

13 February 2022

For the serious attention of the Northern Ireland Public Accounts Committee

Re your meeting of the 10.2.22 concerning the NI Audit Office report on Planning in NI

It is 2pm on Thur. 10.2.22, I await with anticipation the start of your PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE meeting with the Planning Department Officials. The meeting starts at 2.07pm, and ends at 4pm. What was a sense of positive anticipation turns to a feeling and a sense of disillusion and further frustration. Two hours of obfuscation and not any sign of a promise or indication of change in the system or any real notice being taken of the serious issues that were raised in the Audit Office report. It is quite obvious that no improvements will happen under this present administration. Public Accounts Committee members do take note.

Some mention was made by the Dept. speakers of "things" that they are doing to "improve the system" but whatever they are doing, the massively imperfect system that is Planning NI gets continuously worse. We heard excuses being made regarding inappropriate applications> Well whose fault is that? Consultees being blamed for delays which are being caused by sloppy validation of applications. (Applications being validated within hours of receipt) Flawed Environmental Impact Assessments as a result of careless box ticking exercises. The Environment, and Environmental Regulations being blamed for causing delays in decision making, which is not true, especially in the Derry Strabane Council area where we have elected members showing no regard for the Environment and especially our natural Environment. Some of these cases have been brought to the attention of the Dept. but in spite of Ms Godfrey stating at the meeting that they would deal with cases of this sort and that questionable cases could be called in, nothing has been done.

It was disappointing that much of the emphasis at the meeting was directed at the problems being encountered by applicants/developers and no mention was made of the problems that are being encountered by the long suffering public who bear the brunt of very poor decision making. I personally provided an account dealing with the negative attitude that exists towards well-meaning decent people who care about our communities and the environment. In my letter I raised many issues relating to my own experiences and also relating to important issues contained in the Audit Office report. It was disappointing that the content of my letter did not get a mention during the meeting. I would not agree with the recipients of questions being harassed but I think that opportunities were missed by the committee members where they could have been more challenging and assertive. Sometimes a really forensic questioning follow up approach is required and I think that this was one such occasion.

I cannot understand why questions were not asked and pursued about the massive cost of unreliable Local Development Plans and also the exorbitant external expenditure being incurred in the hiring of outside legal experts. (See my letter re the detail of this expenditure) Whilst the expenditure incurred by an organisation should be an important aspect of an audit, the audit must also include the people in the organisation their attitudes

towards the public and importantly how their performance and decisions impact upon the rates and tax paying public.

To the members of the Public Accounts Committee we know that your role is not an easy one but you do carry a heavy responsibility to the public and we think that this Audit Office report presents a real opportunity to show to the public that you can be strong, fair and decisive in your recommendations for change in a system that is presently failing the public that it is supposed to serve.

The positive and transparent outcomes of your scrutiny/assessment in conjunction with the findings of the Audit Office report regarding the present situation in planning and the changes that are required could go a long way towards restoring trust in a new improved system of planning in NI.

Please give absolute priority to the changes for the better that are required in our planning system and in so doing I might be absolved from feeling that my writing to you has been a waste of time.

Yours

George Mc Laughlin

Nature's Keepers International