

## **Strategic Planning – Where Now?**

The question of 'where now' for strategic planning was the subject of a half day conference organised by the RTPI North East and held in Durham on 16 November. David Marshall reports on the discussion.

Consideration of 'where now' for strategic planning was especially topical taking place the day after the Localism Act received Royal Assent. Despite some concerns around the planning vacuum left by the demise of the Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), the messages conveyed by each of the speakers were largely positive, the key one being that strategic planning will continue to exist but in different forms and using different techniques to what we may have used in the past.

Chair for the session, Richard Arkell set the scene for the discussion by reminding the audience that effective strategic planning is an essential prerequisite of sustainable development. Whilst the abolition of the RSS has created a planning vacuum, a real concern was the damaging inertia caused by the resulting hiatus. Far from planning holding back development, it was the uncertainty arising from the lack of a policy framework. However, the CLG committee had acknowledged the importance of 'larger than local' planning and representations by the RTPI and others had secured inclusion of the 'Duty to Co-operate' in the new legislation. Whether this duty is an adequate substitute for strategic planning is the question that formed a backdrop to the subsequent discussions.

Phil Barnes from NLP developed the discussion. The old RSS gave clear regional focus around decisions in relation to how we get new schools, hospitals, roads etc in the right places. Looking back it felt warmly reassuring to Local Authority planners. The RSS was about control but unpopular decisions could always be blamed on the 'nasty' region. Now there was an element of fear which at best causes lack of confidence, at worst decisions that avoid criticism.

Among the principles of the new regime was the need for systems where people feel closer to decisions. An IPSOS/MORI poll found that only 15% feel they can influence planning decisions. On the other hand other research showed that most people concerned about the impact of traffic.

There was also a need to speed up the planning process although this brought with it an increased difficulty in prioritising difficult investment decisions. Interestingly almost all of Phil's examples were transport or roads. However decisions have cross boundary effects and an example of social infrastructure where Northumberland councillors were worried about consequences of schools in Newcastle was cited as an example.

The 'Duty to Cooperate' will require Local Authorities and other bodies to cooperate involving constructive and active engagement. This could take many forms including joint planning approaches and joint planning documents. They would need to prove having cooperated at the EIP. However, consultation with the LEP would be hard when the North East LEP doesn't even have an approved Board at present so that its approach to strategic planning is likely to be some way off.

Voluntary cooperation does not have a great record. As an example, successive agreed housing allocations for Newcastle and North Tyneside highlighted just how difficult this had proved in the past.

If the Core Strategy is in place, Neighbourhood Planning should be straightforward in theory. However there is a perception that Neighbourhood Planning will stop housing development and a succession of articles from the Newcastle Journal were used to illustrate the point. This led Phil to suggest that for the next 10 years strategic planning will be a battle.

In this context it is likely that we will require to develop and acquire new techniques for engaging with neighbourhoods and individuals. To illustrate this Phil outlined the results of NLP research on Positive Engagement. This looked at who objects to planning proposals, how they do it and why. Rather than traditional approaches based on Socio-economic groupings, respondents were grouped along lines used extensively in marketing such as 'professional rewards', 'active retirement' or 'terraced melting pot'. Each grouping wanted different and quite distinctive approaches to planning although a common theme was that most objections related to traffic! The use of such more sophisticated research techniques is likely to become much more prevalent as the new regime evolves and develops.

John Holmes then took us on a tour of the evolving structure for the promotion of development and regeneration. Whilst previous models were now seen as unaffordable and things will never be the same again there was a lot of laudable sentiment and fine rhetoric behind the new legislation. However the Government are not backing up those fine words with resources. It is especially saddening that the regeneration industry in the region has been dismantled so quickly.

John gave a round up of progress with the Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs). There are 38 LEPs approved to date to date. However, only two of these have long term strategic plans in place. The performance of these is widely differing with Tees Valley being among the better examples. In Yorkshire, the LEPs are close to recreating a Yorkshire regional strategy. Other examples of good practice cited include the Sunderland Economic Masterplan being led by Software City and the University of Sunderland.

A more detailed local example of good practice was provided by Neil Wilkinson of Gateshead Council who outlined the joint working on planning being undertaken with Newcastle. In this respect the Newcastle Gateshead joint plan is ahead of the game despite work having started under the previous regime. The joint approach involves taking responsibility for contentious decisions, the local newspaper that day carrying a story of a stormy public meeting in Gosforth the previous evening providing topical evidence of this. As other speakers had mentioned, the RSS was an umbrella where they could blame the regional planners in such instances.

Issues facing the joint approach include the tensions arising from giving greater powers to neighbourhoods but trying to deliver the service with less staff, less resources and less authority.

Rounding off the event, Nic Best from CPRE gave an outline of the new structure from the point of view of an environmental campaign group. CPRE and others had enjoyed a

seat at the table in preparing the RSS and, whilst not always satisfied with all outcomes, always felt they had a fair hearing. There is a need a planning system that can be seen as trusted and fair. The changes have raised the question of to whom is it fair. Interestingly, CPRE which had been seen as anti-development under the old regime have recently been portrayed, along with the National Trust as 'left wing activists'.

## Summary

In summarising and reflecting on a fascinating and stimulating discussion, the following key points emerge:

- Duty to Cooperate may not be an adequate substitute for strategic planning – it will be open to wide interpretation and there is a need for further guidance;
- In a system where strategic planning is a more informal process without firm guidance, strategic planning is set to be a battle for the next 10 years;
- Strategic Planning will still exist but not in the form we know it (no reinvention of the RSS) and it will require very different ways of working for planners;
- It is likely to need less 'evidence' and more commonsense;
- We need to get better at consultation, particularly certain groups (NLP) research;
- It needs to combined with different approaches to regeneration although at present many of the LEPs have not got their act together;
- There are already some very good examples of 'larger than local' working eg Newcastle-Gateshead;
- Interest groups and other third sector organisations can provide a valuable resource and input to the process.

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