ>; SRFIs: <http://bit.ly/uUgRHV>).

Ports. The government approved a second ferry terminal at Dover, which will double the port's capacity. The developers have agreed to conditions to protect heritage and the environment, including Archaeological Exclusion Zones (BBC: <http://bbc.in/uM9BI5>; decision letter: <http://bit.ly/tbVhQ1>).

Rural Economy

Growth Review. Alongside the Autumn Statement, Defra published a Rural Economy Growth Review (Defra: <http://bit.ly/tNRjoe>). The main new announcements are summarised below.

Rural Growth Networks. The Chancellor announced £15 million to fund up to six pilot Rural Growth Networks (RGNs) run by LEPs. They will demonstrate how LEPs can use the planning regime and targeted infrastructure investment to support economic growth in rural areas. The fund includes £2.3 million over the next three years to support rural enterprises led by women, particularly in the RGNs. A funding competition will be launched by the end of 2011. Each RGN will consist of a number of "relatively small" Enterprise Hubs. These will provide essential infrastructure & premises for start up and growing businesses, and be subject to a "simplified planning regime".

Farm buildings. The government will consult on allowing existing agricultural buildings to be used for other business purposes such as offices, leisure and retail space "to make it easier for rural businesses to find the premises they need to expand".

Broadband and poles. The Chancellor reannounced the existing £20 million commitment to a Rural Community Broadband Fund. DCMS is consulting on relaxing planning rules to use telegraph poles for much of the expanding broadband network to cut costs. Currently most cables have to be underground. The new rules would give permitted development rights to broadband poles and will allow the widespread deployment of new telecoms lines overhead for the first time in decades. Local councils, parishes and communities must be consulted, but will have no right of veto. Poles erected in National Parks, AONBs, conservation areas, SSSIs, the Broads and World Heritage Sites will still require planning permission, but not poles in the green belt or unprotected countryside (closing 21 February: <http://bit.ly/s1aSLb>).

Rural tourism. The government will commit £25 million to promote rural tourism, including a new £10 million fund to develop rural tourism destinations and £2 million to improve rights of way (<http://bit.ly/tNRjoe>). The Ramblers said the £2 million would not make up for government cuts that have already savaged local authority footpath budgets and rights of way teams (<http://bit.ly/tAM3M0>).

Rural Community Renewable Energy Fund. A new £15 million Rural Community Renewable Energy Fund will help communities meet the upfront cost of developing renewable projects.

Food and farming. A summit will be held in March 2012 to boost innovation in small agri-food businesses.

About the CPRE South East eBulletin

The CPRE South East eBulletin is usually issued monthly. We cover planning and environmental news with a relevance to the remit of CPRE. Any views expressed are those of the editor and contributors, not of any part of CPRE. Our audience is CPRE and its friends. Please feel free to circulate this eBulletin.

Andy Boddington, Editor. cprenews@gmail.com