



RTPI

mediation of space · making of place

The Government's approach to sustainable development

RTPI evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry

1 September 2015

Introduction

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) has over 23,000 members who work in the public, private, voluntary and education sectors. It is a charity whose purpose is to develop the art and science of town planning for the benefit of the public. The RTPI develops and shapes policy affecting the built environment, works to raise professional standards and supports members through continuous education, practice advice, training and development.

Environmental Audit Committee Questions and Answers

1. **What key policies are needed over the course of this Parliament to adequately protect the environment, promote growth in the low carbon sector and improve wellbeing? Does the Government's current fiscal and legislative agenda accord with the action required and, if not, why not and where might it be improved?**
 - a. Spatial planning can provide a system and framework to help balance social, environmental and economic impactsⁱ. However the lack of a spatial dimension in Government policy limits progress towards sustainable development. The following sections outline how a stronger degree of spatial planning could help protect the environment, support the low-carbon economy and improve wellbeing. This response refers only to England.
 - b. The Government plans for a significant expansion of housing supplyⁱⁱ, and it is critical that related policies support a sustainable, strategic and plan-led approach to delivery. Although housing policy has numerous implications for sustainable development which are outside the scope of this response, a key concern of the RTPI is that elements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) may be leading to a proliferation of housing sites which are poorly located in terms of proximity to employment and services, and of insufficient scale to support the efficient provision of infrastructure. The planning system has to date been generally successful in preventing sprawl, however recent changes risks creating increasingly dispersed settlement patterns in England, patterns associated with higher levels of car-dependency, poverty and social exclusion, and greenhouse gas emissionsⁱⁱⁱ.

- c. Our policy and research agenda has examines these issues in detail. Our Map for England study, conducted in 2012, indicated a considerable overlap between areas of projected housing and infrastructure growth in England, and areas with environmental and policy constraints to growth, including problems of flood risk and water stress^{iv}. Following evidence provided to the CLG Select Committee inquiry on the operation of the NPPF^v, we are now undertaking a major research project which will map the location and scale of new housing developments in relation to employment in fast-growing areas of the UK, in order to better understand potential impacts of changing settlement patterns on the sustainable development agenda^{vi}. Most recently, our 2015 report on commuting patterns in the London Metropolitan green belt highlighted potential negative impacts from uncoordinated housing growth in terms of car use^{vii}.
- d. Our Map for England study showed that individual government departments now have more than 100 major maps for England relating to policies and programmes on the economy, transport, communications, housing and the environment. We therefore recommend that a single place be created within government which makes all of these maps available to view. This would enable policymakers to make better judgments about how individual policy proposals interact with and affect the sustainable development trajectory of the country as a whole.
- e. Government policy should also continue to support the objectives of Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LTSF) which ends in 2015. Transport policy needs to retain focus on encouraging sustainable modal shift and inter-modal transport schemes, and examine alternative transport funding and appraisal models, in order to maximise the wider benefits of major transport projects^{viii}. And while current transport policy has seen some success in reducing emissions by encouraging the uptake of electric and ultra-low emission vehicles^{ix}, recent proposals for major road investment (including the new Roads Fund^x) lack an independent assessment of how negative externalities from increased road traffic^{xi} will be mitigated. Problems of urban air pollution are likely to create environmental and wellbeing challenges even with improvements in vehicle emissions^{xii}.
- f. Stability is also needed to support growth in the low carbon economy. The Government should demonstrate that changes to policy and subsidies related to onshore wind, and continued plans to exploit North Sea oil and gas and shale gas, do not contravene their manifesto promise to cut carbon emissions as cheaply as possible^{xiii}.
- g. Urgent progress is also required on energy efficiency and housing standards. The Government has abandoned key aspects of the zero carbon homes agenda, including the powers provided in the 2015 Infrastructure Act to provide for off-site carbon abatement measures, and the planned increase for on-site energy efficiency standards (through the Building Regulations) due in 2017. This will make it difficult to implement the EU Energy Performance of Buildings Directive and hinder progress towards meeting the next carbon budget. It also creates

uncertainty for house builders and does not recognise future risks around fuel poverty.

- h. A clear strategy is also needed for improving the energy efficiency of the majority of existing residential buildings, following the end of the Green Deal and Green Deal Home Improvement Fund.

2. Where should responsibility lie in Government for ensuring the sustainable development approach is adopted by all Government departments?

- a. No comment

3. What metrics could the Committee use to monitor the Government's performance on sustainable development over the course of the Parliament?

- a. The RTPI believes that performance on sustainable development requires metrics which go beyond measurement of economic throughput and growth (e.g. GVA and CDP), and which recognise the significance of asset appreciation and depreciation as related to stocks of housing, infrastructure, public space, clean air, social cohesion and natural capital^{xiv}.
- b. We support the target of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Defra to incorporate natural capital into national accounts by 2020^{xv}, following the recommendations of the Government's National Capital Committee (NCC)^{xvi}. This would enable a variety of natural capital assets and their corresponding economic, social and environmental benefits to be better factored into national decision-making, and for any increase or decline in asset stocks to be evaluated against other sectors of the economy. The EAC should try to speed up adoption of these measures in recognition of the Government's 2011 White Paper on the natural environment which sets out their commitment to "...to leave the natural environment of England in a better state than it inherited"^{xvii}.
- c. In light of the reversal on zero carbon homes policy, the EAC should monitor Part L of the Building Regulations as a metric for Government performance towards meeting the requirements of the 2010 EU Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (recast), which requires all new non-domestic and domestic buildings to be constructed at nearly zero-energy levels from 2019 and 2020 respectively.

This evidence is prepared by Richard Blyth, Head of Policy, Practice and Research:
020 7929 8178 richard.blyth@rtpi.org.uk

Royal Town Planning Institute
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- ⁱⁱ HM Treasury. (2015) *Fixing the Foundations: Creating a more prosperous nation*. Pages 43-48. Available from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/443898/Productivity_Plan_web.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ Government Office for Science. (2014) *Urban form and infrastructure: A morphological review*. Pages 41-49. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/324161/14-808-urban-form-and-infrastructure-1.pdf
- ^{iv} RTPI. (2014) *Planning Horizons no. 1: Thinking Spatially*. Pages 19-21. Available from: http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/1004403/rtpi_thinking_spatially.pdf
- ^v CLG Select Committee. (2014) *Written evidence submitted by the Royal Town Planning Institute*. Available from: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/communities-and-local-government-committee/operation-of-the-national-planning-policy-framework/written/9385.html>
- ^{vi} Available from: <http://www.rtpi.org.uk/knowledge/research/projects/location-of-development/>
- ^{vii} RTPI. (2015) *Building in the green belt? A report into commuting patterns in the Metropolitan green belt*. Available from: http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/1432483/Building_in_the_green_belt.pdf
- ^{viii} RTPI. (2014) *Transport Infrastructure Investment: Capturing the Wider Benefits of Investment in Transport Infrastructure*. Available from: http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/816110/capturing_the_wider_benefits.pdf
- ^{ix} Committee on Climate Change. (2015) *Meeting Carbon Budgets – Progress in reducing the UK’s emissions: 2015 Report to Parliament*. Page 119. Available from: https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/6.737_CCC-BOOK_WEB_030715_RFS.pdf
- ^x HM Treasury. (2015) *Fixing the Foundations: Creating a more prosperous nation*. Pages 30-31. Available from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/443898/Productivity_Plan_web.pdf
- ^{xi} Department for Transport. (2015) *Road Traffic Forecasts 2015*. Page 6. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/411471/road-traffic-forecasts-2015.pdf
- ^{xii} Natural Capital Committee. (2015) *The State of Natural Capital: Protecting and Improving Natural Capital for Prosperity and Wellbeing*. Page 11. Available from: <http://nebula.wsimg.com/272833c20f4e7f67e2799595a7f06088?AccessKeyId=68F83A8E994328D64D3D&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>
- ^{xiii} The Conservative Party. (2015) *The Conservative Party Manifesto*. Page 56. Available from: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/manifesto2015/ConservativeManifesto2015.pdf>
- ^{xiv} RTPI. (2014) *Fostering Growth: Understanding and Strengthening the Economic Benefits of Planning*. Page 5. Available from: http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/1020786/rtpi_fostering_growth_june_2014.pdf
- ^{xv} Office for National Statistics. (2015) *Natural capital accounting 2020 roadmap: Interim review and forward look*. Available from: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/natural-capital/related-publications/nc-accounting-roadmap-2020.pdf>
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