# Debate over environmental regulations in infrastructure projects heats up



In a recent debate in the House of Commons, issues surrounding environmental regulations in the context of development and infrastructure projects were brought to the forefront, particularly focusing on the implications of proposed nature restoration measures within the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. Conservative shadow housing secretary Kevin Hollinrake expressed concerns about the additional burdens these regulations may impose on developers, particularly in light of high-profile projects like the "bat tunnel" at Sheephouse Wood.

The bat tunnel, a 900-metre-long construction aimed at preventing bats from colliding with high-speed trains on the HS2 railway connecting London and Birmingham, has been the subject of scrutiny due to its substantial cost, exceeding £100 million. Hollinrake indicated that the planning system could be further complicated by proposals that require developers to undertake environmental mitigation measures, such as these bat tunnels and the so-called "fish disco" – an acoustic fish deterrent located in the Bristol Channel intended to protect marine life near the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station in Somerset.

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner responded to the concerns raised during the debate, describing the expenditure on the bat tunnel as “an outrage.” She highlighted the necessity of improving outcomes for nature while acknowledging the need for a more efficient planning system. “I’m sure it’s a shared goal by all members across this house that we want to improve outcomes for nature,” Rayner stated. She stressed that the current approach must evolve to ensure environmental protections do not unreasonably impede development.

In the Commons, MPs including Chris Curtis, the Labour MP for Milton Keynes North, argued that the existing planning regulations were inadequate, preventing necessary housing and infrastructure developments while failing to effectively address environmental issues. Curtis labelled the proposed "nature recovery fund" as a “policy masterstroke,” although he cautioned about the efficiency of the current legislative framework. He noted that “the money we force builders to pay for nature projects isn’t being spent in the most efficient way” and emphasised the delays caused by regulations, especially in the case of the infamous bat tunnel. Curtis pointed out, “Imagine what we could have done for nature not just with that money but with the extra money that would have been provided to our economy by not stalling that project for so long.”

In contrast, former environment secretary Steve Barclay remarked on the complexities of the situation, highlighting the contradiction in criticising the bat tunnel while also advocating for the empowerment of Natural England to oversee similar environmental measures in the future. The proposed Bill aims to allow Natural England to develop environmental delivery plans (EDPs) aimed at safeguarding natural features that could be negatively impacted by building projects. These EDPs would require passing an “overall improvement test” to ensure conservation measures justify the potential adverse effects of construction.

The discourse in Parliament indicated a growing urgency to reconcile the need for environmental protection with the demand for housing and infrastructure development, reflecting the ongoing debate about balancing ecological interests with economic growth. As discussions progress, the role of environmental regulations and their impact on development timelines remains a critical area of focus for lawmakers.

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