

## **South West Policy & Media Officer Update Report**

### **The end of a traumatic year**

2011 was a traumatic year for the English planning system in general and for the concept of strategic planning at the regional level in particular. Indeed, the very word 'regional' has been hastily removed from central government's documentation and operational titles wherever possible. At the very end of the year, the Localism Act put the legislation in place to drive the Coalition Government's 'Localism' agenda, with the planning system at its heart. The South West, as other regions, has seen the 'demolition' of regional strategic spatial and economic planning, while at the same time, the Government has been putting into place the building blocks of a new, statutory, neighbourhood planning system at the local/community level superimposed upon the existing, 2004 Act, development plan system at this level. Unlike other regions however, the South West's Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) found itself 'revoked' before it was even in place, whilst at the local level, most local planning authorities here have yet to see the 2004 system through its first round in the shape of an adopted Core Strategy [what the new Government now wants to call the 'Local Plan' just like the pre 2004 days !]. In the meantime, little progress has been made in easing the desperate shortage of affordable housing – a particularly acute problem in the South West.

In place of regional spatial and economic planning, in the form of the RSS and RES, has come a collection of new sub-regional government backed initiatives, said to better reflect 'real economic geographies', in the form of the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP's), the resurrected idea of Enterprise Zones and, more recently, other initiatives based on the idea of 'city regions'. The South West's six LEP's were all in place by the end of the year. Whilst prospects and performance of all this remain uncertain, some positives can be identified from 2011. The Government has been attempting to get to grips with strategic infrastructure planning in the shape of the first ever National Infrastructure Plan, issued in up-dated form in November and, for the South West in particular, some positive infrastructure outcomes have been announced, such as the £5bn Great Western rail electrification, launched in July [even if it is only going as far as Bristol in this region ], the Kingskerswell By-pass scheme in South Devon, and 'Transport Packages' for Bristol, Bath and Western Super Mare. It has also made an attempt to rationalise the growing mountain of often conflicting national planning policy and guidance. Though whether the new draft National Planning Policy Framework is the answer is, as yet, to be proven. Another 'positive' has been the unprecedented high profile which planning has received in the national media as a result of the reaction, by the Institute and others, to key provisions in the draft NPPF.[ although the killing off of regional strategic planning has not caught the media's attention in anything like the same way !] Finally, although alternative energy is an area where opposing views have become polarised, there is no doubt that planners in the South West have shown leadership and innovation in the definition of policy for and the development management of wind turbine and photo-voltaic array proposals, particularly in Cornwall.

### **Another year of transition ?**

Bearing in mind the many unexpected things that have happened over the last 18 months and a suspicion that this Government, on its mission to promote economic growth, has been making up the details of how it intends to do this as it goes along, predicting what is going to happen in 2012 is probably unwise. How many of the various 'growth' and development initiatives, such as the New Homes Bonus and the central government funding promised to LEP's and to those cities willing to make 'individual deals' is hard to predict at this stage. Although the latter part of 2011 has seen a flurry of activity among the South West's local planning authorities on the draft Core Strategy submission front, it remains to be seen how much of the region will actually be covered by up-to-date development plan policy by the end of 2012. What we can say is that another year of transition is in prospect

### **Recent national policy events and South West topic updates**

This report now goes on to look at the 'final' Ports National Policy Statement; the National Infrastructure Plan; the Mary Portas Report; the RTPI's national responses to the Government consultations on Elected Mayors and Draft Neighbourhood Planning Regulations; and the 'Unlocking growth in cities' initiative.

There are then updates on topics of particular relevance to our region – the latest work of South West Stakeholders in ‘joining up for sustainable growth’ ; the future of the South West Observatory ; energy and low carbon developments; and progress in getting Core Strategies in place.

### **Final Ports National Policy Statement published at last**

Two years after the first draft appeared on the scene, the ‘final’ Ports NPS was published by the Government [ DfT] at the end of October 2011. Readers will recall that the original draft version was published by the previous administration together with a raft of draft energy NPS’s in order to provide strategic national policy for the then new 2008 Act IPC process. The RTPI SW responded at the time that, although the new framework was welcome, not only to support economic growth, but also to best ensure sustainable port development, in which the potential negative environmental impacts were acknowledged, certain critical things were missing. For example, it was not made clear how port development might link into a national policy for surface/land transport and this was seen as a major issue for the South West where there have long been shortcomings in the strategic transport network.

At 76 pages, the new document sits uncomfortably with the Government’s stated aim of simplifying national policy guidance [ the draft NPPF is after all only 58 pages long! ], but at the same time a detailed policy focus is missing. It is perhaps no surprise that this Government has confirmed the essentially free-market approach enshrined in the 2009 draft. It now sees a ‘compelling need’ for additional port capacity, both to support the growth of the national economy, boost local and regional economies [ reference to ‘regional’ is surely a mistake ! ] , and to support the development of offshore renewable energy schemes. It is seen as ‘urgent’ that major port developments are speeded through the IPC process and that such schemes should start with a presumption in favour of granting consent. By way of providing a context, the sections in the NPS on the role of ports in the UK economy and on the assessment of ‘need’ are useful, including references to the implications of the current economic downturn. In this context, the document suggests that, for ports, whilst the economic situation will delay developments for a number of years, it will not ultimately reduce the eventual levels of demand for port capacity.

The Port of Bristol is identified as one of the seven locations in England and Wales with significant potential capacity under existing planning consents [ plans for a new deep sea container facility, approved in September 2010 ]. Beyond this, the NPS remains devoid of any other site specific Government policy steer. Furthermore, there is still little or no information about how ports should be linked with hinterland road and rail infrastructure and the promised NPS on road and rail ‘national networks’ has yet to appear.

### **National Infrastructure Plan 2011**

An up-dated version of the 2010 first ever plan was published jointly by HM Treasury and Infrastructure UK on 29 November 2011, as part of the Chancellor’s Autumn Statement. This marks an important step forward in identifying central government priorities for major projects, with links now made between areas for housing growth and investment in key transport infrastructure. At the same time, as noted by the Institute in its initial response, few links have yet been made with business development and environmental protection.

The 2011 Autumn Statement and a DfT announcement on 14 December, between them signalled approval for 41 transport schemes nationally with a total value of £1.4bn. Of the 20 ‘LA Major’ schemes given approval in the Statement, the three in the South West are among the largest – the A380 Kingskerswell By-pass ( South Devon Link Road) between Newton Abbot and Torbay [ DfT funding of £76.4m towards a total cost of £109m] due for completion in December 2015 ; the Bristol Bus Rapid Transit between Ashton Vale and Temple Meads [ DfT funding of £34.5m towards a total of £41.5m ] due for completion by February 2015 ; and the South Bristol Link ( road & public transport to complete a number of long time ‘missing links’ in the area) [ DfT funding of £27.6m towards a total of £41.6m ] due for completion by May 2016.

In a Written Statement by recently appointed Transport Secretary Justine Greening, on 14 December, approval for a further 21 schemes was announced, four of which are in the South West – the Bristol North Fringe to Hengrove [ via the City centre] Bus Rapid Transit [ DfT funding of £51.1m towards a total of £92.9m ] ; the Camborne-Poole-Redruth Transport Package (new E – W link road from Camborne to Poole) [ DfT funding of £16.1m towards a total of £26.8m ] ; the Bath Transportation Package ( park & ride site extensions and bus priority schemes) [ DfT funding of £11.7m towards

a total of £28.6m ] ; and the Western Super Mare 'Western Package' ( transport improvements in and around the town, including improvements to M5 Junction 21 and to Worle Station) [ DfT funding of £10.4m towards a total of £15.0m]

### **Mary Portas reports**

The Mary Portas 'High Street Review' was published by BIS on 13 December, together with another, related, piece of Government research by BIS itself working with Genecon & Partners, titled 'Understanding High Street Performance'. The latter presents a raft of statistics to demonstrate what most planners and property professionals probably already knew – that the 'high street' [ read town/city centre] has been consistently losing ground to out-of-town retail investment over the last 10 years. While some high streets continue to thrive, a third of them are 'degenerating or failing'. Over the last 10 years, out-of-town floorspace has increased by 30%, whilst that in town centres has shrunk by 14% and it is estimated that, by 2014, less than 40% of retail spending will be on the high street. In the face of all this, some might question what has happened to the 'town centre first' policies so strongly promoted by both central government and local planning authorities ! It transpires that, since 2008, only one of the 146 out-of-town development proposals [ in England?] referred to the government has been called in. It might also be noted that the town centre planning policy as currently set out in the draft NPPF does little to provide real support or encouragement.

The Portas report [ at 55 pages, refreshingly concise and to the point] may have come too late ! The number of high street retail names going into administration is increasing alarmingly according to figures just published by Deloitte – 183 in 2011 compared to 165 in 2010 – with the trend predicted to continue in 2012, with a combination of sharp rent rises and falling sales being cited as a major cause. So, what is the prescription ? Mary's 'vision' is 'to breath economic and community life back into our high streets' and five main aims are set out, each of which has a chapter of the report devoted to it – to get town centres running like [successful] businesses ; to get the basics right to allow businesses to flourish ( realistic business rates, affordable car parking, removing red tape ) ; to level the playing field ( using strong town centre first policies, charging for parking at out-of-town centres ) ; to better define landlords' roles and responsibilities ( including helpful rent and lease activities and disincentives to leave shops vacant ) ; and, to give communities a greater say in what happens to their high street, with ideas being tested in a number of 'high street pilots'. These aims are 'fleshed out' in the form of no less than 28 specific recommendations, together with 'a few words of advice to Britain's shopkeepers' – something viewers of Mary's television programmes have become accustomed to ! The review has drawn on evidence from a wide range of organisations and individuals as well as a number of case studies, among which was Swindon town centre's initiative in reducing car parking charges. A Government response is promised 'this spring'.

### **Consultation on elected mayors**

My previous Update ( 2 December 2011) referred to the DCLG consultation document published in November and to the response being prepared by the RTPI South West. The latter has now been forwarded to the Institute in London. Bristol is the only city in the South West on the Government's list of 'England's 12 largest cities', and we have responded, both to the initiative in general and to the particular Bristol situation. The main points in this were that identifying candidates for elected mayors in terms of city or metropolitan borough council areas only appeared to ignore the realities of politics, policy making and service delivery within the wider urban conurbations or 'city regions' within which many of these areas sit. We also suggested that, for new elected mayors to have any real power, significant powers would have to be transferred over to them, including fiscal ones, and that 'visions' could be prepared under the existing system, as they had been in Plymouth and Torquay, for example, in the South West. The City of Bristol was seen as a prime example of ignoring the reality of a wider area, where it was difficult, certainly from a planning point of view, to see the City operating in isolation from the 'city region' – the former County of Avon area, now the responsibility of three other unitary authorities, as well as Bristol itself. Furthermore, the likelihood of reaching political agreement here for a city region elected mayor seemed remote.

The RTPI's official, national response, which went to the Government a few days before Christmas, whilst expressing support for the elected mayor idea in principle so long as it was the subject of a local referendum, reflected many of the points we made, notably the problem of identifying single cities without recognising the reality of city regions. It also expressed concern about possible moves to vest planning decisions in a single individual, which sat uneasily with the new 'localism' principle of giving power back to local people.

## **Consultation on the Draft Neighbourhood Planning Regulations**

The Institute also responded, just before Christmas, to DCLG's consultation on the draft regulations intended to put the Neighbourhood Planning provisions of the Localism Act into operation. As the item on this in my previous Update ( 2 December 2011) indicated, the Government has been anxious to get all this in place, not least because of growing pressure from local planning authorities and many others wanting to know exactly how this important new statutory provision would work. The Institute's response has been characterised by neither agreeing nor disagreeing with most of the statements in DCLG's set of 'consultation questions', but there are reservations. The draft has now 'answered' many of the questions about the intended process, but has left many others, particularly about resource implications for local authorities, the legal position of bodies such as Neighbourhood Forums, means of ensuring openness and inclusivity, managing community expectations, and the relationship to other planning activity, still un-answered. It has also been pointed out that communities and planning authorities all over England have been engaged in neighbourhood planning of various kinds for many years, quite often with the assistance of Planning Aid.

## **Unlocking growth in cities**

Hard on the heels of elected mayors for English cities comes another cities initiative launched in December 2011 jointly by Deputy PM Nick Clegg and Minister for Cities Greg Clark. The concise, 34 page document identifies eight 'core' cities, of which Bristol is one, who are already in line to receive a share of the £500 million 'Growing Places Fund' announced back in November. As part of a 'move away from one-size-fits-all city policies' the Government is seeking to strike 'individual city deals'. The talk is of 'revitalising' and 'empowering' cities through a radical shift in the balance of power – presumably from central towards local 'government'. Government support is to be given based on evidence of strong local leadership in delivering growth and jobs [with the proposed elected mayors no doubt seen to play a part in this]. Further reading however reveals that this is actually all about cities 'and their Local Enterprise Partnerships', with funds going to the LEP's rather than to local government or 'communities' directly. 'Bristol's' LEP actually covers the whole of the West of England, but it has been designated as a 'Core City LEP' by the Government. As such, its 'indicative allocation' from the fund is £11.3m – a significant amount, but actually the lowest of all the eight cities. [ Leeds and Greater Manchester each have an allocation of over £24m !]

The document talks about 'raising the stakes' and presents an illustrative menu of 21 'bold options' that cities might take and gives an overview of possible outcomes, based on what has already been achieved with a few 'starter' projects. Of course, there are always two sides to any deal and a number of things which the Government is likely to ask in return are also set out. Much of this is of course speculative at this stage, but there is growing evidence of early activity across the relevant LEP's. Possibly the most interesting part of the document therefore is the Annex entitled 'What cities and their LEP's are telling us', in which information about the 'Bristol : West of England LEP' can be found on page 23. Elsewhere, it is interesting to note that Greater Manchester, uniquely among the conurbations outside London, has had, since April 2011, a strategic governance structure in the shape of a Combined Authority, working alongside its particular LEP.

## **Joining up for sustainable growth**

This, the title of a conference held in Taunton on 6 December, encapsulates what South West Stakeholders now sees as its mission for the region. As all things 'regional' appear to be being written out of official central government thinking, SWS sees a clear role in keeping alive organisations and activities which can make links between diverse areas of interest in order to advise and influence policy makers. Among the things that SWS is now monitoring are the activities of the 'patchwork' of variously defined LEP's within the region ; the work of the fledgling Office of Civil Society [ part of the Cabinet Office] which has the unenviable task of piecing together matters to do with the Big Society from across all other Government Departments, and which, surprisingly, has a small team based in the South West [ sharing an office with a BIS team in Bristol] ; equality and Big Society ; housing, planning and transport policy developments; the RDA 'legacy' ; and the future of the South West Observatory.

One of the problems which the SWS Executive has been facing in attempting to cover all this has been the changes within – or in the worst cases, disappearance of- bodies and personnel which previously made up its membership. In this respect, the RTPi South West has so far represented one of the few 'beacons of stability' within this membership, and your Policy Officer, as a member of the small Executive has continued to contribute to the process of information gathering and exchange.

## **The South West Observatory, beyond 2012 ?**

Most readers will be aware of the diverse and valuable work done by the SWO through its Core Unit in Taunton, its on-line Thematic Modules [ Environment, Economy, Public Health, Housing & Planning etc], its Local Intelligence Networks, and its research activities. The overarching aim remains the delivery of relevant and timely evidence to inform the development and delivery of public policy across the South West. As Chair of the Advisory Board, Professor Martin Boddy, says in the SWO Report 2010/11, 'as spending cuts and the restructuring of public services start to bite across the region, it is more important than ever that change is based on sound information and analysis'. South West RDA funding has always been critical to the operation, and although continued funding has been confirmed until the end of 2012 [despite the wind up of the RDA by the end of this coming March ] beyond [www.swo.org.uk](http://www.swo.org.uk)

## **Energy and 'low carbon' developments in the South West**

Although the 'finalised' Energy National Policy Statements were put in place in June 2011, controversy remains on the energy front. The Government's consultation on the draft NPPF has 'sparked' a further debate about the relationship between the stimulating economic growth, sustainable development and the provision of secure and clean energy supplies. The Combined Heat & Power Association, for example, has raised the question of how far planning and other policy can 'drive' decarbonisation of our towns and cities and how policy might be shaped to encourage and enable more CHP and district heating schemes in future. Meanwhile, the Government is due to consult soon on proposed 'allowable solutions', said to be the final element of its 'zero carbon homes' policies.

Meanwhile, on the ground, there are examples of action in the South West on the new nuclear power front, on planning for photo-voltaic electricity generation and on measures to make existing historic buildings more 'low carbon'. After a delay of around six months, it was announced in October that the UK's new nuclear power station programme was rolling once again. Events at the Fukushima plant in Japan in March led the Government to commission a further review of nuclear safety, the outcome of which was published by the Chief Inspector of Nuclear Installations on 11 October 2011. This gave existing and planned new plants a basically clean bill of health, though, at the same time, recommending that emergency planning, security and flood control be tightened up. The last of these would seem to have particular relevance to the two new plants in the South West [ Hinkley Point and Oldbury ], sited as they are on the edge of an estuary with one of the highest tidal ranges in the world ! At around the same time, EDF finally submitted its planning application, under the 2008 Planning Act regulations, to the IPC.

Uncertainties remain however about both the building programmes and the likely long term returns for investors. It would now seem that the new plant at Hinkley Point [the first in the UK] is unlikely to come on stream until 2021/22 at the earliest, whilst further uncertainties remain about the Oldbury plans in view of a recent announcement by RWE [ partnered in this scheme by npower and E.ON ] that it is 'reconsidering its position'

The South West remains at the forefront in the development of 'alternative' energy sources such wind power, wave power and solar photo-voltaic electricity generation. Cornwall, in particular, has a history of promoting a diverse range of renewable energy projects stretching back to 1991, when the UK's first commercial wind farm was opened at Delabole. More recently there has been the 'Wave Hub' project at Hayle [2010] and the initiative in setting up a dedicated Solar PV Planning Team, in order to respond in a controlled and systematic way to a surge in proposals for commercial field mounted PV generating schemes, has received a Commendation in the 2011 South West Planning Achievement Awards competition. Also commended in this competition has been the 'Low Carbon Bath' initiative by the Bristol based Centre for Sustainable Energy working with the Bath Preservation Trust. Addressing the energy saving end of things, this pioneering work has developed solutions to the problem of retro-fitting double glazing, solar panels, draught-proofing and wall insulation to heritage buildings and its guidance is now being incorporated by Bath & North East Somerset in a new Supplementary Planning Document.

## **Core Strategies in the South West**

Although coverage is still far from complete, the second half of 2011 did see more progress in getting these key policy documents in place. Sedgemoor's Core Strategy was declared 'sound' at the end of September, following hearings in May and that for Exeter City was declared 'sound' at the end of November, following hearings in June.

In addition,[ according to the PINS website, as up-dated 9 December 2011] a raft of documents had reached the hearings stage –

Forest of Dean : Core Strategy & Cinderford Northern Quarter AAP, hearings started 12 October ; Poole [ CS already in place] Delivering Infrastructure & Site Specific Allocations/Development Management Policies DPD's, hearings due to start 15 November ; North Somerset: Core Strategy, hearings began 23 November; Bath & North East Somerset : Core Strategy, hearing due to start 17 January 2012 ; Gloucestershire CC : Waste Core Strategy, hearings due to start 31 January ; Taunton Deane : Core Strategy, hearings due to start 7 February ; South Gloucestershire : Core Strategy, following a bit of a hiatus involving the need to consult on a 'refreshed' document, hearings start in March anticipated ; Bournemouth : Core Strategy & Town Centre AAP, submitted in November, but hearings start yet to be confirmed.

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