

RTPI SW Regional Management Board & Regional Activities Committee
4 March 2011

South West Policy & Media Officer Update Report

Introduction

There is, as usual, no shortage of things to report on the policy front, including the consultation on the revised Draft NPS's for Energy Infrastructure and on the Government White Paper on public health in England, 'Healthy Lives, Healthy People'. Also of note is the revised PPG 13 Transport [yes, it still is a PPG !] which slipped out quietly on Bank Holiday Monday, 3 January. In addition, of course, is the progress of the Decentralisation & Localism Bill through Parliament, in connection with which, the response of the RTPI South West has now been submitted to Botolph Lane to form part of a national co-ordinated body of evidence.

This update also includes a 'stock take' of the current position on Local Enterprise Partnerships and the Regional Growth Fund and on progress with getting LDF documents in place in the South West. The stock take indicates a worrying lack of progress, so I end on a more optimistic note on both the national economic situation and prospects for the region.

Revised Draft Energy National Policy Statements

My December 2010 Update referred to the further consultation on the six Draft National Policy Statements. The RTPI's full national response [24 January 2011] has suggested that many of the issues raised by the original drafts, published back in November 2009, remain unresolved. There is said to be still a lack of clear spatial guidance and still an inadequate distinction between background evidence, practice guidance and actual policy. The 'final' NPS's are awaited. In the meantime, planning work on the South West's two new nuclear power stations and massive overhead transmission line scheme [see my 21 January Update] continues and the serious consideration stage by the IPC team in Bristol draws ever nearer !

Health, wellbeing and planning

Town planning has its roots, one hundred years or so ago, in concerns about urban living conditions and public health. Such concerns remain, consciously or subconsciously part of the planning professionals' mindset, but as the decades have passed, the growing 'silos' of public administration, professional expertise and resources, have conspired to see planning and public health drift apart. The Government White Paper 'Healthy Lives, Healthy People : Our strategy for public health in England' Cm 7985, published by the Dept of Health on 30 November 2010, shows signs – even if they are little ones – that things are coming together again at national government level.

The background to this, from a planning point of view, can be traced to work by the RTPI culminating in 'Good Practice Guidance Note 5 : Delivering Healthy Communities', June 2009 and the design orientated work by CABE reflected in its 'Future Health : sustainable places for health and well-being' report of November 2009. At the same time, in the South West, pioneering work at the UWE World Health Organisation [WHO] Healthy Cities Research Centre by planners Hugh Barton , Marcus Grant and others, together with 'Planning for Delivery' workshops organised by South West Councils, at which health, sport and recreation and planning professionals came together to help work towards some kind of 'joined-up' policy action, are just some examples of such 'coming together'. In national strategic policy terms, Planning Policy Statement 1 [2005], states that plan policies should ' deliver safe , healthy and attractive places to live ; and, support the promotion of health and well being by making provision for physical activity' [para. 16] . In sub-national strategic policy terms, the late departed draft South West RSS, contained a policy on promoting [better] health and stressed the importance of spatial planning in making it easier for people to lead healthier lives and make lifestyle choices leading to a beneficial impact on health. In local policy terms, core strategies are now making the same connections – 'Objective 6' of the recently published Bath & North East Somerset Draft Core Strategy ...' to plan for development that promotes health and well being, so helping to reduce identified inequalities', is probably typical.

On the face of it, the Public Health White Paper, which sets out plans to put local authorities at the heart of the public health system within the NHS, is simply more of the Government's 'localism' agenda and a follow-up to the White Paper of July 2010 'Equality & Excellence : liberating the NHS' proposing radical reorganisation. It does however contain important messages about a very important role of spatial planning which demonstrate joined-up policy thinking.

The White Paper is driven by concerns about growing obesity, sexually-transmitted infections, a relatively large population of drug users, rising levels of harm from alcohol and lives claimed by smoking, as well as persistent 'health inequalities', both geographically and across what is politely termed the 'social gradient'. It is also driven by a belief that 'promoting healthier lifestyles by Whitehall diktat and nannying' has not worked and that central control should give way to local control, giving local government the freedom, responsibility and funding [with ring-fenced funding from within the overall NHS budget] to innovate and develop 'approaches appropriate to their areas'. Things are to be simplified nationally, with a new, dedicated and integrated body to be called 'Public Health England' [part of the Department of Health] taking the place of existing complex structures. All of this is to be supported by work with industry [ie. the private sector] and 'other partners' to promote healthy living and this is where planning comes in.

It is perhaps a pity that the White Paper fails to recognise the contributions made by town and country planning, over many years, to bring about better living conditions and especially housing as one of the past 'formidable achievements of public health'. The role is at least acknowledged in terms of contributing to a better environment, cleaner air, improved living conditions, encouragement of healthier lifestyles [including walking and cycling instead of travelling by car], and providing opportunities for sport and recreation, and for all, not just the richest in society. There is also reference to 'designing communities for active ageing', lifetime homes, protecting green spaces and improving access to land for people to grow their own food. Refreshing government joined-up thinking is also evident in references to health and 'local sustainable transport' to be supported by the DfT's £560 million Local Sustainable Transport Fund [more details are promised in a forthcoming Local Transport White Paper]. Particular examples are cited such as the 'Cycle Towns' and the 'Healthy Towns' initiatives and Swindon's successful 'Workplace Cycle Challenge' which attracted over 850 participants, is specifically identified.

The Marmot Review ['Fair Society, Healthy Lives : Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post 2010' , February 2010], on which much of the analysis in the White Paper appears to be based, argued that climate change is 'one of the biggest public health threats of the 21st century', with the potential to increase health inequalities. The RTPI has of course already addressed the matter of dealing with climate change in its action plan 'Planning to Live with Climate Change' launched at the 2009 Planning Convention, whilst three years earlier, the TCPA and Friends of the Earth jointly published a statement linking action on climate change with delivering 'sustainable communities' [TCPA / FOE Planning Policy Statement 26, September 2006] It is somewhat disappointing therefore to note that the list of 'community responses' to climate change in the White Paper – promoting active travel ; 'designating' green spaces accessible to all socio-economic groups, to improve health and quality of life, to enable communities to grow their own food and to offer some protection from heatwaves and flooding ; 'embedding' new ways of sustainable living and working ; community projects to harness renewable energy ; and spatial planning to 'promote local ownership and occupation of public space' [?] – fails to properly reflect the essence of spatial planning's contribution. There is no mention of development plans or the appropriate distribution / allocation of land uses, or measures to protect the environment.

To be fair however, there is reference to the role of planning policy when the White Paper goes on to talk about new localism. 'DCLG will support local areas with streamlined planning policy that aligns social, economic and environmental and health priorities into one place. Health considerations are an important part of planning policy and DCLG will consider how to take this forward in the new National Planning Framework' [para 3.35]. The first sentence here suggests a desire for more joined-up thinking, even if its actual meaning is unclear ! Incorporation of all this within the awaited NPF suggests a major challenge for government policy drafters !

Government plans for trees and forestry have been very much in the news recently and there may just be a connection between this and what is said in the White Paper ! DEFRA, we are told, is to 'lead a campaign to increase tree planting, particularly in areas where increased tree cover would help improve residents' quality of life'. Good air quality and the reduction of noise pollution appear to be linked to this and DEFRA again is to publish information about local air quality and noise levels [particularly in urban areas one assumes] so 'empowering local government and communities to take action' [whatever that means]. Then, in what appears to be something of an afterthought, the same paragraph [3.37] informs us that there is growing interest in promoting access to so called 'blue spaces', such as inland waterways and 'yellow spaces' – a new term for beaches and coastline ?

[Thanks to Stephen Hewitt, Chair of Creating Excellence, and Planner with the Healthy Urban Team, Bristol City Council, for making available material used in the above section of this report]

Residential parking spaces and parking charges policies to be locally determined

On 3 January [a public holiday] , in a move consistent with the Government's wish to devolve more policy responsibility down to local planning authorities, DCLG announced an adjustment to three paragraphs of an otherwise unadjusted PPG 13 Transport dating from 2001. The removal of the national policy requirement to restrict the number of residential parking spaces in new developments and of the previous instruction to councils to push up parking charges, appears to have caused both surprise and confusion among professionals on the ground. The move has been seen by many to conflict directly with entreaties in both this PPG and in other policy documents to reduce reliance on the use of cars. It has also been pointed out that, whilst the opportunity has quickly been taken to remove the paragraph referring to the [about to be abolished] Regional Transport Strategy, the document still refers to PPG's 6, 11 and 12 , all of which have long been replaced !

The Decentralisation & Localism Bill

The second reading of the Bill took place in the Commons on 17 January at which a number of the points made in the Institute's MP's briefing were raised. The following day the Bill was passed to Public Bill Committee, together with a call for written evidence. On 27 January, our new Chief Executive, Trudi Elliot, gave evidence to the Committee emphasising that changes still needed to be made in order to create an effective planning system under the new arrangements. At the same session, Bob Neill, Greg Clark and Andrew Stunell, told the Committee that the Government was still open to amendments to strengthen the requirements for 'communities' to consult others, as well as the other way round. It was already becoming clear however, that on the key principles of the Government was determined to stand its ground.

On 31 January, the Government released estimates of the scale of the new neighbourhood planning operation based on a DCLG 'impact assessment' report. There were said to be 7,618 relevant 'neighbourhoods' in England, based on a count of electoral wards and it was anticipated that 1,910 Neighbourhood Plans would be created within the first five years following the Bill's implementation, whilst after 11 years, 55% of neighbourhoods would have a plan in place. Quite how such precise figures emerged from such a highly speculative exercise is not clear ! The same report also came up with an estimated cost of producing each Neighbourhood Plan of between £17,000 and £63,000. These costs would have to be borne by local planning authorities, who could, potentially, be handling several different plans simultaneously. How 'watertight' the Government's currently stated intention to reimburse authorities for 'extra' work generated by such plans, will turn out to be must remain in doubt ! Latest indications are that the Government sees the Royal Assent coming in November 2011.

I have very recently become a member of the Institute's ' Localism Bill Reference Group', which will be commenting on Draft RTPI Amendments prior to their submission to the Bill Committee. eg. on the NPPF.

A slow and patchy start to Local Enterprise Partnerships in the South West

The new Local Enterprise Partnerships [LEP's] launched in the June 2010 Budget as a means of taking over much of the work currently done by the RDA's, have now just about become a reality. 62 bids received by the September deadline, following an invitation issued jointly by the Business and Communities Secretaries, resulted in 24 Government approvals [announced in the 'Local Growth' White Paper in October], whilst further approvals since mean that there are now 30 such partnerships in place. BIS appears pleased with progress so far, claiming that, geographically, these cover over 70% of England's population, 1.4 million businesses [how is this figure arrived at ?] and 16 million employees. However, compared to the rest of England, LEP 'coverage' in the South West is very limited – just two partnerships approved, for the West of England [where something along these lines was already in place anyway] and Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly. Almost without exception, the LEP's are based on combinations of existing local authority areas, with some 'city region' variants [eg. Leeds and 'Oxfordshire'] and one whole region in the shape of the North East. Also, the initiatives have almost all been local authority driven, with limited input from 'business', despite the Government's intentions. As set out in my 24 September 2010 Update, a very ambitious list of expected roles awaits the new partnerships, including participation in the development of national planning policy ; involvement in the consideration of strategic planning applications ; strategic housing delivery ; and involvement, directly or indirectly, in bidding for Regional Growth Fund [RGF] monies. This list is wider even than the ' five statutory purposes' of the RDA's!

The nature of these first partnerships suggests great variation in what is being put in place to do all this. As Tony Fyson has pointed out [Planning 28 January 2011] , they do not seem to conform to any 'standards' in terms of the areas they cover, have limited democratic legitimacy and will not be eligible for government funding for their

administration. He has also suggested that the spatial impact of their activities, which will impact on the nature of their bids for RGF support, and the location of development within their boundaries, has been ignored. The Institute of Civil Engineers sees limited compulsion for LEP's to address matters such as strategic infrastructure planning and wonders how altruistic they will be in their aspirations: the temptation always being there to gain something 'locally' at the expense of neighbours.

The West of England LEP established its 'interim board' in January and at the end of the same month held a workshop at which board members were joined by 150+ individuals representing different private and public sector organisations, to 'help prioritise the work of the Partnership' and 'start to contribute to delivery'. Perhaps this was, in part, a response to criticism that the body was simply the same 'old' four Unitary Councils together with 'selected' chambers of commerce, with no representation of wider civil society?

Meanwhile, at the other end of the region, the Cornwall & Isles of Scilly LEP, also essentially local authority driven, has been establishing its board and working practices, including a joint commitment by members of the business sector to 'work together'. Those concerned about the need for effective consultation and action in the interests of the wider region, will have been pleased to note that the LEP does not see itself as a 'Fortress Cornwall' initiative! There is talk of a willingness 'to work with partners across the Tamar as well as within Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly'.

Other potential South West LEP's are in the process of putting bids together including 'Devon & Somerset' [previous bids from both authorities, together with others and alone respectively, having been unsuccessful]; 'Wiltshire, but not including Swindon'; Dorset, perhaps together with Bournemouth and Poole; and Gloucestershire [on its own]. There has been a considerable amount of acrimony between bodies involved in all this and some might reasonably have concluded that there would be an important 'refereeing' role here for the South West Government Office, but of course the plan is to see this closed by 31 March this year [together with the eight other regional Government Offices]. However, 'BIS Local' is to remain as a 'business resource' within each region! The RDA's are to cease operation by March 2012, with 'formal closures' happening later in the summer, though the Government has now realised that there may well be a need to set up a 'residuary body' to manage those RDA assets that have not been 'disposed of' by that date. Those with longer memories will recall that such an arrangement applied when the New Town Development Corporations were closed down, and when the GLC was abolished.

Regional Growth Fund bids

BIS has so far been somewhat secretive about the nature and distribution of the first round of bids for support from the £1.4 billion Regional Growth Fund, but it did announce, on 25 January, that 'nearly 450 bids' had been received by the 21 January 2011 deadline. It can be assumed that many of these originated either directly or indirectly from the fledgling LEP's. The bids are now being assessed by the 'Independent Advisory Panel' chaired by Lord Heseltine, which will, in turn advise a 'panel of ministers' chaired by Nick Clegg.

Getting the South West's 'Local Plans' in place

Progress on getting 'sound' Core Strategies in place in the region – already very slow compared to many other areas – appears to have stalled following the change of Government and other announcements during last summer. 'The RTPI believes that the primacy of the local plan'...[the term 'local plan' seems to have crept back into the English planning vocabulary since the new Government's reluctance to refer to LDF's and Core Strategies] '... must be clearly explicit in the Act and will work with its members, Government and other bodies to secure a swift and full coverage of local plans in England'. So said paragraph 13 of the Institute's January briefing for MP's on the Localism Bill. This is of course even more important with the summary abolition of RSS policies and most of the last few 'retained' Structure Plan policies.

As at May 2010, out of the 43 relevant planning authorities in the South West, only seven had Core Strategies in place, together with some 13 other Development Plan Documents [DPD's]. By January this year [PINS website 11.01.11], no further no further strategies had been added and just two more DPD's had been put in place. Since then, a 'raft' of Area Action Plan DPD's has been approved for South Hams, bringing the total in the region up to 20, three quarters of them accounted for by Plymouth and South Hams!

Submitted Core Strategies were still under Government consideration following PINS hearings for South Wiltshire [former Salisbury District], Bristol, West Devon, and the West of England Partnership [Joint Waste Core Strategy.]

These and a number of other authorities, put the progress of their Core Strategies on hold whilst they digested the implications of the new Government's actions : not least the removal of the new housing targets prescribed in the Secretary of State's Proposed Changes to the Draft South West RSS. In the case of the first three authorities listed above, hearings that had already begun were closed down for a while in order to allow for reconsideration of policies, before being reopened. Other Core Strategies are in the process of being prepared, across the South West, for submission to PINS , but the estimated timetables typically extend to the end of 2011 or well into 2012. Unless things can be speeded up considerably from now onwards, the prospects for 'swift and full coverage' are not good.

Meanwhile, DCLG has been doing its best to advise local planning authorities on what can now be assumed to constitute the wider, strategic context. Will the 'ghosts' of former RSS and Structure Plan policies live on to haunt authorities in their LDF work? Will planning inquiries have to keep hearing references to 'former' RSS or Structure Plan policies ? In its consultations with one major South West planning authority, DCLG talks about it being time 'to tidy up the planning landscape by removing policies from abolished Structure Plans', whilst at the same time suggesting that groups of authorities preparing 'local plans' and seeking to establish a context for 'areas larger than local', might draw upon former Structure Plan policies to help them plan more strategically !

Reasons for optimism !

Amidst all this less than encouraging news, there are some causes for optimism, both nationally and for the South West. In the Daily Telegraph Business section of 1 February 2011, Jeremy Warner essayed ten such causes. The world economy is booming [though perhaps a note of caution on this is now called for due to events in North Africa and the Middle East which have since taken place !] ; the US economy is growing again ; an 'economic miracle' is taking place in Germany – Germans are now changing to become avid consumers ; the Euro crisis is abating ; the banking system is returning to health ; business, now more flush with cash, only awaits the right signals to invest it ; employment prospects overall are improving (despite the 600,000 jobs forecast to be lost in the public sector); boosted by a weak pound, manufacturing is experiencing something of a renaissance ; after two years of 'famine', UK dividend payments are now expected to rise strongly ; and – more in hope than expectation – a Government stung by criticisms that its been too busy addressing the deficit, may be about to produce a package of supply-side reforms and tax incentives in the March Budget.

A focus on prospects in the region in particular was provided at the first RTPi South West Conference of 2011 in Bristol, which had retailing and employment as its two themes. Andy Wood, Head of Infrastructure and Partnerships at the South West Regional Development Agency, reminded delegates that the region had a number of inherent advantages over other parts of England. He quoted Prof Dave King of Anglia Ruskin University in saying that ' the South West is a region where the quality of the environment attracts people and the strength of the economy attracts employees'. Particular reasons for economic optimism, he suggested, included the continued attraction of the area for retirement, which would foster economic growth in such things as health and elderly care ; tourism was expected to grow by 40% over the next 10 years ; prospects for agriculture remained relatively strong [despite on-going issues of rural deprivation] ; prospects for the renewable energy sector, as well as spin-off from further nuclear power generation, were exceptionally good ; and the region's strong further and higher education sectors would ensure that its resident workforce maintained a higher level of skills than the average.

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