

a new nature blog

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Weird: UKIP is now the main political party defending Lodge Hill from development.

Posted on [September 28, 2014](#)

Who would have thought that Mark Reckless, MP for Rochester, including Lodge Hill SSSI, would have defected to UKIP? Well I certainly did, [just a couple of weeks ago](#). He had been on the fence between the Tories and UKIP for quite a while, as I [noted](#) back in March.

What is really interesting to me, is that all the main parties in Rochester, at the Local Council level, voted in favour of destroying Lodge Hill for development. The Medway Planning Committee [voted unanimously in favour](#) of the development. The leader of the Medway Labour group, Vince Maple, has been perhaps the most vociferous supporter of the Lodge Hill development, arguing with RSPB's Martin Harper [on the Today programme](#) only a few days ago. I have asked Labour shadow Defra team if they will commit to revoking the planning permission for Lodge Hill – silence from them. But they have committed to building up to 200,000 new homes per year by 2020.

Mark Reckless, who had previously railed against the SSSI notification, is now opposed to it. Mark Reckless is now the UKIP candidate for Rochester and Strood in the forthcoming byelection. Reckless has mentioned the Lodge Hill debacle in his reasons for leaving the Tories. [He said](#), in front of the UKIP Conference yesterday:

“In particular we promised to do away with Labour’s top-down housing targets that forced us to concrete over our green fields.

Yet, now I find that, under government pressure, our Conservative council in Medway is increasing its housing target from the annual 815 we had under Labour, to at least 1,000 every year.

Despite the promised EU referendum, it is assumed that current rates of open door EU immigration will continue for at least twenty years.

In my constituency that means they are giving permission to build 5,000 houses in a bird sanctuary on the Hoo Peninsula, despite it having the highest level of environmental protection as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. If that goes ahead, where will it stop?

I promised to protect our rural Hoo Peninsula. I cannot keep that promise as a Conservative. I can keep it as UKIP.”

So there we have it. Apart from the Greens, UKIP is now the party who say they will protect Lodge Hill SSSI, while Labour, the Libdems and the Tories, have all voted to destroy it through housing development. Now that is a turn up for the books.

There was another slightly less bizarre twist in the saga earlier this week, when Eric Pickles, [disqualified himself](#) from deciding whether to call in the Lodge Hill planning permission, to be determined at a public inquiry. Why? because Pickles is an RSPB member, and RSPB is one of the organisations calling for the call in. This seems overly cautious to me, but perhaps DCLG are looking ahead to the possibility that any decision to call in the planning permission might be challenged by the developers Land Securities, through Judicial Review. Who knows.

What it means is that one of the other planning ministers will make the decision. I would put my money on the decision being made by Minister of State Brandon Lewis. What can we deduce from Lewis' previous form?

Well one thing stands out, and it is that Lewis is front and centre of the Government's deregulation agenda, removing "red tape" or regulatory protection of public benefits as it is also known. A [recent consultation](#) was slipped out on 31st July, with a response deadline of 26th September, neatly removing any opportunity for MPs to debate them. These include

[An end to EU gold-plating](#)

[Today's proposals would remove the unnecessary gold-plating an EU directive which slow down the process, by reducing the numbers of homes and other urban development proposals that would be screened unnecessarily for environmental impact assessments. This would reduce both the cost and time taken to get planning permission for these projects.](#)

Now you can tell this consultation was really rushed out by the basic grammatical errors in it.

Far from protecting communities or giving them more say in how their local decides on new housing, the proposed amendments will do precisely the opposite.


At present, residential, urban or industrial development proposals which cover an area of more than 0.5ha requires the local planning authority to carry out a screening decision. This means that planners have to consider whether the development is likely to have a significant effect on the environment. The environment here means everything from traffic, emissions, light and noise through to nature and landscape impacts. If, having carried out this initial screening process, the Council decide they think the development might have a significant effect on the environment, they can require the developer to prepare an Environmental Impact Assessment. This is usually a large tome, produced by Environmental Consultants. They can be very expensive, and it has been joked that the cost is by weight of the documents, on account of some Consultants padding out their EIAs by copying out whole tranches of legislation, unnecessarily adding hundreds of pages and kilos of extra paper.


The current threshold for triggering a screening decision is 0.5ha, or about an acre. The Government propose to increase that by ten times, to 5ha. This means that housing developments below 150 units would not require screening.


I would suggest that a 150 house housing development would be quite likely to have an environmental impact. The Government says only 20% of planning applications which led to an EIA found likely significant effect, and on this basis it is gold plating of the Directive. I would suggest that a 20% hit rate was remarkably high and a sign of success. But is that really the point? The EIA mechanism is there to help local communities identify the Impacts of Development on the Environment. If they no longer have the power to do that for areas below 5ha or 150 houses, it means that those impacts are more likely to be approved in ignorance.


Still, Lewis is aware that the National Planning Policy Framework places reasonably good protection on SSSIs like Lodge Hill, and will be aware that Medway Council rode roughshod through these policies to approve the planning application. Hopefully he will decide that he has no option but to call in the Lodge hill planning permission.


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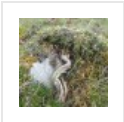
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About Miles King
UK Conservation Expert, writing about nature, politics, life.
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