

24 September 2010

South West Policy & Media Officer Update Report

Introduction

Is it safe to pop my head over the parapet now !? This must be a question many planners are currently asking following a barrage of reforms – cuts, revocations and abolitions – over the summer, since the arrival of the new Coalition Government. In large measure, we've simply been told what is to happen. Some might argue that at least this has made a change from the barrage of consultations which had come to characterise the holiday periods during the previous administration. However, the consultations have started up again more recently. Significantly though, there are now less government department [CLG, DfT, DEFRA etc] driven requests for comment and more calls for evidence from various Commons Select Committees, whose members are seeking to try and come to terms with the Government's changes and proposed reforms.

At the same time, the RTPI has been busy nationally, firstly, in early July, producing a useful Briefing Note on Coalition Government announcements on strategic planning and, more recently, in early August, playing a leading role in a 'coalition' of 29 national bodies which has warned Eric Pickles that 'localism must not miss the bigger picture on planning'. Then, also in August, it was announced that the Institute was to be 'actively involved' in the drafting of the Decentralisation & Localism Bill. Nearer to home, South West Stakeholders has not been idle either- establishing itself on a new, formal footing and producing a new statement of intent entitled 'Let's hear it for the South West'. This points out that the region is yet again in danger of being overlooked by central government and suggests a role for the multi and diverse skills and expertise of SWS members [including RTPI South West], in helping local authorities and others on policy development. Finally, there are things to report on the 'scramble' to form Local Enterprise Partnerships and moves to save the South West's regional planning evidence base.

Consultations on Marine Planning & Licensing, the English Regional Growth Fund, and the Trans-European Transport Network

To begin with the government consultations, most of which are part of work set in progress by the previous Labour administration. On 21 July three separate, but related consultations stemming from the Marine & Coastal Access Act, 2009, opened. HM Government, the Northern Ireland Executive, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government is consulting on a Draft Marine Policy Statement. This is umbrella strategic policy framework for the whole marine spatial planning process. Within its 125 pages, the documentation contains the Draft MPS itself, nine consultation questions and a 'non-technical summary' of the Appraisal of Sustainability and the Impact Assessment [Habitats]. The MPS is both very broad and generic in content , but three particular aspects are worthy of note here. In terms of cross-border planning it is said that the various UK administrations are committed to the co-ordination of the process across administrative boundaries, including activities which extend across national or Marine Plan area boundaries. In this respect, the Severn Estuary represents a major example, with complex issues to resolve. Here, the sharing of data and the co-ordination of plan production timing will be critical, as also will be access to the promised 'UK-wide marine evidence base'. Integration with terrestrial planning regimes is generally agreed to be of critical importance and it is said that both the MPS and the marine planning system will 'sit alongside and interact with' the former across the UK. It is hoped that this integration can be achieved, but there must be concern about attempting to get two very complex system to interact effectively, especially in the case of England, where the terrestrial planning system is currently undergoing major change ! Finally, on Integrated Coastal Zone Management , it is said that under the new system, all coastal areas and activities within them, will be managed in an integrated and holistic way, in line with the principles of ICZM. Here, it can only be hoped that both the various government agencies and the local authorities involved are up to this task !

DEFRA's consultation on the Marine Planning System for England is all about the new Marine Plans, to be prepared under the framework of the MPS by the new Marine Management Organisation (MMO) [more details on this can be found in the notes of the recent 'Planning for the Severn Estuary' conference my July 2010 Update Report]. Within the 88 page consultation document are specifications for the preparation, content and approval of the Marine Plans, which helpfully clarify points emerging within earlier consultations, but many [terrestrial] planners will no doubt be alarmed at how complicated this new system is already looking !

DEFRA and DECC's joint 47 page consultation on the New Marine Licensing System, which is to be 'launched' in Spring 2011, is a follow-up to the consultation of July – September 2009. This deals with the regulation and licensing processes under the [as yet to be put in place] MPS and Marine Plans. In terms of marine activities covered, fishing is not included as it is already regulated in existing EU and UK legislation, neither are oil and gas projects, which will continue to be licensed and 'enforced' by DECC, whilst large offshore energy installations will be subject to approval by the IPC, which will issue a 'deemed marine licence'. The other major exclusion from the new system is MOD activity, but just about everything else is covered. The good news is that this is essentially all about rationalising a diverse collection of existing licensing systems under the MMO to achieve a more consistent approach related to the Marine Plans. The less good news is that the 'flow diagrams' of the licence application process included as Annexes 1-4 hardly suggest that things will be any simpler !

It was announced in the Budget statement in June that a new English Regional Growth Fund of £1bn spread over the two years 2011/12 and 2012/13, was to be set up as part of 'reforms to help private sector enterprise thrive in areas of greater need'. The idea of this is to bring together currently highly fragmented funding streams to [better?] support sub-regional economic growth. The joint BIS, CLG and HM Treasury consultation [now closed] has sought views on how the money should be allocated and the refreshingly short document posed 5 'consultation questions' relating to proposals to allocate different elements of the funds in different ways ; the types of activities that should be supported ; the criteria for assessing bids ; the idea of a two-staged bidding process relating to each of the two years ; and the idea that 'in an effort to avoid short-termism' the fund should form the basis of a more long-term government support system. It has already been decided that bids, which are expected to come in the main from the newly-established Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP's), will be assessed by a new 'Independent' panel chaired by Lord Heseltine. This will recommend allocations to the Government, though which of the three departments involved – BIS, CLG & HM Treasury, will carry the most weight in final decisions is not clear. It is reassuring to note that certain critical functions and projects (RDA based in most cases) will have their funding protected during the 'transition period' leading into the new system, though its not so clear what form of access to European funding, important in a region such as the South West, will be available beyond 2011/12. More details on all this are promised in the forthcoming White Paper on ' sub-national economic growth' and the Localism Bill. See below for more on the Local Enterprise Partnerships, including progress on their creation nationally and in the South West.

Consultation on the Future of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) was launched by the DfT in early August. This is related to a European Commission review of the TEN-T programme which pre-dates the arrival of the New Labour administration as well as the new UK Coalition Government. The complex programme [no doubt meat and drink to strategic transport planners] dates from 1996, with the singularly ambitious aim of eventually integrating land, sea and air transport infrastructure networks across the Community. There are currently 30 'Priority Projects' which have received EU funding in addition to national, four of which are in the UK (eg. the West Coast Main Line) though none has any bearing on the South West. The region does however feature in the 'Networks' element of the initiative – with three identified stretches of trunk road (eg A38 Exeter-Plymouth); certain sections of the rail system (eg, Exeter-Penzance); all the main ports ; and the main airports, defined as 'international connecting points' or 'regional accessibility points'.

The programme overall involves very large amounts of money, of which the EU contribution is about 30%. Eg. funding for the main 'Trans-European Network' for the period 2007 – 2013 is 390 billion euros and for the 30 Priority Projects 154 billion euros. The proposal, which is the subject of the consultation, is to make TEN-T the basis for network planning across the Community rather than just for funding bids and allocations, though it is difficult to see transport and spatial planning authorities, let alone member state governments, remaining enthusiastic unless the prospect of substantial EU funding remains as well.

Calls for evidence by Commons Select Committees

Abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies

The Commons Communities & Local Government Committee has launched an inquiry into the implications of the abolition of RSS's in England. The main focus is on the implications for house building of the abandonment of regional targets and the likely effectiveness of the Government's plans to incentivise 'local communities'. Further clarification of the latter has not, as yet, been forthcoming ! The Committee is also considering three other important areas. Firstly, the arrangements which should be put in place to ensure co-operation between local planning authorities on other matters formerly covered by the RSS's , eg. waste, minerals, flooding, the natural environment and renewable energy. [oddly

transport is not mentioned by the Committee, though perhaps this matter is being left to the Commons Transport Committee – see below ?].

Secondly, linkages with the new Local Enterprise Partnerships and the suggestion that these new bodies should fulfil a planning function and thirdly, the future of the regional 'evidence base'. In this respect, the Committee is to consider how all this data should be preserved and made available to local authorities and what arrangements should be put in place to ensure effective up-dating of that research and the provision for further research on matters which 'cross local authority boundaries' [see below for measures now being taken to preserve the RSS evidence base in the South West]

Transport and the economy

In what appears to be something of a follow-up to the Eddington Report of December 2006, of the same name, the Commons Transport Select Committee has launched an inquiry. The stated purpose of this is to see whether 'conditions' have changed since Eddington and to consider what the priorities [for strategic transport policy and investment] should now be in the light of the new Government's cuts to many transport projects and it's stated intention to prioritise those schemes which support economic growth. The 2006 report concluded that the priorities for investment should be reducing congestion in urban areas and projects in key inter-urban corridors and at key 'international gateways' (major ports and airports). It could be argued that, for the South West, these are still the priorities, but this could be meaningless in the light of recent decisions already made, such as that to scrap rail electrification, and without the backing of an adopted regional transport strategy in the RSS.

Localism and the decentralisation of public services

The Commons CLG Select Committee has launched an inquiry into the implications of the new Government's drive for more 'localism' and decentralisation, bearing in mind that it is largely local government that is expected to put all this into practice ! In an ambitious list, the Committee is to consider specifically – what are, or should be, the limits of 'localism' ; the extent to which decentralisation leads to more effective public service delivery [does the centralisation involved in the recent reorganisations in Cornwall and Wiltshire also imply improved service delivery ?] ; the lessons for decentralisation from the last Government's 'Total Place' initiative [what is the experience of this, in practice, in the South West ?] ; local government's role in decentralised model of public service delivery ; the extent to which localism should extend to 'other local agents' [such as ?] ; the relationship between decentralisation and cost savings in services and the effective targeting of cuts in services [such planning !] ; arrangements for the oversight of local authority performance and accountability [in the light, partly, of the proposed abolition of the Audit Commission !?] ; and, the actions needed on the part of 'Whitehall departments' to achieve effective public service delivery.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

Proposals for new Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP's) to effectively take over much of the work currently done by the RDA's, were set out in the June Budget and followed up with an invitation to 'local authority leaders and business leaders' to submit proposals for LEP's in their area. This is seen by the Government as part of the work to 'reform our system of sub-national economic development'[a kind of SNR mark 2, except that the Labour Government saw sub-national as meaning regional] At the same time, a review of RDA functions has begun, which, so far, suggests that some of these functions are best led 'nationally', eg. inward investment, sector leadership, responsibility for business support, innovation and access to finance , whilst others can be fulfilled 'locally' [by LEP's in the main ?] and without the need to get involved in Regional Strategy work !

The Government sees the role of LEP's as providing strategic leadership in their areas, setting out local economic priorities, having a 'clear vision' and as having a 'remit' to 'rebalance the economy towards the private sector'. It is envisaged that in fulfilling their role LEP's will ' tackle issues such as planning and housing, local transport and infrastructure priorities, employment and enterprise and the transition to the low carbon economy' [why is planning seen as an 'issue' ?] It is also envisaged that in doing all of this, they will liaise with universities and colleges. There have also been vague references to the need to recognise tourism as an important economic driver, though many in this region may now consider this to have a hollow ring to it in the light of the recent announcement that Tourism South West is to be abolished by April 2011 !

In the meantime, the process to establish LEP's moves on apace. By the 6 September 2010 deadline, the Government had received 56 proposals. Seven of these are in the South West, based almost entirely on combinations of existing County and Unitary Authority areas :

Bournemouth, Dorset & Poole
Devon, Plymouth & Torbay
'Empowering Enterprise'- Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly
Gloucester, Swindon & Wiltshire
Heart of the South West
South Somerset & East Devon
West of England

It was perhaps inevitable that the rush to form these alliances would see fractious disputes within a number of regions, including the South West and, as an additional complication, it is only very recently that the Government has accepted that LEP's could include representatives of the voluntary and community sector, as well as local government and business. In this connection, the South West Forum (the umbrella organisation for voluntary and community bodies in the region), has produced a 'ten point action agenda' which the emerging LEP's are being asked to adopt.

So, what about CAA's, LAA's and LSP's ?

Discussion of LEP's prompts a stock take of a number of related 'acronym' initiatives. Comprehensive Area Agreements (CAA's) have been abolished and with them certain LSP 'core work' and some of the dynamic for bringing partners together locally has been lost. The future for Local Area Agreements (LAA's) is presently uncertain, as is that of the related 'Total Place' initiative. There has been no specific government announcement about Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP's) to date, though many of the bodies involved see the move to more 'localism' as likely to strengthen the LSP role.

Saving the South West RSS evidence base

The Government has been unable to 'revoke' the huge amount of material that constitutes the background 'evidence base' to recent regional planning, but has said virtually nothing about its future, or even its status. In this region, Stuart Todd of South West Councils [which still exists, though not as the regional planning body] has been instrumental in ensuring that the evidence base behind the draft South West RSS is being preserved. Both the former Regional Assembly and Strategic Leaders' Board / SW Councils websites have been 'captured' by the British Library National Web Archive, so ensuring that the pages and their extensive content are preserved for future use. See www.webarchive.org.uk/ukwa/target/55148545/source/search for the former and 55148544 for the latter. These archived pages will not be affected by any changes made to the SW Councils website from now on, which will remain live until further notice. In addition, it is planned to produce a data disk for deposit with UWE and there may also be transfer of material on to the 'Planning Module' of the SWRO.

Let's hear it for the South West !

Committee members should now have been emailed a copy of the South West Stakeholders position statement / working paper completed in August. This has been compiled from contributions by members of the SWS Executive Committee, including material from your Policy Officer [who is now representing the RTPi South West on this Committee. This is both a 'rallying cry' for a better deal for the region and a set of 16 actions seen to be required from the perspective of a body with a unique regional perspective things.

Comments on this would be welcome. Circulated in addition is a copy of the minutes of SWS Executive Committee meeting held in Bristol on 23 July 10 to help members get a flavour of the process in which the RTPi SW is now involved.

Geoff Walker
RTPi South West Policy & Media Officer SWPolicy@rtpi.org.uk
15/09/10