

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

Written to brief The RTPI President for her regional visits during 2020

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## 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 the South West is so large and so diverse , physically, economically and, more recently, in terms of local government structure, achieving coherence has always been a challenge.

The RTPI South West region also serves members in the Channel Islands, where the States of Jersey and Guernsey/Alderney respectively, operate a planning system similar in many ways to the UK model.

## Population

The resident population of some 5.6 million (ONS, 2018 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 age 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 ; and in Swindon, Exeter, Taunton, Trowbridge, Westbury and Bridgwater. At the same time, significant growth elsewhere, has changed the character of many of the smaller market and seaside towns. However, demand for further new housing is only partially being met, whilst this new development continues to 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. Declines in agricultural, fishing and other traditional employment in mining and manufacturing, have been compensated for by the establishment of a new economic base comprising defence industries, banking and insurance services and higher education. To this has more recently been added new 'scientific' employment such as the Met Office, which in 2003 moved its HQ to Exeter from Bracknell, and the establishment of 'science parks' in Plymouth, Exeter and Emersons Green ( in the West of England, to the east of Bristol). Unemployment is low, but at the same time, the South West has the highest part-time working rate of any English region, with 'seasonal' employment, much of it poorly paid, a major feature - a reflection in no small part of the significance of the holiday industry.

## Settlement pattern

The South West is mainly rural in character with a population density the lowest but one of the English regions. Around half of the population lives in towns and villages of less than 20,000 people. There is no single, dominant, urban focus, but there are a number of significant continuous urban areas - 'Greater Bristol' ( pop 551,000); the 'south east Dorset' conurbation – Bournemouth/Christchurch/Poole (400,000); Plymouth (264,000); Swindon (218,000); Torbay (143,400) ; and Exeter (130,000). These are the region's main 'economic drivers', but elsewhere there are also busy market and coastal towns . Among the fastest growing of these are Weston-Super-Mare, Taunton ( the County Town of Somerset) and Bridgwater.( the last of which has seen its economy transformed over the last 10 years as a result of Hinkley Point C related development and investment ).

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 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 Taunton, 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. Bristol has for many years been the home of the Planning Inspectorate and was the home of the former Government Regional Office for the South West.

## Contrasting levels of well-being

The South West is often 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, although overall GVA is among the highest of the English regions, average incomes are lower than the UK average, and 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 the larger urban areas, such as Bristol, Plymouth, Bournemouth, and even Cheltenham. This is also the case in smaller towns and the more isolated rural areas, especially in Cornwall.

Another serious social issue is that 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* ) 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 increased three times faster than the average regional income over the 10 years time span of the research and 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 rose 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.

## Parliamentary constituencies

The South West has 54 Parliamentary constituencies. Following the December 2019 General Election, the Conservatives remained by far the largest party, with 47 seats. Labour has 6 seats ( 4 of them in Bristol, plus 1 each in Exeter and Plymouth ). The Liberal Democrats have the 1 remaining seat – Bath. Back in 2010, this Party held 15 of the seats, though its decline since then in Parliamentary terms has not been mirrored in local government, where it remains a major force.

## THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PLANNING STRUCTURE

The last 10 years have seen a significant reduction in the number of individual planning authorities due to successive rounds of local government reorganisation. Prior to the reorganisation in April 2009 there were 53 of them, now, following further reorganisation in April 2019, there are now just 35.

In 2009, the Counties of Cornwall and Wiltshire became individual Unitary Authorities with the abolition of their 'second tier' Districts/Boroughs, whilst in 2019, the County of Dorset and its 7 second tier Councils, became two new Unitary Authorities – Dorset ( combining 6 of the above Councils ) and Bournemouth/Christchurch/Poole ( BCP ) ( combining the two former Unitary Authorities and Christchurch

Borough forming the 'south east Dorset' conurbation. Meanwhile, in the central part of the region, and also in 2019, West Somerset and Taunton Deane merged to become Somerset West & Taunton Council.

The region's structure is now as follows :

- 12 Unitary Authorities ( including the Isles of Scilly ) .
- 3 County Councils – Devon, Gloucestershire & Somerset
- 18 Districts/Borough Councils 'sitting within' these three Counties.
- 2 National Park Authorities – Dartmoor and Exmoor.

These authorities between them and variously , are responsible for preparing Local Plans ( some of these jointly – for example, Gloucester / Cheltenham / Tewkesbury whose 'Joint Core Strategy' was adopted in December 2017, and Plymouth, South Hams, and West Devon, whose ' Plymouth & South West Devon Joint Local Plan' was adopted in March 2019 ). Only as recently as October 2018 has complete coverage of these development plans been achieved and many of them are now in the process of being reviewed. [see below for further details ]

The planning authorities have also been overseeing the process of getting Neighbourhood Plans in place ('made') across the region. By the end of 2019, just over 300 Neighbourhood Plan Area designations had been confirmed, 175 'successful' referendums recorded, following on from which just over 100 had been 'made'. [ see below for further details]

The South West has a wide range of nationally important mineral deposits (including limestone & sandstone, sand & gravel, granite, china clay, tin and oil/gas ) and, like all other parts of the UK, faces a major waste disposal challenge. The County Councils , together with the Unitary Councils and the National Park Authorities, as the responsible authorities, prepare Minerals and Waste Core Strategies, some jointly ( for example, the 4 Authorities in the West of England sub-region, and Wiltshire jointly with Swindon). [ see below for further details ]

Since 2012, six Local Enterprise Partnerships , with areas defined by local authority boundaries, have operated in the South West. Together, these bodies, with their appointed rather than elected members, have, in part, taken over the role of the former South West Regional Development agency. [ see below for further details ]

### **No overall regional plan**

There is no longer an overall regional spatial plan , though there was one until 10 years ago, whilst local planning authority involvement in planning at this level goes back more than 20 years. The establishment of the South West Regional Planning Conference ( SWRPC) in 1990, brought together, for the first time, local government elected representatives from the whole of the standard region, the work of which contributed to central government's Regional Planning Guidance. The then new Labour Government's reform of regional structures in England, saw the arrival, in 1999, of the South West Regional Development Agency ( SWRDA). This was closely followed by the establishment of the South West Regional Assembly (SWRA) in 2000, as successor to the Conference. The elected local authority members of the Assembly then worked with the appointed members of the RDA on the production of a Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) covering the period 2006 to 2026. This arrangement was replicated in the other English regions, but the story 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 scale and distribution 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, spatial and economic planning across the whole region, 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. The 'Economic Strategies' of the LEPs focus on their own respective areas and could be seen, in some respects, to be in competition with each other in securing central government funds and attracting outside investment. More

recently there has been some strategic development planning at a sub-regional level in the form of joint local plans. [see below]

## **THE SOUTH WEST'S DEVELOPMENT PLANS**

### **Core Strategies / Local Plans**

Work on individual LPA Core Strategies ( under the 2004 Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act system ) got off to a promising start in the South West. 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 December 2006 ; April 2007; and July 2007 respectively. In the case of Plymouth, its pioneering 2004 Act development plan 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 up to date strategic policy context for the Core Strategies was to disappear with the abolition of the RSS.

### **A slow and tortuous process**

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, the complexity of the required process, and an ever changing national policy and process context. 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' (OAN) 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 delay has been despite the best efforts of the local government planning professionals on the ground. There have also been suggestions that this delay has been due, at least in part, to a lack of local political commitment to the plan-making process within some authorities.

### **The issue of housing numbers**

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 newly emerging plans Local Plans compared to the figures previously included in the draft RSS. In addition, the level of new house building over the last 30years or so has been in serious decline ( *Heriot Watt University & Three Dragons, August 2017.*) Additionally, Cornwall and Wiltshire each experienced delays to the plan-making process due to local government reorganisation in 2009, which stopped the then emerging former district-based Local Plans in their tracks.

### **Complete Local Plan coverage by 2018**

Complete geographical coverage across the region of 'first wave', up to date Core Strategies / Local Plans, was achieved in October 2018 with the adoption of the North Devon & Torridge Joint Local Plan, ending what had been a drawn-out two year long Examination process. Local Plan coverage of the South West on the 2004 Planning Act LDF model had thus taken 14 years to complete.

### **Minerals & Waste Strategies /Plans**

Planning for Minerals and Waste in the region is the responsibility of the three remaining County Councils together with the Unitary Authorities and the two National Park Authorities. Between them, they have produced a range of Core Strategies and Plans. Some of these have been in place for many years, whilst others are much more recent .For example, Wiltshire has both Minerals and Waste Core Strategies prepared jointly with Swindon Borough, adopted in 2009 and looking ahead to 2026 ; Somerset has a Waste Core Strategy adopted in 2013 and a Minerals Plan adopted in 2015.In addition, in 2017, it published a Minerals & Waste Development Strategy setting out the new documents it expects to prepare over the next few years. The former Dorset County Council has recently submitted a new cross-County Waste Plan looking ahead to 2033. The four West of England Unitary Authorities have a Joint Waste Core Strategy and work together on Local Aggregates Assessment.



## Development plans on the islands – Scilly and the Channel Islands

The [Isles of Scilly](#) is one of only two sui generis Unitary Authorities in the UK, the other being the City of London Corporation. The five inhabited islands have a combined population of 2,259 (2017 estimate) but in the summer this can rise to as much as 6,000. The 16 member Council is responsible for the full range of local government services, including planning. It also owns and operates St. Mary's Airport. The Council has a Senior Manager responsible for Infrastructure & Planning and just one professional Planning Officer.

The Isles share with other island communities, common issues, such as the high cost of infrastructure, high transport and freight costs, and reduced competition and a limited domestic market, all of which are too small to provide economies of scale. There is also a need to consider and protect a high quality natural environment involving a whole raft of land-based and marine designations. From a planning point of view however, one of the biggest challenges is that of addressing an acute shortage of affordable housing.

The Council's current Local Plan was adopted back in 2005, but following a review process which started in June 2015, a new Draft Plan, covering the period 2015-2030, and incorporating policies for Minerals and Waste, was submitted in September 2019. At the time of writing, Examination Hearings were due to begin towards the end of January 2020. Meeting the Duty to Co-operate has been a challenge for a community located 28 miles off the mainland, but the Council has worked closely with Cornwall Council, the LEP and the Local Nature Partnership. In addition, for the Local Plan, statements of common ground have been agreed with Cornwall and Natural England.

The [Channel Islands](#) - Jersey, Guernsey and Alderney, are self-governing Crown Dependencies administered by parliaments called States which are not represented in the UK Parliament. There is no distinction between central and local government. The focus of their economies has moved from horticulture (in decline since the 1970's) into tourism and a globally significant finance industry. Their respective planning systems are based on the UK model and there is a certain degree of interchange between the Islands and the UK by planning professionals.

[Jersey](#) has a resident population of 106,800 (2018 year end) following a significant growth over the last 10 years due to strong net inward migration.

The States biggest challenge, over many decades, has been to balance the development demand due to rapid economic and population growth against the high environmental quality of the Island's coast, countryside and heritage assets. Since 2005, with the arrival of Ministerial Government, the planning function has been the responsibility of a Minister for Planning & Environment supported by a professional Department of the Environment.

There has been full development plan coverage since the early 1960's and the current (and third) 'Island Plan' dates from 2011. This is now being reviewed, with a new Plan, covering the period 2021 - 30 having now reached the first stage of this process. At the time of writing, it was envisaged that a Draft Plan would be published for review by an independent Planning Inspector in mid 2020, leading to an Examination in Public later in the year, with adoption by the States early in 2021.

The [Bailiwick of Gernsey](#) includes Alderney (population 2,039, according to the 2018 Census) and the smaller islands of Sark, Herm, Brecqhou, Jethou & Lihou. Gernsey itself has a resident population of 63,000 (2012 figure) and the members of its parliament, the States of Deliberation, are called Deputies: two of whom represent Alderney. The importance of protecting the high quality natural landscape from the inappropriate ribbon development and suburbanisation which has happened in the past, is high on the planning agenda, along with the protection of built heritage assets.

The modern planning system was introduced under the 2005 Land Planning & Development (Gernsey) Law, which came into operation in 2009 after 25 years in the making. The Island Development Plan (IDP), prepared under this law by the professional Development & Planning Authority, came into effect in November 2016 replacing two earlier Plans – one for the 'Urban Area' and the other for the 'Rural Area'. The Principal Committee (one of six in the States) responsible for planning is that for Environment & Infrastructure. A review of the Planning Law is underway, with, at the time of writing, a 'policy letter' due to be considered by the States in 2020.

## **Moving towards Core Strategies /Local Plans covering more than one LPA area**

Taking up both the spirit and the letter of the Duty to Co-operate, a number of authorities within the region have been involved in preparing joint Core Strategies or Local Plans .For example : the Christchurch & East Dorset Joint Core Strategy ( Adopted April 2014) ; the West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Joint Local Plan ( Adopted October 2015) ; the Gloucester/Cheltenham/Tewkesbury Joint Core Strategy (Adopted December 2017) ; the North Devon & Torrridge Joint Local Plan ( Adopted October 2018) the Plymouth & South West Devon Joint Local Plan (adopted March 2019) ; and the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan ( first draft for consultation. summer 2019 ) All of these joint plans have responded to the realities of economic areas wider than individual Districts, particularly Housing Market Areas and journey to work areas. Details of the most recent plans are set out below.

The **Gloucester/Cheltenham/Tewkesbury Joint Core Strategy 2011-2031** was formally adopted by the three Councils in December 2017 following a long and complicated journey, starting with public consultation on Issues & Key Questions in October 2008, and including a protracted Examination process which had to work its way through a very long list of issues raised by the Inspector, Elizabeth Ord. The proposed strategy was submitted back in November 2014, with the first of three stages of examination hearings starting in May 2015 and the third stage ending in April 2016, involving almost 200 tabled documents.

The strategy covers three of the six Gloucestershire Districts/Boroughs containing a population ( 2016 Mid Year) of 334,607, more than half that of the County overall, representing its main economic hub and where growth pressures have been at their greatest. The process of preparing this strategy has had to face up to the challenge of development in areas of Green Belt. Following additions made by the Inspector, 35,175 new dwellings are provided for and the need for such a joint plan is starkly illustrated by the fact that most of these will be provided in a number of major urban extensions involving Green Belt land – three of them to meet the housing needs of Gloucester, located entirely within Tewkesbury Borough ; and two others to meet the needs of Cheltenham, falling across the administrative areas of both Cheltenham itself and of Tewkesbury. A new Local Transport Plan 2015-2031 and Transport Implementation Strategy have been prepared by Gloucestershire CC, as Local Transport Authority, to ‘sit alongside’ the JCS.

In the meantime, the three LPAs are separately working on their individual City and Borough Local Plans within the context of the JCS.

At the other end of the region, the **Plymouth & South West Devon Joint Local Plan : 2014 – 2034** is another pioneering example of joint working by Plymouth City, South Hams District and West Devon Borough, following a decision to ‘roll into one’ the Local Plan review processes which had then begun in each authority respectively. This is one of the only such plans in England to date to set out both strategic and local policies and site allocations in the same document. In this way, the ‘stand alone’ Local Plans with their traditional two stages will be completely replaced. Equating geographically to the ‘Plymouth Housing Market Area’, but excluding that part of it within the Dartmoor National Park, this large plan area has an existing population of just under 400,000, over half of it in Plymouth. Provision is made for the delivery of at least 26,700 new homes – 19,000 of them in Plymouth. The Joint Plan was submitted in July 2017, followed by Hearings in summer 2018 and by adoption by each of the Councils in March 2019.

Professional recognition of the work on this Plan came in the form of a ‘Highly Commended’ award for Excellence in Spatial Planning in 2018 by the RTPI South West. It was also a Finalist in the Excellence in Plan Making Practice category in the RTPI’s 2020 national awards.

The **Greater Exeter Strategic Plan (GESP)**, which looks ahead to 2040, encompasses the ‘Exeter & East Devon Growth Point’ as part of its area., but excludes that part within the Dartmoor National Park. It is being prepared jointly by Exeter City, East Devon, Mid Devon and Teignbridge Councils in partnership with Devon County Council. Unlike the Joint Plan above, it will not replace the sub-region’s Local Plans. The Authorities’ respective Local Plans, which have each only recently been adopted, will remain, for the time being ‘sitting within the context’ of the new strategic framework provided by the GESP. Consultation on ‘Issues’ took place between February and April 2017, but for a variety of reasons, the process has been significantly delayed. In 2018. East Devon rejected the original emerging plan. There was then a need for the planning team to take account of on-going changes to national planning and housing policies ; to consider the outcome of a ‘call for sites’ which generated over 700 of them ; and to resolve some complex transport issues in the Exeter area .Further delay was caused by changes in administrations in East

Devon, Mid Devon and Teignbridge following the May 2019, local government elections ,as well as a new Council Leader in Exeter.

A new timetable has now been agreed which envisages consultation on a 'Full Draft Plan' in November 2020, submission in July 2022, an Examination in September of that year and Adoption in April 2023. What is now a process likely to have spanned at least seven years, is a sobering illustration of the complexity ( both technical and political) of large joint plan exercises of this kind in the current context.

## **STRATEGIC PLANNING & DEVOLUTION IN THE WEST OF ENGLAND**

The history of statutory development planning in the West of England is a particularly complex one and unlike almost any other part of the South West. This sub-region –the so called ' twin city region' based on Bristol and Bath' , is said to have one of the fastest growing economies in the UK, now worth over £25bn. It has a population (2018 Mid Year) of 1,1m. The area is divided in local government terms between four Unitary Authorities - Bath & North East Somerset ; Bristol; North Somerset ; and South Gloucestershire. Apart from the City of Bristol, which retained its previous boundaries, these were new constructs which came into being in April 1996 following the abolition of the County of Avon and its six 'second tier' Councils - Bath City; Bristol City; Kingswood; Northavon; Wansdyke and Woodspring.

To say that the preparation of strategic planning policy for this sub-region has been something of an on-going saga is probably an understatement. At the start of 2020, work on the West of England Joint Spatial Plan (JSP), the most recent example of joint working in the area, was suddenly abandoned in controversial circumstances. This could be said to be an example of 'history repeating itself', which a brief look at recent history illustrates. .

Recognition of the need for high level spatial policy to guide the sub-region's future goes back to before WW2. 1930 saw the publication of the 'Bristol and Bath Regional Planning Scheme' prepared by Abercrombie & Brueton, covering an area uncannily similar to the present day West of England. This work sought to recognise the relationships between the then many different and diverse local councils within the area. 1971 saw the publication of 'Sevenside – A Feasibility Study', an estuary based strategic planning study, which identified the many issues and opportunities facing the sub-region : a key one being the feasibility of accommodating major growth.

However it was not until the creation of the brand new County of Avon in April 1974 that a framework for the strategically coordinated administration of this functional sub-region was put in place. A Structure Plan ( then a new kind of document on the development plan scene) prepared by the County, would provide the strategic policy framework, whilst a Local Plan, containing more site specific detail, would be prepared by each of the six 'second tier' Councils. For a variety of reasons however, Avon's first County Structure Plan, which looked ahead to 1991, was 11 years in the making and by the time it was approved in 1985, it had the dubious distinction of being the last in England to be put in place.

Following the abolition of Avon County Council in April 1996 and its replacement by four new Unitary Authorities collectively covering the same geographical area – Bath & NE Somerset ; Bristol ;North Somerset ; and South Gloucestershire, it was quickly accepted, following central government advice, that from a strategic planning and transportation point of view, joint working was vital. The strategic framework for the sub-region had been provided by the Avon Structure Plan, by then in its 'third alteration' version. A replacement was now necessary to provide a coherent and collectively accepted set of strategic policies which reflected the new local government circumstances.

Despite the best endeavours of the professional officers working in a Joint Strategic Planning & Transportation Unit, who were able to build upon the Structure Plan review work already begun by the Avon planners, the emerging 'Joint Replacement Structure Plan' was not without its political difficulties. The new Plan was placed on deposit in 1998, but the examination process dragged on for several years and, in the end, it required the intervention of the then Secretary of State responsible for these things, John Prescott, to 'direct' the four Councils to reach a suitable accord on total new housing numbers and their distribution, before the Plan could be given the Government's approval in September 2002.

Following the 2004 Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act , a new regional policy context for the planning policy work in the West of England was provided by work on the South West RSS. Between 2003 and 2007, the four Councils contributed to this as members of the new Regional Assembly .The spatial

strategy, looking ahead to 2026, which emerged, included a West of England 'inset'. However, as explained above, all of this was to prove short lived. Meanwhile, and under the provisions of the same Act, each Council began work on its own Core Strategy, whilst at the same time attempting to take account of what each of the others was doing. Following long, complex and separate Examinations, the respective Core Strategies were adopted, but with an 'early review' stipulation attached due to only partially resolved housing land allocation and evidence base issues. - Bristol in June 2011 ; South Gloucestershire in December 2013 ; and B&NES in July 2014. In the case of North Somerset, the road to adoption was additionally complicated, as the Strategy, having been adopted in April 2012, was then subject to a major court challenge on one policy area. This led to a further Examination of its new dwellings provision policy, leading to a delay of two years, with adoption in 2014 involving the Council's acceptance of a significant increase in numbers.

As the respective Core Strategies were being prepared, a new strategic player arrived on the scene in April 2011 in the shape of the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership, the first of six LEPs which were to be established covering the South West region. [ see below for details] This was able to build upon an already established 'West of England Partnership' between commerce, industry and local government. From the outset, the LEP worked closely with the four Councils, in particular in promoting economic growth, introducing a business driven investment dimension alongside a planning one. It provided an 'extra lever' in negotiations with central government for resources, particularly in respect of funding for major transport schemes, and in the establishment of Enterprise Zones within the sub-region. Because of all this, it became an important player in the Core Strategy preparation process.

Devolution came to the sub-region in May 2017 in the form of the new West of England Combined Authority (WECA), with an elected Metro Mayor, established under the Government's devolution 'deals' agenda. Failure to secure political agreement on this across all four Councils has meant, however, that North Somerset has not become a Combined Authority member. It does however continue to work with the other three Councils on most strategic planning and transport matters.

Meanwhile, in recognition of the continuing need for some kind of strategic land use and transport plan for the sub-region, and in the light of the fact that the Joint Replacement Structure Plan was now more than 12 years old, whilst the more recent framework provided by the RSS 'inset' had been abolished, the four Councils began joint work, overseen by a Joint Planning Executive Committee of members, on a new plan. The **West of England Joint Spatial Plan (JSP)** looked ahead to 2036. It attracted wide interest, as the first plan of its kind in England. Intended to provide the framework for the four up-dated (reviewed) Local Plans ( formerly Core Strategies) , initial public consultation on 'Issues & Options' took place in 2015. Alongside the JSP, a new **Joint Local Transport Plan** was also prepared under similar Committee arrangements, whilst the West of England LEP had in place a non-statutory 'Strategic Economic Plan 2015-2030' prepared in close collaboration with the Councils , with a focus on 'financial interventions' and the delivery of specific projects. Thus, things appeared to be coming together quite well –despite the arrival on the scene of the WECA in 2017. However, the JSP preparation process involved some highly controversial issues and proved to be less than straightforward. The Plan was submitted in April 2018, but subsequent exchanges between the combined authorities and the two Inspectors on significant technical matters meant that the Examination Hearings did not begin until summer 2019.

The Plan included provision for 105,000 new homes, mostly within 12 'Strategic Development Locations' ( SDLs) across the sub-region. Land for 60,000 of these had already been allocated in existing plans. Individual sites were not identified, the assumption being that this would be done in the emerging new Local Plans. There were also proposals for development within the existing Green Belt.

Examination Hearings began, in Bath, in early August 2019 , but after just seven days, the two Inspectors called a halt to the whole process ! Suggesting that the Plan be withdrawn from examination, they took the view that there was a need to return to the early plan preparation stage in order that fundamental issues could be addressed. Without this, there was serious danger that that the Plan, as submitted, would be found 'unsound'. There was particular criticism of the nature and process of identification of the 12 SDLs , a central and fundamental element of the strategy, as well as concerns about development in the Green Belt and about emerging evidence of 'local confusion' between the JSP and work preparing the four new Local Plans. The initial response of the four Councils was to express 'disappointment' (an understatement), but a willingness to carry out further work to address the issues. However by March 2020 it became clear that there was little, if any, will on the part of any of the Councils, to do this. Each of them formally withdrew from the JSP process, but at the same time, expressed a wish to continue to work



together on new development plan policies.

### Work on four new Local Plans

Most critically, this will involve work to complete the respective new Local Plans ( in practice, reviews of the four Core Strategies). Up until work on the JSP ceased, each of the Councils had been working to a plan preparation programme which was broadly aligned with the progress of the JSP and which, by early 2020, were reasonably well advanced. – in the case of Bristol and B&NES, Examination Hearings had been ‘pencilled-in’ for late 2020. Each of the Councils has now produced a revised programme. At the same time, it was formally stated, in March 2020, that the Councils and the WECA would be working together to commission a new ( ‘refreshed’) strategic planning evidence base.

### The ‘Western Gateway / Porth y Gorllewin’

In the meantime, the West of England, and more particularly Bristol and WECA, have emerged as leading members of a new economic partnership spanning a national boundary as well as local authority ones. Seen as the UK’s third ‘powerhouse’ ( after the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ and the ‘Midlands Engine’) and the first cross-nation initiative of its kind, the proposal to the Government was launched in July 2019 with a report commissioned by the self-styled ‘Great Western Cities’ of Bristol, Cardiff and Newport. It was formally announced by Ministers in November 2019 and its first ‘Prospectus’, involving a vision to promote ‘inclusive and clean economic growth’, making the most of the potential for scale and collaboration, was published in February 2020. Joining the four West of England Authorities , the West of England LEP and WECA in the partnership are Cardiff, Newport and other South Wales Councils ; Gloucestershire ( including ‘GFirst’, its LEP); and Swindon & Wiltshire ( including their combined LEP). The Welsh and English Governments are also partners.

It remains to be seen what emerges in practice from this ambitious project, particularly from a planning point of view, but its population of 4.4 million and a combined economy said to be worth £107bn, potentially provide opportunities for some very strategic policy and action. Worth noting perhaps is that the creation of a strategic inter-nation local government initiative centred on the Severn Estuary is not without precedent. In the 1980’s and 90’s, the Standing Conference of Severnside Local Authorities ( SCOSLA) comprising all the then local authorities bordering on the Estuary, both along the South Wales and the English shores, did valuable monitoring and research related to anticipated future developments. These included the economic implications of proposals for massive tidal power schemes, whilst at the same time there were growing concerns about the need to protect the Estuary’s natural environment.

### Reorganisation and devolution elsewhere in the South West

The former Counties of **Wiltshire** and **Cornwall** each became a Unitary Authority in April 2009. In the case of Wiltshire, five former ‘second tier’ disappeared. In Cornwall, six disappeared , but in addition the Council subsequently secured a Devolution Deal from central government in July 2015 ( the third nationally after those for Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire). This was the first in England relating to a major rural area, as opposed to the more typical urban ones, and for not involving a commitment to have an elected mayor. Its devolved powers cover the franchising of bus services ; joint working to ‘re-shape’ FE training and adult learning ; and new apprenticeship opportunities. More significantly from a planning point of view is the fact that the deal has given the Council direct ‘Intermediate Body’ status for access to two EU Structural Funds. Since 1999, Cornwall has benefitted from some £800 million in such funding due to its relatively weak economy.

More recently, at the other end of the region, devolution/ local government reorganisation in April 2019 has seen **the former Dorset County Council replaced by two new Combined Authorities**. Under this, Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole have come together as a new unitary authority (BCP) for what is essentially the south east Dorset conurbation, whilst the remaining districts – East Dorset ; North Dorset; Purbeck; West Dorset and Weymouth & Portland, form the other Combined Authority – Dorset Council., with its administrative centre in Dorchester.

# THE DEVELOPMENT PLANS PICTURE – EMERGING NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS

## Progress to date

In the South West, by November 2019, just over 300 Neighbourhood Plan areas had been designated. These had resulted in 175 'successful' Referendums ( a number second only to that in the South East ) out of which, just over 100 Plans had been 'made'. As with the national picture, most of this progress has been made in the last two years. In terms of geographical distribution by LPA, there are now very few of these in the region without at least a handful of area designations. Leading the field in terms of plans made are Cornwall – 32 Plans made and a further 92 area designations ; Wiltshire – 29 made and a further 51 designations ; East Devon – 17 made ; Dorset ( new Dorset Council area) – 17 made ; South Hams – 10 made ; and B&NES – 9 made + a further 9 in preparation. Cornwall's progress and pioneering work on Neighbourhood Plan support, has been helped by its long experience of community involvement in planning 'neighbourhood-sized' areas.

## Emerging issues and lessons

As is the case nationally, the vast majority of the South West's plans are being prepared by rural parishes, which 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 with very limited financial resources. At the same time, the LPAs have, to varying degrees, provided the obligatory support to a steadily increasing number of plans coming forward at a time of steeply declining local government resources (affecting planning in particular!) ,growing costs of officer input to the NP process, and the need, in many cases, to prioritise getting an up to date Local Plan in place. There have been particular problems associated with plan making by means of NP Forums within non-parished urban areas, which the experience in Bristol illustrates . Here, of the five plan areas with Forums originally designated, only three have emerged with made Plans – one for a complex inner city area and the other two for 'problem' estates further out. On-going issues here have included trying to establish what the eventual plan should do ; getting the right governance, support structures and finance in place ; ensuring effective working with the Council ; appropriately channelling the skills and resources available within the local community ; and sustaining energy levels and commitment over several years !

With the aim of providing mutual professional support, including the exchange of 'best practice', the South West Neighbourhood Planning Officers Group has been set up as a regular forum for planning professionals working directly in support of neighbourhood planning bodies in their respective LPA areas.

## Early promise – South West leading the way

As had been the case with the 2004 Planning 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, in April 2012, held by Prof Chris Balch, of Plymouth University and RTPi South West Chair 2014, whilst Exeter St James and LynPlan( Lynton & Lynmouth), were among the first plans nationally to complete all stages to being 'made' [adoption by their respective LPA's ], in July and December 2013 respectively. There followed a period within which progress in the region was slow compared to the situation nationally, with just 18 Plans 'made' by April 2016. However, in the years since then a further 80 or so Plans had been put in place, though at the same time, fewer new areas are now coming forward for designation.

# THE SOUTH WEST'S LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIPS

There are six Local Enterprise Partnerships ( LEPs) 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 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 former County of Dorset plus the former 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 ('south east 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 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**

Initially, LEP involvement in the planning process in the region was limited, with the exception of the West of England (as noted above). 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 had, by that stage, 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 as 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**

### **Balancing development and protection of the environment**

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 professionals that there is no longer a region-wide strategic planning policy mechanism in place at either local or central government level to address this issue. 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 major housing development initiatives include 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 Crest Nicholson’s 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 , is to be provided.

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 the now closed 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 – an RTPi SW award winner in 2017.

A particular planning challenge in the South West 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 (the latter a winner of RTPi regional and national awards for planning excellence in 1992 and again 2013.) ; Royal William Yard, Plymouth ; and Exeter and Bridgwater Docks.

### Harnessing the region’s huge potential for generating renewable and carbon free 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, near Bodmin, 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 £22.5 billion 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 ! It has also been a severe challenge to the host local planning authorities who have responded in an exceptionally pro-active manner both in terms of handling the development proposals themselves and in channelling and co-ordinating the related investment to secure an appropriate 'legacy' for the local area ( see 'significant recent projects', below).

Due to a combination of issues, work on HPC has suffered from severe delays, but it has now been underway for a number of years. Thousands are now at work on site, 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, like HPC, was granted consent under the NSIP regime.

Meanwhile, a few miles upstream, on the English Severn Estuary coast , and in what is now South Gloucestershire, is Hitachi's Horizon Nuclear Power 2.7 GW Oldbury-on-Severn scheme. This proposed new power station, on a site adjacent to the now de-commissioned 1967 plant, had reached the pre-application stage under the NSIP planning regime by summer 2016. There are now doubts however about Hitachi's continuing commitment to this scheme.

### **The region's road 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. Sections of both motorways now suffer from severe congestion on a regular basis, especially the M5 south of Bristol and the Almondsbury M4/M5 junction. Parts of the A30 – the main spine route onwards from Exeter into Cornwall, and parts of the A303, linking the western end of the M3 to the A30 at Exeter also suffer from congestion. Long overdue upgrades to the A303 in Wiltshire and the A30 in Cornwall, are now in hand. (see ' Significant recent projects below).

### **The region's railways**

The rail network in the South West is limited and vulnerable. There are no significant local commuter rail services, with just limited networks serving the Bristol /Bath, Exeter and Plymouth areas. Many former branch lines and stations disappeared under the 'Beeching axe', especially those serving small coastal towns . To the south west, beyond Exeter, there is only one mainline spine, with 'express' services operating at much reduced speed beyond Plymouth and down to Penzance. The Great Western Railway Electrification ( see projects below) will only partially address these issues. 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 rail transport infrastructure is. It is estimated that the subsequent six week closure of this line cost the regional economy £1.2bn, with immediate required repairs costing £50m. (see 'Significant Recent Projects', later )

### **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 wind farms, 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. Proposals in recent development plans ( eg the Gloucester/Cheltenham/Tewkesbury Joint Core Strategy , adopted December 2017 and ill fated West of England JSP ) have now started to put these long established Green Belts under 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 and limited already available land within and around the region's major urban areas.

### **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 securing 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 for planners.

### **Devolution and the future administrative structure with the South West**

The national 'devolution train' appears to be slowing down somewhat now and no longer making the headlines. Reference was made earlier to the three areas of the South West which have so far made and secured devolution bids, but 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 region. Potentially however, devolution 'deals' provide major new sources of central government funding and the opportunity for levels of strategic planning which were lost to the region with the demise of the RSS. It is ,as yet, too early to assess the detailed implications for the planning system.

The devolution process is 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. A related factor, due to their sub-regional strategic role, is the future of the region's LEPs. They have already been involved in the devolution bidding process and there is now evidence that they are taking on more of a combined role, for example in the promotion of a new sustainable energy strategy involving three of the partnerships. The business community at least appears to have high hopes for devolution. According to the recent CBI report [ *Shaping Regional Infrastructure – Priorities for growth – South West, April 2017* ] businesses see it as a means of introducing more effective governance, collaboration and strategic planning.

### **'Spaceport' - 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 has moved a step closer with the recently published ' Space Industry Bill'. In the meantime, those in the South West, and Cornwall in particular should watch this space !

## **SIGNIFICANT RECENT PROJECTS IN THE SOUTH WEST**

Major projects recently completed or currently underway, a number of which have been recognised in RTPi Planning Excellence Awards, include :

### **Securing the legacy of HPC**

The planners at Sedgemoor District Council, working with ( the former) West Somerset District Council and Somerset County Council, have devised and operated an innovative and pro-active approach in order to deliver legacy benefits from the HPC scheme. This work has already seen positive and transformational results on the ground, including : The National College for Nuclear, Cannington ; The Somerset Energy Innovation Centre ;The EDF Energy Low Carbon Leadership Training Campus, Cannington Court ; The 'Bridgwater Gateway' employment site ; and new facilities at Bridgwater & Taunton Colleges. All of this is already leading to a sea change in what was the area's previously low value economy. The two District planning authorities have been 'punching well above their weight' 'in dealing with all of this, using a comprehensive planning policy framework ; a development management system dealing, in parallel, with two different planning systems ; and a Special Projects Team with a focus on the planning and implementation of projects associated with HPC itself, as well as a range of related developments. The excellence of this work was recognised by the award of 'overall winner' in the RTPi South West 2018 Awards for Planning Excellence.

### **The Exeter and 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. It covers the whole of Exeter City and parts of East Devon and Teignbridge Districts and plans to deliver around 20,000 new homes and over 25,000 new jobs by 2026. It includes Cranbrook New Community ( with a new railway station) ; Exeter International Airport ( expansion) ;the Skypark Business Park ; Exeter Science Park ; the 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.

### **The Dawlish Countryside Park**

This £2.9 million, 27 hectare scheme by Teignbridge District Council, functions as a 'Sustainable Alternative Natural Green Space' ( SANGS), providing a 'green lung' for the local towns and, in particular, for an adjacent 1700 home urban expansion and to enable planning permissions for around 4,000 new homes near the protected Exe Estuary – altogether representing almost 60% of 'Greater Exeter's' planned new housing supply. The scheme won 'Best Entry' in the ' Planning Delivery' category of the 2018 RTPi SW Awards for Planning Excellence.

### **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.

### **A303 Amesbury to Berwick Down ( Stonehenge)**

After nearly 30 years of uncertainty and controversy, with a number of 'false start' schemes, the



Government is about to give the go-ahead to a major improvement on the A303 in Wiltshire involving the stretch close to Stonehenge. The subject of an application for a Development Consent Order, now granted, the £1.7 billion scheme involves a tunnel 2 miles long past Stonehenge and a further 8 miles of surface work, including a by-pass of Winterbourne Stoke village, all dual carriageway. Apart from easing the serious congestion at this point, the scheme will conserve and enhance the Outstanding Universal Value of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site. At the time of writing it was anticipated that a formal decision to go ahead would be issued by the Secretary of State in April 2020.

### **Great Western Railway Electrification**

This massive railway infrastructure project is nearing completion through the region. Though subject to delays and significantly scaled down - with the centre of Bristol ( Temple Meads) and Bath not included for the time being, this up-grade involves overhead electrification and brand new dual-mode electric/diesel 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 and Cardiff. Electrification further west to Swansea has been shelved.

### **Resolving the 'Dawlish' problem**

Immediately following the serious disruption of winter 2013/14, Network Rail published a 'resilience study' into possible schemes to better protect the stretch of line in the Dawlish area from both the adjacent sea and rock falls. The 'options' included complete replacement by a number new rail lines further inland. Subsequently, in summer 2019, work began to significantly up-grade a section of the sea wall to provide greater resilience against storms. Any decisions on an alternative route remain in the future.

### **The Army Basing Programme, Salisbury Plain**

Wiltshire, and in particular the military bases around Salisbury Plain, have been playing a key role in the process of bringing some 4,300 troops and their families back from their bases in Germany. In a £1.2 billion programme run by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, together with partners and most notably, Wiltshire Council, and supported by planning consultants WYG, new facilities, including housing and schools, have been provided exceptionally quickly in five existing military settlements. The Programme won 'Best Entry' in the 'Planning Decision Making ' category on the RTPI SW 2017 Planning Excellence Awards.

### **Somerdale**

The redevelopment of the 90 hectare site of the former Fry's/Cadbury's chocolate factory in Keynsham, between Bristol and Bath, was the overall winner of the 2019 RTPI SW Awards for Planning Excellence. Here, both a successful new neighbourhood and a valuable legacy for the local community has been delivered. With a clear and agreed vision from the outset, there has been collaborative working between Taylor Wimpey ( high quality housing ); Barton Willmore ( overall site plan maker and project manager ); St Monica Trust and Tetlow King ( between them responsible for the conversion of the original factory building into retirement apartments, a care home, community facilities and commercial uses ) Also on site is a doctors' surgery and a new primary school and a new sense of 'place' has been achieved by walkable, permeable streets, open spaces, green corridors and riverside walks. The whole process has been facilitated by timely work by B&NES as planning authority.

### **Southmead Regeneration**

This community-led project, which was highly commended in the 2019 RTPI SW Awards, is set to improve the centre of Bristol's Southmead Estate – one of the UK's most deprived wards. The work of the Nash Partnership, together with Streets Reimagined, has involved the community to a degree above and beyond what would normally be expected, and is seen as an exemplar in empowering communities. It has enabled the Southmead Development Trust to 'convert' its earlier Community Plan into a realistic Master Plan for the estate's neglected central area, including new housing and other facilities on the currently under-used open space of Glencoyne Square. The Plan has been linked into the emerging City Local Plan and was formally endorsed by the Bristol Planning Committee in May 2020.

### **Swanage Pier Restoration and Regeneration**

This £2.2m project was also highly commended in the same RTPI SW Awards. It has involved the repair of the 'at risk' historic pier and the refurbishment of the adjacent Grade II listed Marine Villas, creating new interpretation, catering and retail experiences, as well as an outstanding educational case study package. It has been brought to fruition by planning consultancy Footprint Futures, working as project manager, on behalf of the Swanage Pier Trust.

### **'The Wave' inland surf lagoon**

One of the most unusual schemes to come before the South West's planners in many years opened in November 2019. The 'Wave', in Almondsbury, South Gloucestershire, close to Junction 17 of the M5, is England's first inland surf lagoon. On 29.4 hectares of former farmland in the Green Belt, the 'Wave' is a 180 metre long lake in which up to a thousand artificial waves per hour, up to 2 metres high, can be generated. In addition to the lake and its adjacent clubhouse, shop, café-bar and changing facilities, there are soon to be completed landscape gardens, family-friendly camping areas and other short stay accommodation. The decision by South Gloucestershire Council to grant planning permission, in summer 2017, was based on 'very special circumstances' involving a difficult balancing exercise between harm caused to the openness of the Green Belt in the area and the potential benefits to health and well-being and to the local economy.

## **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 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., which has its HQ in Bristol, whilst sustainable / low carbon energy 'champion' and consultancy Regen has its base in Exeter.

The private sector is characterised by a flourishing body of planning consultants, with over 80 firms operating within the South West, offering a wide range of specialist expertise to developers, local planning authorities and other bodies. A number of the larger firms, including WYG, Peter Brett Associates, Savills, RPS, Pegasus, Turley and Barton Willmore, have offices in several towns, and among the smaller firms with a growing reputation for design and community planning work are the Nash Partnership and Place Studio. A number of international names such as Colliers, Arup and Atkins, also operate from bases in the region. Research and consultancy expertise, not to mention a supply of young graduates and post-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.

### **And finally, some less well-known facts about the South West**

According to the Government, Swindon is the most 'statistically average' place in the UK. 'Plasticine' was invented in 1897 by William Harbutt, in Bath and 'Ribena' was invented at the Long Ashton Research Station near Bristol to improve the population's health during WW2.

### **Written by**

**Geoff Walker, Member of the Regional Activities Committee, RTPI South West**

**May 2020**

**NB** Any views or opinions expressed in this paper, beyond the direct reporting of facts, are those of the author, though they are based on many years of being involved in and the monitoring of planning activity in the South West.

