

## RTPI South West Region

### 2010 Conference Programme

#### Regional Planning & LDFs – 14<sup>th</sup> July 2010

#### Paper prepared by Geoff Walker as background to his presentation “The Regional Planning vacuum: issues and opportunities”

##### Regional planning : where does it go from here ?

So, the regional spatial and economic planning system in England is to be ‘abolished’, though those hundreds of professionals and elected members who have spent many years producing the respective regional spatial strategies and economic strategies, including, in the case of RSS’s, steering them through a slow and complex central government approval system, would probably prefer the term ‘abandoned’ ! In the immediate wake of new Coalition Government action designed both to address major public sector deficit and to replace ‘big government’ with a ‘big society’ involving much more emphasis on local decision making, this paper looks at the past history of regional planning and attempts to identify why it is now being abandoned. In taking on the perspective of those who have always been sceptical about the value of regional planning, it briefly considers some of the opportunities which the removal of this layer of governance might provide. It then moves on to more negative implications and considers some of the main issues which now face all of those still attempting to think strategically. It draws on the South West as its main case study.

The overall contention of the paper is that the need for and the principles of strategic planning at both regional and sub-regional levels remain established. In the South West, the list of matters requiring a long-term policy response over a wide geographical area, involving many different bodies, remains as long as ever. What has been the undoing of regional planning is the way in which it has been carried out. It is also suggested that RSS abolition will put even more pressure on an already struggling Local Development Framework (LDF) system which will remain the only element of the statutory development plan.

#### The changing fortunes of regional planning

Regional planning has suffered a ‘helter-skelter’ ride at the hands of central government for over thirty years. Just as one of the first actions of the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government was to announce that the English Regional Spatial Strategies were to be ‘rapidly abolished’, with all policy and decision-making powers on housing and planning ‘returned’ to each local planning authority, one of the first actions of the then new Conservative Government in 1979, was to abolish the English Regional Economic Planning Councils and their officer Boards. In came Michael Heseltine as Environment Secretary, pledged to speed up and sort out a development plan process in which the newly introduced strategic component, the Structure Plans, was lagging well behind the expected rate of approvals. The next ‘targets’ were the GLC and the Metro County Councils as strategic sub-regional planning authorities, which were abolished in 1985. At this point it appeared that the argument for such strategic policy mechanisms had been lost, with regional planning, and indeed strategic planning in general, consigned to the wilderness. Even the County Structure Plans were under threat. The late 1980’s/early 1990’s however were to see the Government embracing new ‘greening’ and ‘sustainable development’ imperatives (eg ‘The first Environment White Paper – This Common Inheritance’, Sep. 1990) which directly or indirectly led to a reprieve for Structure Plans and the introduction of advisory Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) and the growing importance of Regional Planning Conferences as the principal bodies involved in its preparation. All of this took place under successive Conservative administrations, so demonstrating that, contrary to assertions recently made, regional strategic planning was not a Labour initiative when it was first elected to power in 1997.

The Labour administration did however bring with it a new ‘regional agenda’ for England, which manifested itself in Regional Development Agencies and Regional Assemblies. The latter were tasked with RDA policy scrutiny role as well as that of ‘Regional Planning Body’ responsible for preparing initially RPG and subsequently, a Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). Regionalism under Labour was probably seen at its peak in John Prescott’s 2002 proposals for elected regional government. In the South West, as in most regions, this initiative got little further than ‘sounding out’ the local population, with a ‘no enthusiasm’ outcome ! The entire initiative was however to be quietly dropped following a ‘NO’ vote in a formal referendum in the North East. There followed further system review with the final abolition of the Structure Plans and establishment of the RSS as the strategic statutory component of the development plan alongside the new LDF system replacing the longstanding Local Plan one. ( Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act, 2004).

Those, including the RTPI, who expected a more streamlined system of policy production and integration to emerge from this they will have been very disappointed however.

### **2004 and all that**

The need to reform an English development plan system conceived in the late 1960's and introduced in 1974, was widely accepted by the turn of the century and although the principles of what was to replace it were sound enough, it is now widely, though not, by all means, universally accepted, that the 2004 Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act planning system has proved to be too complex. Policy – which is, after all what it should be mainly about – has taken far longer than expected to emerge. The new LDF system, with the Core Strategy at its heart, is way behind schedule. By the end of 2009, just 56 of the local planning authorities in England (14%) had a sound/adopted Core Strategy in place and updating based on data posted on the Planning Portal and Planning Inspectorate websites, suggests only limited progress since. By the beginning of May 2010, in England overall, 67 strategies had been declared 'sound', of which nine were for minerals or waste policies. A further 15 or so were at the hearings stage for the final draft.

In the South West the 53 relevant planning authorities [ prior to the 2009 local government reorganisation, which saw the number reduced to 43 ] had, between them, just seven Core Strategies in place, together with 12 other Development Plan Documents (DPD's). Two further strategies were at the hearings stage. LDF/Core Strategy work got off to a promising start in this region with South Hams (November 2006), Plymouth ( April 2007), and Mid Devon (May 2007) very much in the van nationally in terms of producing 'sound' documents. In the case of Plymouth, its pioneering LDF work was recognised by the award of the 2005 RTPI Silver Jubilee Cup for planning achievement. Sadly this early promise has not been maintained and, whilst this paper is not the place to discuss in detail why this has happened in this region or why things are so far behind schedule nationally, some things are already clear.

Although many of the shortcomings of the former Local Plan system have been addressed – a slow and 'constipated' system, which had, by general agreement, lost most of its effectiveness -, the post 2004 system which has replaced it has proved to be too complex. With the best of intentions, including a desire to base spatial planning policy on wider-based 'community strategies', several different kinds of new documents have been introduced. These have involved huge demands for technical groundwork by already stretched professional staff – the famous 'evidence base'- and overkill in terms of appraisal and layers of consultation requirements. There have been problems due to a lack of appropriate skills in planning departments and even a suggestion of lack of commitment to the task in some cases, with elected councillors seen to be at least partly responsible. Although some excellent work has emerged, including several 'exemplar' exercises and documents in the South West, overall, the requirements of process and procedure have been allowed to smother policy output and the blame for this must be shared by both central and local government. Some of the problems faced by the LDF system can however be traced to that other complex component of the 2004 Act system, the Regional Spatial Strategy process, since this was intended to take the lead in providing the framework for Core Strategy direction and policy. Those planners with longer memories may recall that Structure Plan delay caused similar problems for authorities preparing their Local Plans back in the late 1970's !

### **RSS production delay**

Considering that the RSS system was really only an adjusted RPG system given statutory status – indeed DCLG talked in terms of 'RPG/RSS review'- the length of time taken to get the strategies in place across the eight English regions outside London, has been frustratingly long for all concerned. The reasons for this are complex, but little blame can be attached to the collective efforts of local planning authorities, the Assemblies and the RDA's in each region to reach an agreed consensus on strategic policy. Much more of a problem has been the length of time it has taken central government to work through its stage of the process. The Government's own production timescale estimates, in PPS 11, 2004, envisaged that the whole process of the first RSS round ( called 'RPG/RSS review 'after all ) would be completed in 35 months. This has, in practice, turned out to be wildly over optimistic. The respective Regional Assemblies took between two and three years to get to the stage of submitting a draft RSS to central government, subsequent to which it has taken, on average, a further three years for the latter to complete the processing to the 'final RSS'. In the meantime, local planning authorities preparing their Core Strategies have grown impatient to see this necessary strategic policy document in place.

Nowhere has this been more of an issue than in the South West, whose RSS had, by the turn of the year 2009/10 acquired the dubious distinction of holding the record for the length of time taken in central government processing and which, even now, more than four years after the draft was submitted by the [then] Regional Assembly (in April 2006), has

not been issued in final form. And now, following the action of the new Coalition Government [ first post-election statement on planning, 18 May 2010] it would seem that it never will be ! This may be the end of regional planning in the region as we have come to know it, but the process has a long history involving much important work.

### **Early regional planning through to the RSS in the South West**

Regional planning in the South West has existed, in various forms, since the early 1960's. At this time local authorities in the northern part of the region combined together to consider the 'problems' caused by the continuing growth in the Bristol/Bath area, whilst in the far south west, Devon and Cornwall County Councils began what was to become a long period of joint action on issues of common concern. In 1965, the South West Economic Planning Council (REPC) and its supporting board of professional civil servants was set up, reporting to the newly established Department of Economic Affairs of the then Labour Government. The SWREPC was superimposed over and worked entirely separately from the local authorities and, like its equivalent in each of the other [then] seven English standard regions, was set the task of assisting in the formulation of a 'regional plan'; advising on how this might be implemented ; and looking at the regional implications of national economic policies. Though the emphasis was on economic issues rather than land use planning as such, the work had important strategic land use implications.

In 1967 the REPC published 'A Region with a Future : A draft Strategy for the South West' This was intended as a basis for wide consultation, as the first stage in the production of a 'regional plan'. Amongst other matters, this highlighted the diversity of the South West ,suggesting that it was not really a homogeneous entity at all, but rather a collection of distinct 'sub-regions'.

Growth pressures were particularly acute in that part of the region, served by the newly constructed M4 and estuary bridge, which came to be known as 'Bristol Severnside' and by the late 1960's, this area had been put under separate investigation by the [then] Ministry of Housing & Local Government as part of an estuary-based study. 'Severnside : A feasibility study' published jointly by the then new DOE and the Welsh Office in 1971, was the result of this joint central and local government technical planning exercise.

In 1974, the REPC published its second and last report 'A strategic settlement pattern for the South West' This was much more orientated towards land use planning than the 1967 report had been and was intended to influence the strategic planning policy ideas of the new local authorities formed in 1974 following the Local Government Act 1972. It was seen by central government as offering 'useful guidelines to be tested in detail' in the preparation of the new County Structure Plans. Population growth forecasts up to 2001 and various policy proposals were set out for each of 20 economic planning 'sub-regions' established a strategic pattern which has remained broadly the same to this day.

Despite the creation, in 1974, of the completely new County of Avon (which covered broadly the same area as the REPC's 'Bristol Severnside'), it soon became clear that wider geographical issues to do with countryside protection and appropriate areas for urban growth would still need to be resolved. The new County Councils in this part of the region – Avon, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire- combined as a 'Joint Advisory Conference' .

In 1986, stimulus for further 'conference-forming' came with the publication of the now Conservative Government's ideas for the development plan system (The future of development plans : A consultation paper , DOE/Welsh Office, Sep. 1986) which posed a threat to strategic planning by suggesting the abolition of County Structure Plans ! At the end of 1987, the five Counties of Avon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire combined to form the 'West Country Planning Conference'. Initially, Devon and Cornwall remained unconvinced that they had sufficient interests in common with the 'northern area' to join this Conference, and thus attended meetings only as 'observers'. However, in late 1989, these two authorities became full members of the new South West Regional Planning Conference, bringing together local government elected members from the whole of the region for the very first time. Some 30 members in total comprised three councillors from each of the seven Counties, together with one district councillor to represent the District planning authorities in each of the Counties.

Over the following ten years the Conference, with its administrative base in Somerset County Hall, Taunton, produced an increasingly sophisticated range of strategic planning documents, the most significant being the 1993 'Regional Strategy for the South West'. This 150 page 'advocacy document' which went beyond a purely land use focus, was the first to essay a 'vision' for the region's future. It also boasted a massive 'evidence base' [ thought the particular term had not been invented then !] This Strategy was to become the basis for work on the first (1994) and revised (2001) versions of RPG 10, in which the Conference worked increasingly closely with the newly established Government Office for the

South West. Although it operated on a shoestring budget, the Conference extended its operations across a range of matters regional, including transportation, economic development, minerals & waste management and a growing range of European matters. Somehow, however, it never managed to gain wider community recognition across the region, possibly because it was not seen as part of the 'real' planning system.

### **The South West Regional Assembly and the RSS**

One important chapter in the history of regional planning in the South West came to an end in July 2000, when the Regional Planning Conference was wound up and its place taken by the new South West Regional Assembly. (RA). Created under the terms of the 1998 Regional Development Agencies Act, this was a significantly larger body (117 members) with over a third of its members drawn from social, economic and environmental 'partners' ( SEEPS) and, equally significantly, considerably enhanced funding provided by central government, which enabled the setting up of a full-time, dedicated professional team. Initially, the RA inherited the work of the Conference in the final stages of the review of the then RPG 10, 1994, which was subsequently published by central government as the 'final' ( revised) RPG 10 in September 2001

As soon as RPG 10 was issued, the RA effectively began work on its review. Three years later, under the terms of the 2004 Planning Act, the Government decreed that all RPG's would henceforth 'become' Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS). For some reason, in part increasingly complex central government procedural, consultation and evidence requirements, this review and 'conversion' work was to take over four years. In April 2006 the RA, which was by now working closely with the South West Regional Development Agency on policy development, submitted the Draft RSS to central government. This was followed by a summer of public consultation, which produced almost 15,000 'representations'. At this time also, the Planning Inspectorate assumed responsibility for the processing of RSS's from DCLG. The first South West RSS Examination in Public (EIP) was held in Exeter over the summer of 2007 involving 191 participating organisations and individuals, including the RTPI South West.

The EIP Panel's report, published in January 2008, was clear and comprehensive, but it continued a trend of increasing document length and complexity associated with the RSS process generally – 258 pages, plus 231 pages of Appendices. Later that year, a 'Single Issue Review' EIP was held on South West Gypsy & Traveller Site Provision. In July 2008, the then Secretary of State, Hazel Blears, published the Government's 'Proposed Changes to the Draft RSS' [ 1,000 pages of documentation !], in the light of the Panel's report and of increasing central government concern about a growing shortfall in new housing provision in the regions. The RSS's were seen as the strategic mechanism to do something about this. To say that the Proposed Changes proved controversial would be something of an understatement – the summer 2008 consultation period ( which had to be extended) produced 35,000 representations, with the Government's upward 'adjustment' of the housing requirements and identification of additional areas for development which had not featured in earlier consultations the source of major concern.

During 2009, the year in which the RA was abolished and South West Councils and its executive Strategic Leaders' Board, became responsible for a new form of regional strategy jointly with the RDA ( May 2009), uncertainty about when the 'Final RSS' would be issued remained. In September GOSW eventually announced that there would be further substantial delay because additional sustainability appraisal [of policies for new housing development] work was required. This was in the light of successful High Court challenges to the East of England RSS and similar challenges pending to the South East Plan (RSS). By the time of the General Election and the arrival of the new Coalition Government in May 2010, pledged to abolish regional planning, there was still no word on the publication of the South West RSS - more than eight years after work on it first started.

The kind of questions which have to be asked about the process of regional planning in England have now been somewhat overtaken by events !

### **The regional planning vacuum : issues & opportunities**

Unless we act quickly to put an appropriate alternative in place, the 'rapid abolition'[sic] of the strategic regional planning system in England, will leave a policy vacuum in which confusion and inconsistency could be the order of the day. This is particularly serious at a time when we are facing major strategic infrastructure development decisions, as well as needing the support of the planning system in re-building the economy. This, in summary, has been the initial response of the RTPI and many other organisations to the Coalition Government's proposals. There are other issues, which will be outlined below. At the same time, professionals in all areas may agree with the Government about certain opportunities which present themselves.

## Opportunities nationally and within the South West

- Having a single [level of] Development Plan should make for a less complex system which, for most people, is easier to understand.
- People would feel better able to relate to all policy matters about their own 'local' area, which they know. Relating to matters at an inevitably more remote regional level, and even at County level when there were Structure Plans, has always proved to be difficult.
- Time and cost, in terms of professional resources, will be saved by removing a whole layer of policy-making.
- The region's Unitary Councils and other planning authorities will be able to more speedily progress their Core Strategy and other elements of the LDF without the 'encumbrance' of regional policy with which they must conform, and with which, in some cases they never agreed. In the South West, for example, tensions about housing policies in particular, surfaced at the EIP in the summer of 2007 and have rumbled on ever since.
- The Government Office for the South West will [eventually] only have to deal with one level of spatial planning policy below that at national level.
- The Planning Inspectorate will be able to concentrate all its resources on assessing the 'soundness' of LDF documents, thus helping to speed up this process. Early RSS review, which was being strongly promoted by DCLG, even for the South West, would have been a daunting prospect for all concerned, involving many hours of professional work.
- There are many voices who would argue that, due to its size and diversity, the South West has never demonstrated the kind of 'regional coherence' which would make regional planning realistic. The removal of formal regional structures may thus present opportunities for local authorities and other 'partners' to establish and build new alliances of common interests able to deal directly with central government in the absence of regional 'intermediaries' such as the RDA or the South West Councils/Leaders' Board. This is perhaps the kind of thing which the new Government has in mind with the Local Enterprise Partnerships. Furthermore, such groupings already exist in the South West, such as the West of England Partnership of the four unitary councils making up the 'Bristol/Bath city region'.

## Matters of concern

Set against these 'opportunities' is a long list of issues which will need addressing both immediately and in the near future. The Coalition Government has moved with such speed on this planning system reform that little detail has yet emerged and there are questions that need answering before anyone will really be in a position to properly assess outcomes – least of all a paper such as this.

- What are to be the transition arrangements whilst the present development plan system is being phased out? As yet, all we seem to have had are 'holding statements' and advice from DCLG and PINS professional officers who appear to have no more knowledge of the 'big picture' than anyone else outside the higher circles of government.
- Although initially, only strategic housing numbers and traveller site pitches were specifically mentioned by the new Government as no longer applying, a revocation order has now been made (under the terms of the Local Democracy, Economic Development & Construction Act, 2009) in respect of all policies in all of the RSS's except the London Plan. This effectively leaves LDF Core Strategies without a strategic policy framework. In the South West, this revocation would appear to include the policies in RPG 10, 2001, which, by central government edict, 'became' RSS as soon as the process of its revision began.
- However, until such time as new primary legislation is in place [the promised 'Decentralisation & Localism Bill'], the regional spatial and economic planning system remains in place. Also remaining in place is the enormous RSS evidence base, which would not be so easy to 'revoke'. The 'ghost' of current regional strategies could thus live on in ways that may well constrain LDF policies, and be possibly used against planning authorities in appeals.
- What the Government will not be able to 'revoke' of course is that long list of issues which, by common consent, require addressing at a regional level. In the South West this includes – a serious lack of affordable housing; severe social and economic deprivation and inequality of opportunity; inadequate transport infrastructure; and balancing energy generation requirements with natural environmental considerations - to name but some. The promised 'National Infrastructure Plan' could help in dealing with some of these matters, but it as, as yet, far from clear how the new 'Open Source Planning' with its focus on 'localism' will tackle all this. Clarification is urgently awaited.

- How will the necessarily regional- based interface with Europe and its important public sector funding streams be handled in future ?
- Abolition of the regional tier of statutory policy will immediately put extra pressure on Core Strategies (and other elements of the LDF) as the sole remaining part of the development plan.( apart from a somewhat ad hoc collection of 'saved' Structure Plan policies and policies in other sorts of 'old style' plans still in force). As indicated earlier in this paper, Core Strategy adoption has proved to be much slower than originally anticipated. In the South West, for example, across the [now] 43 relevant planning authorities, there were by this May, just seven Strategies in place together with 12 other Development Plan Documents. Unless the process can be speeded up significantly, there could be major problems, in all regions, but particularly here, due to lack of up to date policy.
- The Government Office for the South West ( like its counterparts elsewhere) has come to play a critical role in the support and facilitation of development plan policy-making. It has acted both as 'critical friend' and arbitrator across a range of policy and development management matters with a strategic dimension. There has been no word to date about whether or not this will continue to be the case. If it is not, what alternative arrangements will be put in place for this task ?
- Are local planning authorities to be given extra resources to go with the extra responsibilities of determining more things 'locally'? Talk of extra financial incentives coming their way on the strength of new housing approvals may or may not meet such requirements, whilst current moves by councils to make planning staff redundant and the recent announcement that the 2010/11 Housing & Planning Delivery Grant is to be removed, do not inspire confidence on the resources and skills front.
- There is now the suggestion that many of these same authorities will be forming new, wider partnerships, both between themselves and with other bodies. This will inevitably take them into areas of strategic [ as opposed to purely local] policy . Will extra resources be forthcoming in order to help them in such work ?
- Abolition of regional quangos and other bodies with a wide geographical brief will require complex 'unpicking' of project and funding streams. In particular, the winding down of the RDA's [ latest indications are that they will be abolished by March 2012 ] will lead to a dissipation of valuable skills centres as well as major concerns for the many bodies whose work depends on RDA funding.
- To what extent will 'nimbyism' among local councillors run riot without the checks currently in place through 'higher-level' strategic policy ?

### **Conclusions – where to now ?**

The new Government has moved in on the English planning system with great speed and both the RTPi and other professional bodies have been almost equally speedy with their response. It has to be very much an initial one however, as we do not know, as yet, what the eventual overall shape of the new 'Open Source' planning system will be.

Whatever mechanisms, systems and spatial policies are or are not in place at the end of the current reform process, the issues facing the South West which require cross-boundary action, over a large area and consideration of the long term, will remain. The integrity of the South West as a coherent and meaningful region will also continue to be tested, as it has been in the past. Back in the 1980's, the region's County and District Councils came together as a Planning Conference to deal with strategic matters, and its importance grew in the early 1990's, with the then central government's introduction of Regional Planning Guidance to provide a hitherto missing framework for the Structure Plans. This work was then continued, with a higher profile, by the Regional Assembly. The Government has sought to sweep all this away, but the inevitable need to think and work on a sub-regional and possibly regional scale, is likely to draw the region's planning authorities together once again. In a year or two's time another 'planning conference' could be taking shape.

**Geoff Walker**  
**RTPi South West Policy & Media Officer**  
**8 July 2010**

Please note. Much of the background work for this paper has been carried out on behalf of the members of the RTPi South West. The views expressed are however, unless otherwise stated, the author's own.