

The South West : current planning issues, major projects, and professional planning activity

An extended and up-dated version of the Briefing note for the Presidential visit to the RTPI South West by Stephen Wilkinson 6-7 July 2017

A LARGE AND DIVERSE REGION

The South West is the largest of the nine English regions. At 23,800 sq km, it is larger than Wales and its northern boundary, in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds is closer to the Scottish border than it is to the Scilly Isles, its southern boundary. It is renowned for its environmental quality, its mild climate and spectacular coastline. The image of the region as a popular British holiday destination, dates from the days before mass foreign travel. However, tourism remains a key element of the economy, with more than 25 million visitors each year. Because it is such a diverse region, physically, economically and (increasingly) in terms of local government structure, achieving coherence has always been a challenge for the South West.

Population

The resident population of some 5.5 million (ONS, 2016 mid-year), has all but doubled over the last 100 years, from 2.8 million back in 1911 (an increase of 89% compared to that for England overall of 57%). The population is projected to reach 5.8 million by 2024 – a 7.3% increase, which is the fourth largest after London, Eastern England and the South East. Inward migration has long been a key element of population growth in the region, so that whilst the percentage of growth due to natural change is one of the lowest of any region, that due to inward migration is much the highest of any region (ONS forecasts to 2024), with most of this accounted for by migration from other parts of the UK. The region's population structure is older than the average for England, with the proportion of older people expected to grow faster than the national average over the next 20 years.

The last few decades have seen major urban growth around Bristol, Bath and Weston-super-Mare (in the 'West of England' sub-region – not to be confused with the South West of England region) ; in South East Dorset ; Swindon and Exeter, and significant growth elsewhere, which has changed the character of many of the smaller country and seaside towns. This has given rise to a demand for further new housing which remains un-met and has put a strain on social and physical infrastructure, not least the road and rail systems. All of the region's major urban areas are now experiencing road traffic congestion and pressure on their open space and surrounding countryside.

Economic change

At the same time, the South West has been undergoing 'structural' economic change. Decline in agricultural, fishing and other traditional employment such as mining and manufacturing, has now been joined by threats to the more recently established economic base of defence-associated, banking and insurance services, employment. This has, in part, been countered by new 'scientific' employment such as the Met Office, which in 2003 moved to Exeter from Bracknell ;the establishment of 'science parks' in Plymouth, Emersons Green (in the West of England) and Exeter ; and employment in an expanding higher education sector. The South West has the highest part-time working rate of any English region and 'seasonal' employment, much of it poorly paid, is a major feature - a reflection in no small part of the significance of the holiday industry.

Settlement pattern

The population density is the lowest but one of the English regions and it has an essentially rural settlement pattern in which half of the population lives in towns and villages of less than 20,000

people. There is no single, dominant, urban focus, with the 'Greater Bristol' urban area (551,000); 'South East Dorset' – Bournemouth/Poole/Christchurch (400,000); Plymouth (264,000); and Swindon (218,000); as the only major urban areas. Bristol is generally considered to be the 'regional capital', though the far south west looks to Plymouth as its main centre. Sitting between these two is Exeter (130,000) the county town of Devon, serving as a major administrative, educational and cultural centre, and the 'home' of the former South West Regional Assembly and former South West Regional Development Agency. The geographical 'balance point' of the region is the Somerset county town of Taunton (65,000), which was the administrative centre of the Regional Assembly and where the RTPI South West has for many years held its RMB/RAC meetings and where, until recently, it had its office.

Contrasting levels of well-being

The South West is externally perceived to be a prosperous part of the UK, enjoying a good environment and a strong economy – a perception which many claim has consistently put it at the end of the queue when it comes to central government recognition and investment priorities. However, areas of affluence mask a lower than UK average income overall. The reality is that there is, in detail, great variation in the quality of life enjoyed by the region's residents. Alongside areas of relative affluence, areas with high levels of multiple deprivation, measured in national terms, exist in a number of urban areas, such as Bristol, Plymouth and Bournemouth, and even Cheltenham, as well as in smaller towns and the more isolated rural areas, especially in Cornwall. At the same time, housing affordability levels (measured in terms of average income against average house prices) are amongst the lowest anywhere. Recent research into the deliverability and affordability of housing, carried out for the RTPI South West (*Heriot Watt University & Three Dragons, August 2017*) has confirmed that the region overall remains one of the least affordable in England, with the problem being particularly acute in Bournemouth, North Devon, Cornwall, Weymouth/West Dorset and 'Greater Exeter'. Overall, house prices have increased three times faster than the average regional income over the past 10 years and the latest figures from ONS (*Housing Affordability, England & Wales 1997-2016 , March 2017*) indicate that by between 1997 and 2016 , average house prices over most of the South West had risen to between 7 and 10 times average income, whilst in certain areas, notably 'South Devon', 'South East Dorset' and Cotswold, the figure was 10 to 14 times. The average ratio for England & Wales was 7.6. Low affordability is now a particularly acute problem in most rural areas of the region.

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PLANNING STRUCTURE

Following the most recent round of local government reorganisation in April 2009, the region now has 43 Planning Authorities, as follows :

- 12 Unitary Authorities , including the former Counties of Cornwall and Wiltshire.(both of which went unitary in 2009)
- 4 County Councils – Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire & Somerset
- 25 Districts/Boroughs 'sitting within' these Counties.
- 2 National Park Authorities – Dartmoor and Exmoor.

Prior to April 2009, there were 53 planning authorities, which between them, and via the mechanism of the former South West Regional Assembly, were responsible, together with the South West Regional Development Agency (SWRDA), for the production of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). The history of this particular RSS and its planned successor 'Integrated Regional Strategy' (combining spatial land use and economic development policies) ended on a somewhat sad and sorry note. Following many years of work, by planning professionals, politicians and others, which eventually succeeded in producing a workable consensus across a diverse region on the nature of future development, the whole process was derailed. Not only was this RSS much longer in the central government 'processing' stage than that for any other region (four

years), it was 'revoked' [abolished] in May 2013 by the incoming Coalition Government, having never been put in place, in final form, by the previous Labour administration !

All those bodies with a remit for strategic, across the region, spatial and economic planning, including the Government Office for the South West (GOSW), having now been abolished, there seems little prospect at the moment of any kind of replacement regional strategy emerging. In its place has come the 'strategic' policies of local authority Core Strategies/Local Plans with a 'duty to co-operate' with one another and the separate economic strategies of the region's six Local Enterprise Partnerships. More recently however, a number of joint Local Plans have emerged, including, notably, a 'Joint Spatial Plan' being prepared by the four Unitary Authorities comprising the 'West of England' sub-region [see below].

THE SOUTH WEST'S DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Core Strategies / Local Plans

Work on the 2004 Act LDF system Core Strategies got off to a promising start in the South West, with South Hams, Plymouth and Mid Devon very much in the van nationally in terms of producing new style local policy documents which were relatively quickly pronounced 'sound' and adopted. In the case of Plymouth, its pioneering LDF work was recognised within the planning profession by the award of the 2005 RTPI Silver Jubilee Cup for planning achievement. The pace of plan production was not however maintained, whilst the strategic policy context had, within a further five years, all but disappeared. By this stage, the 39 relevant planning authorities required to produce Core Strategies/Local Plans, (12 Unitary Authorities; 25 District/Borough Councils; and 2 National Park Authorities) had as their context, the ghostly legacy of 'Regional Planning Guidance 10', dating from 2001 and never replaced by an RSS; some 'saved' Structure Plan policies; and some very old [pre-2004 system] Local Plans.

The process of getting all of the new plans in place has proved to be slow and in many cases, tortuous [as it has been in England nationally]. Among the reasons for this have been over-stretched professional resources due to local government cuts and the complexity of the required process. Not confined to the South West, but certainly prominent here, have been delays due to the need for multiple rounds of consultation; assembling the evidence base; and more latterly, the process of arriving at an 'objectively assessed need' for new housing; the requirement to demonstrate a five year housing land supply; and the requirement to comply with the Duty to Co-operate. All of this has been despite the best efforts of the local government planning professionals on the ground. There have also been suggestions of a lack of local political commitment within some authorities. A major on-going concern in the region, both for the Government and for those seeking housing, has been the significant reduction in planned new housing numbers in many of the emerging plans compared to the figures previously included in the draft RSS. In addition, the level of new house building over the last 30 years or so has been in serious decline (*Heriot Watt University & Three Dragons, August 2017*). Additionally, Cornwall and Wiltshire have each experienced delays to the plan-making process due to local government reorganisation in 2009, which stopped the emerging former district-based plans in their tracks.

Complete geographical coverage across the region of up to date Plans is now however almost complete. By January 2017, just seven of the 39 relevant planning authorities, had yet to get a Plan in place. Six of these were however in the final stages of Examination, whilst the remaining Plan, for Cotswold District, was submitted in July this year, with Hearings planned to begin in October. The region's first joint Core Strategy was adopted in April 2014 by Christchurch & East Dorset.[see below]

Moving towards plans covering more than one authority area

Taking up both the spirit and the letter of the Duty to Co-operate, 9 authorities within the region have been involved in preparing joint Core Strategies or Local Plans : Christchurch & East Dorset Joint Core Strategy (Adopted April 2014) ; West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Joint Local Plan (Adopted October 2015) ; Gloucester/Cheltenham/Tewkesbury Joint Core Strategy (‘Final’, Proposed Modifications Hearings closed in July 2017) ; and North Devon & Torrington Joint Local Plan (Consultation on Councils’ Main Modifications closed this September, with Inspector’s final report expected in December). All of these joint plans have responded to the realities of economic areas wider than individual Districts, particularly Housing Market Areas.

Local plan reviews

Meanwhile, progress is being made on plan reviews, which will represent a ‘new generation’ of Local Plans across the region. Leading the way in terms of innovation, has been the corporate ‘Plymouth Plan’. In the West of England, the four Unitary Authorities (Bath & North East Somerset ; Bristol ; North Somerset ; and South Gloucestershire) are progressing with the required ‘early reviews’ of their respective Core Strategies, whilst at the same time working together on a new ‘Joint Spatial Plan’ & ‘Joint Transport Study’ which will provide the sub-regional context for these.

At the other end of the region, other authorities are reviewing their Local Plans, whilst at the same time working together on completely new joint plans reflecting the reality of housing markets and other economic links. For example, South Hams and West Devon, are combining local plan review with work on a wider joint strategic plan in partnership with Plymouth, whilst Exeter, East Devon, Mid Devon, Teignbridge and Devon County Council are preparing a new joint strategic plan for their areas. Initial consultation on ‘Issues’, for what will become a statutory ‘Greater Exeter Strategic Plan’ (GESP), looking ahead to 2040, took place between February and April 2017. The respective Local Plans are to remain and sit in the context of the GESP as they are reviewed over time.

THE DEVELOPMENT PLANS PICTURE – EMERGING NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS

By the end of 2016, some 300 Neighbourhood Plan designations had been made in the South West, though only 23 of these had been put in place (‘made’). For England overall, the completion rate by the same stage was slightly better – 2000 + designations with 230 of these ‘made’ (*DCLG data*). Leading the way in the region were Cornwall (5 Plans made out of 70 NP area designations in total) ; East Devon (38 NP area designations, covering, between them, almost all of the District area, with 1 Plan made) ; South Hams (22 area designations) ; and Teignbridge (13 area designations , with 1 Plan made) As has been the case nationally, by far the most Neighbourhood Plan activity has been in rural areas. By the start of 2017, very few LPAs in the region had not become involved to a greater or lesser extent in the process.

Early promise

As had been the case with the 2004 Act Core Strategy/Local Plan system, the South West was once again in the van nationally in the early years in taking up the opportunities provided by the new Neighbourhood Plans. The region featured prominently in the Government’s ‘NP Frontrunners’ programme (announced in 5 ‘waves’ between April 2011 and March 2012), with 37 of England’s 233 ‘trial plan areas’ , including 4 of the 17 in the ‘first wave’ – Dawlish, Cerne Valley, Lockleaze(Bristol) and Lynton & Lynmouth. The region also saw the very first informal ‘pilot Neighbourhood Plan Examination’ in Dawlish, held by Prof Chris Balch, of Plymouth University and RTPi South West Chair 2014, whilst Exeter St James and LynPlan(Lynton & Lynmouth), where among the first plans nationally to complete all stages to ‘being made’ [adoption by their respective LPA’s], in July and December 2013 respectively.

Slower progress since 2014

Over the three years since then, progress to plan completion has been slow compared to the situation nationally, even though in parts of the region there was already experience of community involvement in planning in 'neighbourhood-sized' areas. Cornwall for example, had a long tradition of advisory plans for each of its 19 'Community Network Areas', whilst in both Plymouth and Bristol, the concept of planning based on neighbourhoods, was already being developed well before the Localism Act.

Many South West Parishes have enthusiastically grasped the opportunity to become directly involved for the first time in the statutory policy-making process. However, almost all of the 'qualifying bodies' have found themselves on a steep learning curve, whilst the LPAs have, to varying degrees, provided support at a time of steeply declining local government resources, growing costs of officer input, and the need, in many cases, to prioritise getting an up to date Local Plan in place.

THE SOUTH WEST'S LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIPS

There are six Local Enterprise Partnerships in the South West, with areas defined in all cases by local authority boundaries, but differing significantly in size and 'economic potential'. They are, in order of establishment :

West of England The former County of Avon area, comprising 4 Unitary Authorities, with an already well established 'West of England Partnership' between commerce, industry and local government, giving it a head start on other parts of the region. The main concentration of population, jobs and economic potential in the South West, this 'city region' has a population of 1,121,268 (2016). The Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) was formally established April 2011 and secured the region's first Enterprise Zone - Temple Quarter, Bristol – in June 2011, followed by Bath Western Riverside in 2016.

Cornwall & Isles of Scilly The newly-Unitary Cornwall & the Scilly Isles. Formally established May 2011, with a population 556,000.(2016) As a mainly rural area and one of the least affluent and least well-connected parts of the UK, it is recognised by the EU as a 'less developed area'. The LEP regards economic growth 'as a sine qua non if the people of Cornwall are to gain improved standards of living and well being' .The only part of the region to benefit significantly from EU Structural & Investment Funding. Secured the region's second, Enterprise Zone – Aerohub Newquay – in August 2011.

Heart of the South West (HotSW) The largest South West LEP both by area and population, covering the Counties of Devon and Somerset with their 13 constituent 'second tier' authorities, the Unitary Authorities of Plymouth and Torbay and the Dartmoor and Exmoor NPAs – in all,19 Local Planning Authorities. Population 1,727,363 (2016). A physically and economically diverse area, where many of the issues relate to the dispersed nature of economic activity and problems of connectivity, but also growing urban centres such as Plymouth, Exeter and Taunton. Has secured three Enterprise Zones – South Yard, Plymouth and more recently, the 'multi-site' Huntspill Energy Park, near Bridgwater and the Exeter & East Devon Enterprise Zone (4 sites) (see below)

Dorset Covering the County of Dorset plus the Unitary Authorities of Bournemouth and Poole, - 8 LPA's in all - this LEP was formally established in July 2011. It has a population 771,884 (2016), 400,000 of whom live in the Poole, Bournemouth, Christchurch ('SE Dorset') conurbation. An economically buoyant part of the region, with better than average 'connectivity' with the rest of England : notably with the South East and London.

Gloucestershire (GFirst) The only South West LEP covering a single, traditional, two-tier County area – 7 LPA's in all. Spun out of a previously unsuccessful bid to the Government for a 'Gloucester, Swindon & Wiltshire LEP'. Formally established in November 2011. Population 623,129 (2016). Heavily business orientated, with a philosophy of 'run by business for business' and part of an already established local economic development and promotion 'landscape'.

Swindon & Wiltshire (SWLEP) The newly-Unitary Wiltshire and Unitary Swindon. Established in February 2012. [spun out of an unsuccessful bid- see above]. Population 706,314 (2016), of which 217,905 is accounted for by Swindon, one of the region's major and fastest growing urban areas, which is seen as a significant 'urban economic growth pole' along the M4 corridor. The largely rural area of Wiltshire (Population 488,409) is dominated by a low wage economy, agriculture and a diverse range of very small firms. At the same time, has a relatively well educated workforce contributing to an emerging 'knowledge economy' and modern, hi-tech manufacturing and research. There is a high defence presence on and around Salisbury Plain, where the resident military population is set to increase rapidly as forces are brought home from Germany.

The LEP's as successors of the South West Regional Development Agency

The Government has been gradually giving more economic power to the LEP's , seeing them, in particular, as spearheading 'sub-regional' bids for project finance as well as local 'custodians' of such resources. In this respect, the region's Partnerships have developed much like the other 33 across England, with activities, to date, focussed on such things as economic regeneration, skills training, transport funding and 'image-building' to attract inward investment. Further power for the Partnerships was signalled in the March 2013 Budget with the introduction of a 'single pot funding' system, as recommended by Lord Heseltine. More recently, and in common with all LEPs, those in the South West have produced Strategic Economic Plans as a bid for central government funding to be supported by private/local funding.

The 'Growth Deals', for the period 2015/16 -2016/17, announced in July 2014, saw the six South West LEP's between them secure £650m of central government funding to sit alongside an anticipated £1,156m of private/local funding. Dorset, notably, received the largest of the region's Deals, with £66m of government funding alongside £530m private/local. The LEP's have also produced draft Strategies for how they each propose to handle their respective shares of the EU Structural & Investment Fund Programme for 2014-2020. These allocations ranged in size from 593 million Euros for Cornwall & The Isles of Scilly [one of the largest allocations of all the 39 LEP's] , to 80m for the Heart of the South West, down to 38m for Gloucestershire.

The South West LEPs and the planning process

To date, LEP involvement in the planning process in the region has been limited, but, to better understand their potential role in delivering economic growth, strategic planning and sustainable development, the RTPi South West commissioned Plymouth University, in association with Hardisty Jones and Figura Planning, to conduct in depth research into their activities. This provided a South West specific picture to build upon the findings of previous RTPi national research into the role of LEPs across England in planning for growth. (*Planning for Growth : The Role of LEPs* , Pugalis & Townsend, July 2015)

The South West study findings, which were published in March 2016, were as follows : As champions for local economic growth the LEPs have been focussed on growing private sector business activity, improving skills and productivity and economic infrastructure. There has been increasing involvement in competitive bidding for funds, particularly Local Growth Funds [see above], although their performance in these areas has been variable. All six of the LEPs have identified 'priority sectors' as a means of delivering local growth eg. aerospace, nuclear power,

renewable energy and advanced manufacturing. Their agendas have addressed 'soft' people issues, such as knowledge, innovation and skills, as well as 'harder' place-based matters such as strategic connectivity, infrastructure, land and premises.

However, few South West LEPs have so far taken up the opportunity to adopt a strong role in relation to planning. Some have decided not to engage in the planning process given their limited resources and expertise, relying on their relationship with their constituent LPAs to ensure alignment between economic, spatial and transport planning. In this regard, the LEPs have operated within the framework of the region's adopted and emerging Core Strategies/Local Plans. A particular focus has been transport and other infrastructure projects aimed at 'unlocking' employment and housing development and funding has focused on principal urban areas and main transport corridors. Only in the West of England has the LEP taken on a formal role in contributing to and brokering joint work between the four LPAs.

This has included working as part of the partnership preparing the 'Joint Spatial Plan' and 'Joint Transport Study'. Elsewhere, the Heart of the South West LEP (HotSW) has been closely involved in securing new economic opportunities with significant planning implications, such new research and educational opportunities arising from the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station and the recently confirmed new Enterprise Zones near Bridgwater and Exeter [see above].

PLANNING ISSUES ARISING FROM GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, POLITICS AND MECHANISMS

There is one overriding issue which continues to challenge the South West's planners and looks set to do so well into the future. This is the need to balance the level of investment and development, essential to maintain the region's economy and quality of life of its residents, with the need to protect its greatest asset – the quality of the renowned natural and built environment in its countryside, around its long coastline, and in its cities, towns and villages.

It is a concern of many that there is no longer a region-wide strategic planning policy mechanism in place at either local or central government level to address this. Also now missed is the former South West Observatory , a network of professional expertise from local government, the Universities and government agencies from across the region. Set up in 2001, this operated for over 10 years, with a core unit of full time staff, drawing together research, resources and analysis, with the aim of informing decisions based on the best available evidence. Sadly, the Observatory had to be wound up in the wake of the Coalition Government's cuts to all things 'regional'.

TOPIC-BASED ISSUES IN THE SOUTH WEST

Outlined below are some of the more significant 'topic-based' issues and challenges which planners and others in the region are addressing :

Satisfying the demand for new housing in the most sustainable way

Pressure to provide more housing has been a common feature of virtually all development plan work in the region for many years, with long, drawn out Core Strategy / Local Plan Examinations seeking a resolution of matters such as 'objectively assessed need' , the five year housing land supply , and the Duty to Co-operate. Added to this, in many areas, has been the separate and continuing need for new 'affordable' housing – an issue brought into sharp focus by former South West MP, Lord Matthew Taylor in his 'Review of the Rural Economy and Affordable Housing' published in 2008.

Particular housing development initiatives have included two 'New Settlements' on sites allocated originally in the Devon Structure Plan – at Cranbrook,(8,000 new homes) east of Exeter and a key element of the 'Exeter & East Devon Growth Point' (see below) ; and at Sherford, east of Plymouth (5,500 new homes) .Other on-going schemes include 'Clay Country' – an Eco Town scheme designed to regenerate an area of redundant china clay quarries north of St Austell ; the

Seldown Eco-Village on a brownfield site close to the centre of Poole; and Tadpole Garden Village on the northern edge of Swindon (1,300 new homes).

In Taunton Deane, in response to the Coalition Government's 'Locally-led garden cities' initiative of 2014, and with access to special central government funding, has come the Monkton Heathfield 'Garden Town' (urban extension) on the northern edge of Taunton, where around 950 dwellings have already been delivered, with a planned total of some 4,500 energy efficient homes. Here a full range of new infrastructure including a new district centre, three new primary schools, a new secondary school, a country park, locally generated electricity and SUDS.

Major urban regeneration / brownfield site schemes include, in Bath, Western Riverside and three former MOD sites, together providing several thousand much needed new homes, within the challenging context of a World Heritage City ; in Charlton Hayes, South Gloucestershire ('Greater Bristol' urban area) 2,200 new homes on land previously part of Filton Airfield ; and Plymouth's RTPI award-winning 'Plan for Homes' involving the release of 33 Council owned sites (73% brownfield) which is planned to deliver 1650 new homes.

Regeneration has gone hand in hand with listed building restoration in schemes such as the 201 home 'Old Railway Quarter' in Swindon – another recent RTPI SW award winner.

A particular challenge for South West planning, perhaps greater than in any other English region, has been the regeneration of land and buildings in and around former active docklands for housing, commercial and leisure uses. Major examples include the former Bristol City Docks ; Gloucester Docks (winner of RTPI regional and national awards for planning excellence in 1992 and 2013 respectively) ; Royal William Yard, Plymouth ; and Exeter and Bridgwater Docks.

Harnessing the region's huge potential for generating renewable energy

Wind, wave, solar, tidal and geothermal resources have all been harnessed in the South West, whilst protecting the best of the natural environment. Projects like the 'Wave Hub' and others involving wind and solar power in Cornwall and elsewhere and the capture of tidal power from the Severn Estuary (which the region 'shares' with Wales), are seen by some as major commercial opportunities responding to global warming, and by others, as environmental threats. The development of on-shore windfarms has posed particular challenges in Devon and especially Cornwall, which saw Britain's first ever commercial wind turbine, at Delabole, come into operation in 1992. More recently, solar power generation has come to the fore in many areas. In 2010, Cornwall Council set up a specialist 'Solar PV Planning Team' in response to an increasing volume of planning applications for solar PV arrays.

Electricity from nuclear power

Nuclear power plants have operated along the Severn Estuary / Bristol Channel coast since Berkeley came on stream in 1960, followed by Oldbury in 1967 and Hinkley Point A in 1965. All of these have now been de-commissioned, but new and much bigger plants are now planned on two of these sites, which will have to be successfully accommodated environmentally, whilst at the same time making the most of the related local economic benefits on offer.

The £20 bn Hinkley Point C scheme (HPC), which was granted its Development Consent under the 2008 Planning Act NSIP system back in March 2013, has become a saga of international proportions. After many years of uncertainty, delay, and rising cost, the decision to go ahead was finally made in Autumn 2016. This new 3.2 GW plant, being built on the West Somerset coast near Bridgwater, by EDF Energy with financial partner China General Nuclear Power Corporation, is the UK's first new nuclear power plant in a generation. The scheme has been a severe test for the NSIP consents regime, with its significant up-front consultation requirements ; for the finances of EDF; for UK central government energy policy ; and, more recently, for Anglo Chinese international relations ! Work is now well underway on what is undoubtedly the largest single

construction scheme ever in the South West and arguably the largest currently in the UK. Alongside this is National Grid's new 400,000 volt power line scheme to link the new plant to the main electricity grid near Avonmouth some 35 miles to the north, with 5 miles of the route underground as it passes across the Mendip Hills. This has also been granted consent under the NSIP regime, but, like HPC, has been subject to delays.

Meanwhile, on the local stage, the economic benefits of HPC for West Somerset, Sedgemoor and the wider County area promise to be considerable - 25,000 jobs during construction; 900 permanent jobs on site when the plant is operational and £40 m into the local economy each year during the life of the plant through wages and supply contracts. Among the new spin-off investment projects is the Somerset Energy Innovation Centre near Bridgwater opened in 2016. The associated planning processes for HPC have also set records. The scheme was the subject of a massive Planning Performance Agreement signed in 2009, which set the context for the subsequent raft of planning applications between February 2010 and September 2014 dealing with access and preliminary works, whilst in 2011, West Somerset Council produced and adopted an 'HPC SPD' to provide a context for EDF and other related development proposals. The professional planning expertise in handling nuclear power station construction, honed within a very small team here in the South West, has already been in demand from other professionals faced with new nuclear plants in Anglesey and Suffolk.

A few miles upstream, on the English Severn Estuary coast, and in what is now South Gloucestershire, is Hitachi's Horizon Nuclear Power 2.7GW Oldbury-on-Severn scheme. This had reached the pre-application stage, also under the NSIP regime, by summer 2016.

Transport infrastructure

In part due to its size and physical and economic diversity, achieving modern standard connectivity has long been a concern in the South West. The region's 'spine' motorways – the M4 and M5, are poorly connected to outlying areas which they must serve, the latter only goes south westwards as far as the middle of Devon and the A30 – the main spine route onwards from Exeter into Cornwall, has only recently been given long overdue upgrades [see below]. Sections of both motorways now suffer from severe congestion on a regular basis, especially the M5 south of Bristol.

The rail network is limited and vulnerable. There are no significant local commuter rail services, with just limited networks serving the Bristol, Exeter and Plymouth areas. The Great Western mainline electrification scheme between London, Bristol and South Wales, work on which is now underway, will only go part of the way to addressing the issue, offering little for region beyond Bristol, apart from new 'dual mode' trains, which will then be diesel powered as they travel further south west. The experience during the winter of 2013/14, of the severance, for several months, of the main [and only !] rail link between south Devon, Plymouth and Cornwall, and the rest of England, at Dawlish, amply demonstrated just how vulnerable the region's transport infrastructure is.

The region's seas and coastline

The region's coastline is both longer than that of any other English region, but also spectacular and, in many stretches, of internationally recognised environmental significance. Major examples include the Dorset & Devon World Heritage 'Jurassic Coast' and the Severn Estuary, with its RAMSAR status and multiple other designations. Recreational and commercial (ports and fishing) opportunities have had to be sensitively accommodated, but there have been more recent challenges. Off the Dorset / Hampshire coast, in the south east of the region, the proposed Navitus Bay offshore windfarm project, involving 121 turbines, each 650 feet high, just a few miles off the coast, proved highly controversial, with significant high-level political opposition. At the time, the Government was known to switching its support, in principle, from on-shore to off-shore

windfarms, but in 2016, the scheme was refused Development Consent by the then DECC Secretary, in what many will have seen as a strong acknowledgement of the importance of protecting the region's natural environmental assets.

Elsewhere, the economic opportunities provided by offshore renewable energy activities [wave, tidal and offshore wind] are being assessed and co-ordinated by planners and others. On the national stage, the UK's emergent marine spatial planning regime has been playing 'catch-up', with the programme of Marine Spatial Plans recently reaching the region in the shape of the 'South Inshore & South Onshore Marine Plan'. The 'South West Marine Energy Park' was launched, with Government support, early in 2012, to create ' a favourable business environment' to facilitate access to marine energy resources. Its 100 member organisations include Cornwall Council ; the Cornwall & Isles of Scilly LEP ; the Universities of Plymouth and Exeter ; and Regen South West.

Protecting and enhancing the natural environment generally

In addition to the region's two National Parks (Dartmoor & Exmoor) and 14 AONB's , there are many other areas with designated protection featuring prominently within Local Plan policies. Notable among these are the region's three most significant Green Belts - around Bristol & Bath ; Bournemouth / Poole / Christchurch ; and Cheltenham & Gloucester. Core Strategy bids for land to meet 'objectively assessed [housing] need' have now put these long established Green Belts under significant pressure, with fierce local debates about how much protection should, or can, be afforded to them in the long term within the context of a desperate shortage of new housing.

Protecting and promoting the interests of the region's rural areas

Outside of the few significant urban centres, the South West is essentially rural, with most of the population living in small market towns and villages. Here, issues such as poor connectivity (including very limited broadband coverage) and appropriate access to essential services such as public transport, medical facilities, and shops, as well as a chronic shortage of 'affordable' housing, remain a challenge.

Devolution and the future administrative structure with the South West

As the 'devolution train' nationally gathers momentum, it is, at this early stage, difficult to judge the extent to which the process is going to change the local governance geography of the South West. Potentially however, devolution 'deals' provide the opportunity for levels of strategic planning which were lost to the region with the demise of the RSS, though it is too early to assess the detailed implications for the planning system. By the Government's deadline of 4 September 2015, 38 bids of various kinds had been submitted across England – some full-blown prospectus documents, with detailed 'asks' and others more in the way of requests for more discussion with central government. They were also highly diverse in terms of geographical scale and constituent membership.

By the September 2015 deadline, seven 'bids' had been submitted from the South West – five of them based on LEP areas : Cornwall & Isles of Scilly ; Gloucestershire; Dorset ; Heart of the South West ; and the West of England. The other two were from Swindon and Wiltshire, who chose to make separate bids even though together they form a single LEP. By March 2016, devolution deals had been agreed with 11 areas, including two in the South West – Cornwall (agreed in July 2015) and the West of England Combined Authority (agreed in March 2016) .

The Cornwall deal [the third to be confirmed nationally after Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire] is unusual in being for a major rural area, as opposed to the more typical urban ones,

and for not involving commitment to an elected mayor. Its devolved powers include franchising bus services ; joint working to 're-shape' FE training and adult learning ; and new apprenticeship opportunities. Significantly, the deal also confers on Cornwall directly 'Intermediate Body' status for two EU Structural Funds. The West of England deal has not, in the event, turned out to be as 'combined' as originally planned because, at the last minute, one of the four Unitary Authorities – North Somerset, failed to reach the necessary political agreement to join with the other three. This deal does include a commitment to a 'metro mayor', the first of whom is now in office following an election on 4 May 2017. The existing leaders of the three authorities, including in Bristol's case, an elected Mayor, will continue to be responsible for all their current council services, except where powers are transferred to the Combined Authority. The deal includes a significant strategic planning and transport element in the shape of the emerging Joint Spatial Plan and Joint Transport Study to which all four Councils will continue to contribute.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the south east of the region, the original bid, covering the whole of Dorset has now become a plan for two separate combined authorities, which was submitted to the Government early in 2017. Under this, Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole would come together as a new unitary authority for what is essentially the south east Dorset conurbation, whilst, covering the rest of Dorset, the remaining districts – East Dorset ; North Dorset ; Purbeck ; and West Dorset / Weymouth & Portland, would form the other new authority.

The devolution process is thus an on-going one, both nationally and in the South West and much of it would appear to be driven by local government efforts to make 'economies of scale' cost savings, at the same time as securing more powers locally to take decisions. It remains to be seen how much planning, which many would consider has already received more than its fair share of cost cutting, is going to feature in all of this and what is to be the emerging role of the region's LEPs. The business community at least appears to have high hopes. According to a recent CBI report [*Shaping Regional Infrastructure – Priorities for growth – South West, April 2017*] businesses see devolution as a means of introducing more effective governance, collaboration and strategic planning.

A very unusual opportunity

The Goonhilly Earth Station on Cornwall's Lizard Peninsula has for many years been a significant part of the UK's satellite communications system, whilst nearby Newquay Airport, on the north coast has been steadily developing commercial air services as well as being the site of the 'Aerohub' Enterprise Zone. However, the South West has now featured on a shortlist as a location for our first 'Spaceport'. Material published at the 2016 Farnborough Air Show , as a follow-up to the Government's ' Space Innovation & Growth Strategy 2014-2030' included a shortlist of six potential sites. These sites are as follows : Campbeltown (on the Mull of Kintyre) ; Prestwick Airport (Ayrshire) ; RAF Leuchars (near St Andrews, Fife) ; Stornaway Airport (on the Isle of Lewis) ; Llanbedr Airport (in the Snowdonia National Park) ; and Cornwall Newquay Airport.

In an outline evaluation, it is noted that each of the sites in Scotland has weather issues which could be a problem, as might future uncertainty about Scottish independence. The site in Wales would obviously face the major environmental issue of being in a National Park . Newquay however, is seen as potentially the most promising, because although it can also suffer from poor winter weather, it is close to Goonhilly and could provide 'an important potential economic bonus for England's poorest County'. Since then, information has begun to emerge (See '*Beyond the horizon : The future of UK aviation*', HM Gov July 2017) about what a UK Spaceport might look like and about how, and under what kind of regulatory framework satellite launches might take place. A move towards such a framework could emerge in the recently published ' Space Industry Bill'. In the meantime, those in the South West, and Cornwall in particular should watch this space !

MAJOR PROJECTS IN THE SOUTH WEST

Major projects currently underway include :

Hinkley Point C nuclear power station This £20 bn project by EDF with Chinese support, is almost certainly the largest single construction project ever in the region. Over 5,600 people will be working on the 176 hectare site during the busiest part of the construction and commissioning phase, which is due to take close on 10 years. HPC presents a transformational opportunity for the economies of West Somerset, Sedgemoor, Somerset County and the wider South West, with an estimated 25,000 new job opportunities during construction and 900 permanent positions during the station's 60 year life.

The Army Basing Programme – Creating Sustainable Communities on Salisbury Plain A unique £1.2bn development project being run by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) with the support of consultants WYG and in close collaboration with Wiltshire Council. The programme involves the delivery of new facilities within five existing locations in the Salisbury Training Area for about 4,300 troops and their families returning from Germany by 2020. Key to the project, which has a very short timescale, is the improvement of the integration of the military and civilian communities on the Plain.

The Exeter /East Devon Growth Point A long-term strategic development partnership project involving several elements catering for housing and employment growth within and to the east of Exeter, adjacent to the A30 and M5. Includes Cranbrook New Community (with a new railway station); Exeter International Airport (expansion) ; Skypark Business Park; Exeter Science Park; Flybe Training Academy; a Clyst Honiton By-pass; an Intermodal Freight Terminal ; and improvements to Junctions 29 & 30 on the M5. In addition, a multi-site Enterprise Zone has recently been established. New sustainable public transport infrastructure is being developed to serve the area as are new parks and open spaces as part of a green infrastructure strategy.

A30/A303/A358 Trunk roads improvements These long overdue improvements to one of the region's spine routes, involving several elements, were 'unlocked' by a £2bn South West roads investment strategy announced by the Government in July 2014. Details of the elements are now emerging, including consultation on the proposed route for the new dual carriageway on the A30 in Cornwall, between Chiverton and Carland Cross, costing between £100m & £250m ; further dualling of the A30/A303 and of the A358 link between the A303 and the M5 at Taunton ; and a planned 1.8 mile dual carriageway tunnel plus 8 miles of new dual carriageway, on the stretch of the A303 running close to Stonehenge. This highly contentious tunnel scheme was finally confirmed by the Government in January 2017 following 28 years of discussion, debate and indecision, during which time the volume of road traffic on this single lane stretch of trunk road has increased dramatically.

Great Western Railway Electrification Though subject to delays and recently scaled down (with the centre of Bristol and Bath not to be included for the time being) this scheme will see brand new electric Hitachi trains running on the main line out from Paddington, through the region from Swindon to Bristol Parkway and on through the Severn Tunnel to Newport , Cardiff and Swansea.

The Plymouth Plan Not a project in the same sense as those above, but something on which the City of Plymouth is once again taking a lead nationally. This pioneering and innovative corporate development plan goes beyond statutory planning to bring this together the strategies of all the other services for which it has responsibility. Innovative community involvement and continuing public consultation has gone hand in hand with cross-party political agreement and commitment. The submission and examination of the final product against the 'standard' PINS template promises to be interesting !

RECENT PLANNING SUCCESSES

The RTPI South West's Awards for Planning Excellence (run in conjunction with the Institute's national awards competition) have been showcasing the achievements of the region's planners annually since 1992. Projects large and small, involving completed schemes on the ground, as well as plans and other work , continue to reflect the diverse nature of what its planners do. This has been illustrated nowhere more so than in the 2017 Awards, selected from the largest ever number of entries in the region. Some of these are described below :

There were two joint winners in the 'Excellence in Planning Delivery' category. The Stafford Close Housing Scheme, Christow , is an 18 home development with high sustainability, affordability and low energy credentials on a highly sensitive village edge site within the Dartmoor National Park , delivered by a partnership including a Community Land Trust, and a local Housing Association , together with positive planning input by the planners of the NPA. The Old Railway Quarter, Swindon is a high density, 201 homes, scheme on the last major land parcel of the Railway Works Conservation Area. The formerly heavily contaminated site has involved the high quality restoration, renovation and re-use as apartments of an historic listed building previously on the 'at risk' register alongside new build housing to a design appropriate to the historic context. All this has been achieved as a result of a close working relationship between specialist house builder Thomas Homes Ltd and the Conservation and Planning Officers of the Borough Council.

Among a range of projects highly commended in the 'Excellence in Spatial Planning' category are The Victory Oak Housing Scheme, St Leonards, East Dorset, which is a large partnership scheme promising major 'biodiversity gain' on a challenging former hospital site and the Stroud District Plan which conveyed the enthusiasm of the planning team, and impressed the judges with its unusual features, including on-line interactive mapping bringing the policies map 'alive'.

Winner in the 'Excellence in Planning Decision Making' category is the Army Basing Programme – Creating Sustainable Communities on Salisbury Plain in which the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, together with partners and most notably, Wiltshire Council, is leading a £1.2bn project to deliver new facilities on five exiting locations within the Salisbury Plain training area for 4,300 additional troops and their families returning from Germany by 2020.

Winner in the 'Excellence in Spatial Planning' category and overall winner 2017 is the Water Space Project, Bath . This unusual spatial planning project, involving extensive partnership working and consultation, co-ordinated by the Bath & North East Somerset planners, is addressing the issues and identifying improvement projects along a hitherto largely neglected 16 mile River Avon and Kennet & Avon Canal corridor.

SKILLS & EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The range of planning skills required and the range of public and private sector employment opportunities are as extensive and varied as the South West is large and diverse. Despite recent 'contractions', the region's 43 Planning Authorities continue to require and attract young planners, attracted by the range of rural and urban challenges here as well as by the quality of life offered by its environment. Although opportunities within central government agencies are now limited, there continue to be others within a number of 'green' organisations based in the region, including the Soil Association and SUSTRANS.

The private sector is characterised by a flourishing body of planning consultants, with (according to the latest RTPI Directory) over 80 firms operating within the South West, offering a wide range of specialist expertise. A number of the larger firms, including WYG, Peter Brett Associates, Savills/Smiths Gore, RPS and Pegasus, have offices in several towns, and international names

such as Colliers, Arup and Atkins, also operate here. Research and consultancy expertise, not to mention a supply of young graduates, is also provided by the region's two University planning schools – UWE, Bristol and Plymouth, the former of which has been providing RTPI accredited planning courses continuously for almost 40 years.

NB Any views or opinions expressed in this paper, beyond the direct reporting of facts, are those of the author and not of the RTPI...though they are based on many years of being involved in and the monitoring of planning activity in the South West.

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