

RTPI SW Regional Management Board & Regional Activities Committee  
12 March 2010

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

There has been no let up in the volume of Government consultation, guidance and policy documents issued and announcements made as we enter the new year. I deal briefly below with those which appear to have a particular relevance to the South West – Consultation by DEFRA on English Marine Plan areas ; Policy Statement on [the new single] Regional Strategies ( DCLG & BIS) ; Programme for replacement of PPG's & PPS's ( DCLG) ; and Policy Statement on Local Economic Assessments (DCLG). On the local government reorganisation front, has come the announcement that Exeter is to become a unitary authority. Meanwhile, the Strategic Leaders' Board and the South West RDA have opened a consultation on their 'Scheme for Strategic Regional Joint Working'.

I can also report the publication, this January, of a very interesting Green Belts study, by the CPRE and Natural England jointly and on a regional Cultural Infrastructure conference organised by South West Councils , which I attended on behalf of the RTPI SW. Finally, reference must be made to the recently published Conservative Party Green Paper on the planning system. There remains as yet, no further news on the 'final' South West RSS.

### **Consultation on English Marine Plan areas**

The Marine & Coastal Access Act, which received the Royal Assent on 12 November 2009, brings terrestrial style strategic spatial planning to the UK marine environment. In order for the new Marine Management Organisation (MMO) to take forward the development of marine spatial plans, the Government needs to define the boundaries of each plan area. There are 12 plan areas proposed in total, defined chiefly on the basis of natural processes ( coastal cells) and existing marine jurisdiction limits, of which four relate to the South West and these lie adjacent to 24 different local planning authority areas, each of which will have an interest in both the process and the policies, as well as the RDA and South West Councils. The need for a close working relationship between all these bodies and the MMO and the need to ensure compatibility between terrestrial and marine plans promise to be key issues. The RTPI's response to the consultation has been led by the Environmental Planning & Protection Network.

### **Policy Statement on Regional Strategies**

The Local Democracy, Economic Development & Construction Act, which stems from the SNR process and which received the Royal Assent on 13 November 2009, makes provision for 'Responsible Regional Authorities' in each of the eight English regions to prepare the new style, single, integrated, Regional Strategies replacing both the RSS and the RES. This Policy Statement, issued jointly by DCLG and BIS, on 23 February 2010, builds on responses to a consultation launched in August 2009 ( see my Update Report to the 27 November RMB/RAC). These responses, published just in time for Christmas, were generally supportive of the then draft proposals, but there were concerns about lack of proper representation of rural areas and about the role that strategic planning authorities should have in advising the 'responsible authority' on sub-regional matters .Both of these concerns have particular relevance in the South West. The Statement explains what the relevant, Part 5, of the legislation is intended to achieve, including the expected form, content and [ inevitably] preparation process. The stated intention is to replace all the Government's existing regional planning regulations, PPS 11 and the 2005 Guidance to RDA's on Regional Economic Strategies.

### **Replacement programme for PPG's and PPS's**

As promised in the 2007 Planning White Paper and supported by the findings of the Killian Pretty Review, 2008, PPG's and PPS's are being 'streamlined' as and when there is reason to review policy [ back in 2004 the Government was committed to such a replacement as a matter of urgency !] The first of the so called 'streamlined' policy documents is the new PPS 4 – Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth , published last December. On 9 February 2010, DCLG published its latest replacement programme, stating that the main objective is to make PPS's 'clearer and more accessible and, in so doing, more effective'. Amongst other things, it

is intended to separate policy from guidance by putting these in different documents ; to 'draw together national development policies' ; and to set out clearly ' the evidence needed to make robust decisions'. The DCLG release includes a useful spreadsheet setting out the latest position with all 24 existing PPG's and PPS's, together with the new one on Development Management, published in draft immediately before Christmas. Sadly, there is no reference anywhere here to the relationship [if indeed there is to be one] between these documents and the new NPS's.

### **Policy Statement on Local Economic Assessments**

Under the provisions of Part 4 of the LDED&C Act, local planning authorities in England will, as from April 2010, have a duty to carry out Local Economic Assessments (LEA's). There has been serious concern about the resource implications of this requirement ever since the DCLG published a draft Policy Statement on the matter in January 2009. There have also been concerns about the need for some kind of co-ordination of nature and content of the assessments between different local authorities as the Government's guidance on the matter has remained vague. In this region , a degree of co-ordination has been provided by the South West Observatory (SWO), which held an event, in conjunction with the Regional Improvement & Efficiency Partnership, in Exeter last November, designed to start working towards some kind of regional consensus about 'themes' and 'core indicators'. The Audit Commission has also been active in providing guidance on the intended relationship between the existing Comprehensive Area Assessments and the new LEA's. The LEA Co-ordinator at the SWO is Lorna Gibbons – see [www.swo.org.uk/resources/local-economic-assessments](http://www.swo.org.uk/resources/local-economic-assessments) for the latest guidance.

### **Latest round of local government re-organisation in the SW completed**

In 2006, the then Secretary of State, Ruth Kelly, 'invited' the remaining 'single tier' areas in England to submit proposals for the creation of new unitary local authorities. For the South West, the first output of this process saw Cornwall and Wiltshire become single unitary councils, in April 2009. Matters in Devon have proved less easy to resolve , with the Boundary Committee for England [ a committee of the Electoral Commission] involved in two separate reviews to consider submitted proposals and make recommendations, with the position of Exeter as a potential unitary authority at its heart. Finally, on 10 February 2010, Local Government Minister Rosie Winterton announced that the City of Exeter [ together with Norwich] is to become a unitary authority based on its existing boundaries , whilst the rest of Devon retains its two-tier structure. The controversy, and considerable acrimony, surrounding this is set to continue and even intensify, not least because this particular arrangement had twice before been rejected by the Boundary Committee. The DCLG announcement talks about making Exeter 'a far more potent economic force' than it is under the current two-tier arrangement, though how this will provide 'the best and most efficient local services for the people of Devon' remains unclear. As ever, the interests of spatial planning have not weighed very heavily overall in the review process. One final thought – if the immediate past pattern is repeated, it will be 2016 before we see another phase of English local government reorganisation.

### **South West Scheme for Strategic Regional Joint Working**

On 16 February, the Strategic Leaders' Board and South West RDA published a document for consultation setting out how it is proposed to implement the new arrangements as set out in the LDED&C Act. This includes the production of the new single Regional Strategy. Governance and officer support structures involving the new [at least in the statutory sense] joint decision making are spelled out in what is a concise and clearly written document. Of particular interest to the RTP1 SW are the arrangements for 'engagement and consultation', which have very positive things to say about the resources, skills and experience possessed by consultees, which continue to be important in the policy making process. South West Stakeholders, of which we have recently become a member, is one of the bodies getting special mention. Essentially what is set down here is formal written confirmation of arrangements which have already started to operate. The consultation period runs until 30 March 2010, so if RMB/RAC members have particular points to raise please let me know as soon as possible after the 12 March meeting. The document can be viewed on [www.swcouncils.gov.uk](http://www.swcouncils.gov.uk) or [www.southwestrda.gov.uk](http://www.southwestrda.gov.uk)

## **'Green Belts : A greener future'**

In January 2010, a study jointly commissioned by the CPRE and Natural England, was published by the latter. See [www.naturalengland.org.uk/publications](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/publications)

This is the latest in long line of studies into the purpose and effectiveness of the 14 Green Belts covering in total nearly 13% of the land area of England. The South West has three of these – Avon ( by far the largest in the region) , SE Dorset (part of a GB also extending into SW Hants), and Gloucester/Cheltenham (one of the smallest nationally) For this study, surveys nationally have been supplemented by those of particular Green Belts, including Avon, and the whole thing [91 pages of text plus an extensive bibliography and Annexes containing lots of comparative data on the individual GB's ] makes very interesting reading.

The Green Belts are seen as a 'vast national asset', but they need to 'contribute to positive land use objectives' and the study has looked in particular at how this 'asset' might better connect urban centres to wider countryside and food production ; how it might help to tackle the challenges posed by climate change ; and how it can be [better] valued as part of a 'nationwide ecological network'. In broad terms, this study concludes that although the Green Belts have remained effective in preventing urban sprawl and maintaining a distinction between town and country and as areas free from built development delivering multiple benefits to nearby urban populations, some have been seriously neglected in terms of landscape management (including Avon !) More attention to ecosystems in the areas is seen as vital in meeting the climate change challenge. Overall, Natural England and the CPRE call for 'more ambition' on the part of all concerned to work together to 'enhance' Green Belt land for passing on to the next generation.

## **Planning for cultural infrastructure**

The South West Councils organised conference held on 24 February at the Somerset College Conference centre, was one of a series of regional information and good practice exchange events under the heading 'planning for delivery'. The varied programme included workshops on 'culture & leisure for planning officers' and 'the planning system for the culture/leisure sector'. Professor Martin Elson gave a presentation about the 'Culture and Sport Planning Toolkit' see [www.living-places.org.uk](http://www.living-places.org.uk) and there were case study presentations on the role of culture as a driver of regeneration in Gloucester ; the multi-function Campus in Weston-super-Mare ; and Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter. Overall, efforts to promote cultural and leisure activities were seen to struggle as 'the soft underbelly of local government', but there was optimism in the evidence of improved joint working and a growing understanding among planners of the culture & leisure sector.

And finally .....

## **The Open Source Planning Green Paper**

Though we still don't know the full details of what is included in the much delayed South West RSS , we do now know what its fate would be should the Conservatives win the forthcoming General Election ! The Green Paper was published on 22 February 2010 and provides plenty of food for thought. All RMB/RAC members should now have been provided with their own electronic copy, but this can also be accessed via the RTPI national website, which includes the Institute's initial response. I will be preparing a draft RTPI SW response for the meeting on 7 May, but in the meantime any comments and thoughts would be gratefully received

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