

RTPI SW Regional Management Board & Regional Activities Committee  
16 July 2010

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

### Introduction

This report coincides with the end of the second year of this post – a year that started with yet more central government consultation on new policies and mechanisms, saw the introduction of a new system of strategic regional planning responsibilities in England with the abolition of the Regional Assemblies and the RDA's ; the arrival of a new, 'parallel' planning system for dealing with major infrastructure projects( NPS's and the IPC) planning and further delay to the South West RSS and ended with a new coalition Government bent on radical reform of the planning system, including the abolition of regional planning ! Throughout this year, your Policy Officer has been instrumental in increasing the profile of the RTPI South West in terms of responses to consultations and involvement in regional forums such as South West Stakeholders (SWS), the Construction Industry Council (CIC) South West, and the South West Housing Initiative (SWHI). Links have also been improved with the policy and communications teams in Botolph Lane and very useful, regular contact has now been established with the national directors/policy officers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, by means of teleconferences. Finally, SW Policy Officer work continued to receive support and encouragement from Martin Willey during the second half of his year as RTPI President.

### **South West Stakeholders**

A 'dying ember left over from an abolished Regional Assembly which refuses to go away' or 'the one remaining multi-organisation body in the South West left to champion sustainability and equality' These were the two ways in which others saw SWS according to Nigel Costley, Regional Secretary of the TUC South West and newly installed as Chair of the 30 member stakeholders body at its Conference and AGM in Taunton on 18 June. What was clear from the workshop discussions on the day was that, notwithstanding the new Government's mission to dismantle formal regional spatial and economic planning mechanisms, and whatever administrative and policy-making arrangements emerge, major regional issues remain and the expertise across the members of a group such as SWS would continue to have a valuable part to play in supporting local government's efforts to deal with these issues. Furthermore, within such a group, the unique spatial expertise of professional planners, was seen to be vitally important and both the outgoing and new Chairs publically welcomed RTPI South West membership.

Somewhat ironically, SWS has 'come of age' as a formally constituted body in the form of a company limited by guarantee, just as the South West Councils Leaders' Board and the South West RDA, the joint regional spatial and economic planning bodies with which it had started to interact have been abolished. In the absence of this, decisions are now needed about who SWS should engage with and about how best to do it. Amongst the 'opportunities' seen to exist are the ability to see beyond the traditional government 'silos'; engagement with opinion formers such as MP's and local councillors ; being a mechanism for pulling together diverse strands of information, including support for the very successful South West Regional Observatory [ probably now under threat in the wake of RDA abolition] ; and acting in an advocacy role on behalf of causes such as regional poverty and inequality and transport investment.

At the AGM your Policy Officer, as the current representative of the RTPI South West, was elected to the Executive Committee, as one of two members drawn from the 'Others' college of member bodies, the other being Leslie Watson of Sustainability South West. [ there are four 'colleges' into which member organisations have been placed – Social, Economic, Environmental, and Other, the last one for those whose interests and expertise span the other fields ]. There is now an SWS website – [www.southweststakeholders.co.uk](http://www.southweststakeholders.co.uk) and the next meeting of the Executive takes place in Bristol on Friday 23 July.

## **CIC South West**

As part of our continuing involvement with this multi-professional body in the region, Claire Alers-Hankey attended the committee meeting in Taunton on 17 June. Amongst other matters this meeting heard a presentation by the CIC's national policy officer and made further progressing in firming up arrangements for a regional evening event in Exeter, in November, with an energy planning theme. Claire's report is another item on the 16 July agenda.

### **Planning for the Severn Estuary**

If ever there was a case for strategic sub-regional planning, the future sustainable management of the Severn Estuary is surely it, and writ large !

Here, in what is one of the UK's largest estuaries, are a combination of environmental, economic and energy issues, opportunities and threats set within a context of administrative and policy complexity, with two different nations as well as 14 different local authorities and a full range of central government departments and agencies involved. These matters were the subject of a joint Severn Estuary Partnership (SEP), RTPI Cymru and RTPI South West conference held in the Council House, Bristol on 21 June.

The main initiative for the event, which attracted some 70 delegates, came from Roisin Willmott of RTPI Cymru, though bookings were handled Helen Clarke's legendary efficient system.

The strategic importance of the estuary has one again been highlighted by further studies into the potential for tidal power generation and more recently proposals for new nuclear power stations at Hinkley Point and Oldbury, as well as arrangements being put in place for Marine Plans under the Marine & Coastal Access Act. In addition to hearing an update on the work of the Severn Estuary Partnership, which has been striving to facilitate integrated, strategic and sustainable management since 1995, there were presentations on the tidal power options; progress on the UK Marine Policy Statement ( adoption expected by April 2011) ; the shoreline management and new habitat creation work of the Environment Agency ;and the climate change adaptation work being carried out at Cardiff University as part of a Europe-wide research project. Somewhat worryingly, it emerged from the latter that development plan acknowledgement of shoreline management and SEP work was difficult to find. A useful group role play session, organised by Jim Claydon and Emmaline Gottwald of WWF UK, teased out key issues from local authorities such as Bristol and Newport, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), SEP and the fledgling Marine Management Organisation and fisheries interests. It was clear that most of the initiatives on estuary planning were coming from WAG and other interests in South Wales, so that there was a danger that one 'half' would see much more co-ordinated action than the other ! For a very full report on the day see : <http://www.severnestuary.net/sep/partnership/imcore7est.html>.

### **New Government and early planning reform**

In my previous Update ( which coincided with the General Election), I referred to the RTPI South West's response to the Conservative's 'Open Source Planning Green Paper'. The feeling, shared by the Institute nationally, was that, although there was some interesting material here and some things to be welcomed, such as the proposal for a national spatial planning framework for England, many things, including the abolition of regional planning, appeared not to have been thought through in any detail. Fundamentally however, the concern was that yet more radical change to the system was about the last thing needed. Members of the Joint Committee will now be aware that little, if any, of this advice has been headed, at least so far !

The reality has emerged in a series of brief and frankly rather disjointed statements from various parts of the new Coalition administration :

18 May 2010 In the first post-election announcements relating specifically to planning, it was announced that the Government is pledged to, 'in the longer term' radically reform the [English] planning system to give 'neighbourhoods' [ not defined] far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live [ reference here, at least, to 'place shaping !] and to 'rapidly abolish' [ English] Regional Spatial Strategies. This would involve returning decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils, whilst, in the same breath, came a pledge to give councils new powers to stop 'garden grabbing'!

20 May 'The Coalition: our programme for government' published [ Directgov website] setting out 31 'key policy areas' related to government departments. Amongst other things, this confirmed that the Infrastructure Planning Commission ( IPC) would be abolished, though not the system of strategic National Policy Statements [ at least as far as Energy is concerned].The IPC was to be replaced with 'an efficient and democratically accountable system that provides a fast track process for major infrastructure projects' This prompted the IPC Chair to publically re-assure its existing 'clients'[ 30 or so registered for projects by this stage] that it would be business as usual, with a seamless transfer to any new arrangements. It has subsequently transpired that the newly appointed staff/expertise are likely to be incorporated in a DCLG internal re-structuring involving the Planning Inspectorate and that decisions on projects will be taken by Ministers and not the IPC.

25 May- Queen's Speech The 'Decentralisation & Localism Bill' put the changes proposed to the planning system on a more formal footing. This time the Institute was ready with an immediate response. It suggested that amending the system without a proper alternative in place was a risk to the economy and was concerned in particular that the proposals to abolish regional planning appeared to be based on local government objections to centrally imposed housing targets rather than any full analysis of the value, in principle, of strategic planning. It suggested that the Coalition Government appeared to think that regional strategic planning had only begun with the Labour administration in 1997 and that such hasty abolition would leave a vacuum in terms of the policies needed to give certainty to major investment decisions. Finally, it stressed that giving extra policy responsibilities to local authorities at the local level would need to be supported by enhanced resources for those same authorities.

27 May Eric Pickles, the new Communities Secretary, writes to all Chief Planning Officers in England to confirm that both the housing targets and the travellers' sites pitch requirements within RSS's were no longer binding. Whilst suggesting that a 'formal' announcement on RSS abolition was yet to come, the announcement caused immediate confusion about which particular parts of the strategies, or indeed, all parts, were to be revoked. The Planning Inspectorate issued hurried guidance to those involved in core strategy hearings in an attempt to at least standardise how housing policy was to be considered. At the time of writing however, until such time as a formal revocation announcement is made, or new legislation implemented, it would appear that RSS's, at least overall, remain the strategic component of the statutory development plan in the English regions. For the South West of course, where there is no RSS in place, this means RPG 10 issued back in 2001 !

28 May A joint statement issued by the RTPI and the Planning Officers Society [ see RTPI website] stresses again that dismantling the regional planning system is a hasty decision which would leave those local planning authorities preparing LDF documents ( especially core strategies) without an agreed policy framework within which to work.

9 June Greg Clark, Minister for Decentralisation, announces the re-issuing of PPS 3 with amendments designed, apparently, to deal with both 'garden grabbing' and 'town cramming'- private residential gardens to be no longer defined as 'previously developed land' and the national indicative minimum density of 30 dph abolished.

10 June Eric Pickles announces that the Housing & Planning Delivery Grant allocation for 2010/2011, of £141million in total, has been removed. This grant to local planning authorities had only been 'determined' by former Minister John Healey in March and amongst others in the South West affected ( with grants previously allocated as shown) are Swindon UA £2.5m , the new Wiltshire UA £1.8 m, the new Cornwall UA £1.6m, Poole UA £1.3m, Bristol UA £1.1m, North Somerset UA £1.0m and Gloucester City £913,310. It is probably too early to determine what affect this will have on authorities whose planning services were already under pressure due to cuts already budgeted. The Institute's response has been to ask how this will motivate councils to produce sound plans!

17 June The very new Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander, announces a package of £2billion budget cuts across the board, which includes all funding for the regions' Local Authority Leaders' Boards ( £16m).This has effectively put a stop to regional strategic planning work in most regions with significant staff redundancies, not least in the South West, where many of the staff at Dennett House in Taunton have been given notice.

[ South West Councils will continue to exist in the form of the South West ( local government) Employers body and the SW Local Government Association, but not as a regional planning body]

22 June Following a certain period of uncertainty in which the New Government suggested that it was looking closely at the future of Regional Development Agencies [ although the London Development Agency had been abolished immediately ] with their possible retention in regions where this had widespread support , it is eventually announced by Vince Cable that they are to be abolished everywhere. In their place and where required, are to be new 'Local Enterprise Partnerships' ( LEP's) involving local authorities and business – effectively, a form of sub-regional economic planning.

On the same day, in the Emergency Budget ,the commitment to abolish the English RDA's is further confirmed, together with 25% cuts in funding for departments with particular responsibilities for planning and infrastructure provision – CLG, ECC & Transport ; a Council Tax freeze in 2011-12 and the cancellation of all Housing & Planning Delivery Grant funding for 2010-11 [ see also above]

A White Paper is promised later in the year setting out detailed proposals for the LEPS , though somewhat worryingly for the South West, there is a suggestion that these bodies will be based primarily on cities. Also of concern to the region is the fact none of its major transport infrastructure schemes seems to have survived a swathe of cuts whereas projects in the Midlands and the North of England have done. On a more positive note, the Budget also announced the establishment of a new 'Regional Growth Fund' ; National Insurance relief for new small businesses 'in regions outside the South and East of England ' [ implying that the South West would qualify] ; the production of a national infrastructure plan in Autumn 2010 ; the establishment of a new 'Green Investment Bank' ; the roll-out of digital communications infrastructure everywhere [of major importance to a region such as the South West] ; and a new 'Green Deal' to help households invest in home energy efficiency improvements.

In another rapid response, the Institute expressed disappointment at the apparent scant appreciation of the very positive impact and key role of planning and planners' skills in fostering economic recovery. It also urged the Government to recognise the vital importance of strategic planning and, in the light of the major planning system changes being made, to put transition arrangements in place so that the inevitable period of uncertainty does not result in loss of impetus, commitment and skills. [ RTPI Press Notice by Ann Skippers 22.06.10 ]

### **South West local government reorganisation halted**

In a constantly changing scenario which must by now have become very frustrating for all concerned, it now seems that Exeter City will not become the region's eleventh unitary authority after all. In a previous Update, I reported that former Minister Rosie Winterton had announced that the then Government had decided in favour of the reorganisation, to take effect in April 2011. However, at the beginning of June, Eric Pickles halted the process and introduced a revocation bill which subsequently went into the Queen's Speech and which also blocked unitary status for Norwich. The proposed changes were said to be 'wasteful and unnecessary'. A subsequent High Court ruling has provided support for the new Government's action in finding that the DCLG's actions had been unlawful because of last minute changes made to the qualifying criteria for a change to unitary status. There had been disquiet in some quarters about a decision for Exeter seen as political rather than technically justified. It seems that a similar conclusion about the latest turn of events may have been outflanked by a legal technicality ! To what extent all this provides greater long term certainty for the growth area/airport/new settlement planning implementation process is yet to be determined.

### **RTPI South West input to national RTPI consultation responses**

It is pleasing to report that South West responses to recent government consultations on 'Planning for a Low Carbon Future- Draft PPS' and 'Planning for the natural environment – draft new PPS & draft new Government Circular' have once again been incorporated within the national response and with due acknowledgement. Your policy officer is indebted to those Committee members who provided comments and information, but a more extensive response from across the membership would be helpful.

### **The Regional Planning vacuum : issues and opportunities**

The implications of the abolition of regional planning, with particular reference to the South West are the subject of your Policy Officer's presentation to the Plymouth Conference on 'Regional Planning and LDF's' held on 14 July 10. In addition, to complement this, is a short paper entitled ' Regional Planning : where does it go from here?'

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28.06.10