

South West Policy & Media Officer Update Report

Introduction

The latest edition of Branchout includes the first in a series of reports updating readers on policy matters of relevance to the region and explaining what I am doing in my Policy & Media Officer role. With this in mind, it had been my intention in this piece for the Joint Committee, to focus on what was contained in my two reports circulated to all members last month – our relationship with the newly formed South West Stakeholders body and the Draft Policy Statement on the new Single Regional Strategies.

However, the ‘tide’ of new consultations, initiatives and controversies sweeps on, so that there are already other things to report, firstly on the historic environment protection front and secondly on the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects /NPS/ IPC system.

Revising national policy on the protection of ‘historic assets’

The new PPS 15 Planning for the Historic Environment , published at the end of October, following a period of consultation resulting in 500 responses, has caused an outcry from the RTPI and the Institute of Historic Building Conservation, amongst others, because of the way it implies that ‘historic assets’(the new term combining the present ‘listing’ and ‘scheduling’ systems) should not be allowed to get in the way of development which benefits the economy. The Government has admitted that the intention has been to benefit developers and to ‘reduce the number of applications for planning permission rejected on heritage-related grounds’. In the national press on 1 November, Martin Willey called the new policy ‘a charter for people who want to knock things down!’ There had already been controversy surrounding all this because the draft Heritage Protection Bill, published in Autumn 2007, had seemingly been side-lined by English Heritage when it claimed this July that most of what was in the proposed legislation could be ‘carried forward’ by means of the new PPS. Now, the confusion and uncertainty has been compounded by an announcement by John Healey, on 15 November, that there has been no intention to reduce the protection afforded to historic assets and that parts of the PPS are to be re-drafted to make the Government’s position clearer.

Consultation on the first seven draft National Policy Statements –Energy & Ports

My Branchout report referred to the relentless production by central government of draft policy documents over the summer involving nine significant consultations and it seems that there is to be let up in the pace of this. In September DCLG published a raft of documents on the definition of ‘key infrastructure projects’, the proposed National Policy Statements(NPS’s) covering these and the new Infrastructure Planning Commission ‘parallel’ planning approvals system to ensure the speedy progress of such projects. November 9 saw the simultaneous publication in draft of the first set of NPS’s, six of them, dealing with energy, from DECC and the other, dealing with Ports, from the DfT. The energy documents -‘EN’s 1-6’ respectively- cover Overarching National Energy Infrastructure Policy ; Renewable Energy Generation ; Fossil Fuel Power Stations ; Gas Supply Infrastructure, Gas & Oil Pipelines ; Electricity Networks ; and Nuclear Power Stations (which identifies 10 ‘potentially suitable sites’, of which two, Hinkley Point, in Somerset and Oldbury, in South Gloucestershire, are in the South West). The Draft PPS on Ports is not location specific in the same way, but sets a development criteria based framework to ‘encourage sustainable port development’ as part of a ‘competitive and efficient port industry’.

The draft NPS’s, together with related nuclear power station site assessments and other environmental / sustainability appraisals, comprise in total some 3,000 pages of documentation and the Government’s deadline for consultation responses is 22 February 2010. In turn, if we, the RTPI SW wish to make a response we will need to get this to Botolph Lane by 18 January 2010. I have not had time even to make a start on reading the vital parts of this, but will attempt to put something together in due course. In the meantime please let me have any comments as soon as possible. A good place to start is the set draft NPS summaries just published by Planning Aid, which as many members will know, has been ‘commissioned’ by the Government to assist in facilitating the consultation process (as of 20 November, there had been 45,000 ‘hits’ on the site and 5000 downloads of summaries) There are also useful pieces on both the energy documents and on that for ports in the

20 November issue of 'Planning'. So armed, the adventurous can then venture on to the Government websites www.energy-nps-consultation.decc.gov.uk and www.ports-nps-consultation.dft.gov.uk, but these are not at all easy to navigate! In order to assist response, the Government has set out 28 Consultation Questions covering the six energy draft NPS's, so there is at least somewhere to start, though study of the documents is still required.

As members will also be aware, the Government is in a great hurry to move all this forward and a raft of both national and local events is now under way, both relating to the draft NPS's themselves and, in connection with Nuclear Power Stations, related to particular suggested locations. Of direct relevance to the South West, the national events on energy include a public meeting at the Rougemont Hotel, Exeter on 21 January and, in connection with Hinkley Point (new nuclear station proposed by EDF) the local public consultations have already begun – with events organised between mid November and mid January by the DECC, EDF (and its planning consultants PPS) and National Grid, which has a statutory obligation to connect any new plant to its high-voltage transmission network. There is also to be a DECC local event in connection with the Oldbury on Severn site, the other scheme in the region, between 4-6 February 2010. Details are to be found on the DECC's nps consultation website.

Some initial thoughts on the draft NPS's

The Institute nationally has welcomed these first draft NPS's, but has warned that without an overall national spatial plan, there is a risk of missing out significantly on the real economic, social and climate change benefits of planning new major infrastructure in a coherent way. Without such a plan, the response goes on, the nation cannot be certain that it will get the right infrastructure in the right place. [Press Release 10 November '09]. To this might be added that, whilst the arrival, at long last, of comprehensive national policy on such matters is a move in the right direction, the relationship to the existing planning system has as yet been neither clarified nor tested in practice.

The new IPC /NPS planning system will have to run alongside the existing 'standard' planning system, because many of the related accommodation works, some roads and, significantly, housing development, will continue to go for approval in the normal way. This situation raises questions such as – will the standard system be able to work at the same high speed as the IPC one; what will be the relationship between NPS policy and that within existing locally produced and government approved RSS and LDF policy; and what will be the relationship with existing PPS's?

South West Stakeholders and the RTPI South West

Do members of the Joint Committee have any comments to make on my 22 October report on this matter? Are the recommendations at the end of this accepted ie. that we should accept SWS membership and pay the first year's subscription?

Policy Statement on Regional Strategies & the establishment of Leaders' Boards

Do members of the Joint Committee have any comments to make on my 23 October report? In particular, are there any comments on my response and reflection on the main features and [6] principles of the Government's proposals?

Other developments to note

The establishment in October of a new Rural Coalition of which the RTPI is a founder member. The announcement in November of a 'special design review panel' to assess emerging detailed proposals for the first Eco-towns

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