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Clive Betts MP
Housing, Communities and Local Government
Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

15th June 2020

Westferry Printworks: Robert Jenrick MPs unlawful decision to approve it and public confidence in the probity of the planning process and the Ministers quasi-judicial role in these matters

Dear Mr Betts

I wrote on the 3rd June to the Committee requesting an investigation into the decision by Robert Jenrick MP to approve Westferry Printworks in my ward. A decision that he subsequently accepted was unlawful on the grounds of apparent bias. I know you are considering this, but I wish to write to you personally stating why I believe you should now do so.

Not so much because of the decision itself but what it illustrates about flaws within the process by which Ministers make planning decisions. Inevitably those decisions tend to be among the largest or most controversial planning decisions in the country. To restore public confidence that process needs to be improved, something I believe your Committee can take a lead on.

As a local Councillor with experience of planning committees, I have been bemused by how much worse the planning decision process is at the MHCLG level than at the local authority level, which is not great either.

I believe the Committee could profitably look at the following issues;

1. Should Ministerial planning decisions be made in public like the Mayor of London and local planning authorities do where objectors/supporters have public speaking rights?
2. The role of public relations companies?
3. Why internal advice to Ministers is not made public?, only a letter explaining the decision after it has been made is published. Local planning authorities publish planning officers recommendations in a report in advance of any decision with their recommendations.
4. The role of planning officers? To make recommendations they then defend or to present the decision makers with the pros and cons of each scheme for them to decide. Currently planning officers decide and then steer decision makers to support their decision. This is a wider issue than just at MHCLG.
5. Why are planning inspectors reports not published when complete but only after a decision is made?
6. How does the quasi-judicial role of Ministers conflict with their political responsibilities? Can the two be kept separate?

7. Why decisions are made by a single person at MHCLG rather than a Committee or a small group of experts including the Minister?
8. Firewalls between party political donations, fund raising events, and individual Ministers involvement. How do they work in practise?
9. How are conflicts of interest managed?
10. How are meetings / events with interested parties declared internally and whether they should also be made public when a decision is made?
11. The concept of recusing yourself from a planning decision, is common at a local authority level, why not at a Ministerial level?
12. The attendance of decision-making Ministers at events like fundraising dinners?

I have copied you into a letter to Sir Mark Sedwill, Cabinet Secretary where I also request an investigation into the decision, I would appreciate the Committee supporting that investigation or carrying it out itself. Finally, can I ask you to ask Jeremy Pocklington, Permanent Secretary MHCLG that the Ministry fully answer all of the many FOI's that have been submitted by myself and other interested parties.

In the attached synopsis is a more detailed list of questions, background and history of the scheme.

Please let me know if you have any questions, happy to assist in any way I can to resolve this,

Sincerely yours,

Andrew Wood
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CC
Jeremy Pocklington, Permanent Secretary MHCLG