

P-04-472 Make the MTAN law - Correspondence from the petitioner to the Clerking team, 30.10.2013

Dear Stephen and Kayleigh,

Thank you for your consideration of my request contained in my earlier email of 24th October and in today's telephone call. I hope this matter can be considered at the next meeting.

The factual situation with respect to the Minister appearing before the committee is that he is being advised not to do so before he has made a decision in respect to the Varteg Hill Appeal. He could, at any time in the past six months, have dismissed the Appeal by confirming that he took the view that the MTAN guidance should be given greater weight (than whatever the Inspector has written in his still unpublished report) but, to date, little progress has been made along the lines suggested by his predecessor as Minister.

As petitioners, we never understood the relevance of Varteg Hill - it is not mentioned in our petition. In reality, the relevance of the petition is to the Planning Bill shortly to be debated in the National Assembly. Nonetheless, we were comfortable with the postponement from July and heartened when the First Minister confirmed that the Minister for Planning would give his evidence at your meeting in October.

Now that it has been revealed that the Minister is obliged by law to reopen the public consultation (only if he is minded to approve the Appeal), it seems he may not appear before the committee in 2013. This, effectively, leaves the Petitions Committee in limbo and means that it cannot reach a conclusion before the Planning Bill is debated. So I am writing to ask that the committee consider reaching conclusions on our petition sooner rather than later as, to be of any value, we would like its input to go to the debate on the forthcoming Planning Bill.

The delay has a wider implications for the credibility of the Petitions Committee. By definition, a petition implies that lay people wish to influence some aspect of government policy - in this case to strengthen a government policy that already exists on paper but appears to have been ignored by a Planning Inspector. If such a petition can be delayed (and effectively dismissed) by the unwillingness of a Minister to answer general questions from the committee about the MTAN (clearly it would be improper to question the Minister specifically about Varteg Hill), it devalues the whole point of having a Petitions Committee.

So I would be grateful if the committee were to consider coming to at least an interim conclusion about our petition as such - possibly leaving open the option of a revised opinion after one day having the opportunity to quiz the Minister and Planning Inspector. I think it quite intolerable that a petition signed by more than 1000 can be sidelined in this casual manner.

Alternatively, maybe the Minister simply wants an assurance that specific questions about the Varteg Hill will be ruled out of order? Can you ask?

Sincerely,

John COX (Dr)