

CPRE *SOUTH EAST*

Date of meeting: 12 October 2010

South East Director's Report to Regional Group

Report covers representations, background and policy work of the Group August – October 2010

1. South East in Perspective

Strategic planning at a regional level has dropped out of favour for the present government. Formal planning at a South East level began in 1962, with the formation of SERPLAN, and famously gained admiration and respect from Michael Howard in an anniversary homily. The South East Plan was a legal part of the Development Plan for each area. It contained essential guidance, carefully assembled, that did not appear at either national or local level. The Plan has now gone, revoked by Eric Pickles in July. Each local council will now have to decide how much development it needs, and where it goes. This is the new 'Localism' agenda, but is not as easy as it may sound. Any new figures for housing, for example, must be justified and able to withstand the rigors of a public inquiry. But, it has been said that planning should not look to the past, but to the future.

It is important to see these processes in perspective. The previous government promoted a regional agenda as part of its economic policy and to decentralise decision-making. This 'regionalisation process' created a number of new bodies and structures with responsibilities for economic performance, social and physical regeneration, and sustainable development. Unfortunately, perhaps the economic side outgrew the physical aspects of planning. The budgetary demands of the development agencies became ever greater and more persuasive, and even seductive. The calls for regeneration and resource distribution were shrill and continuous. We had a reformist government, with a modernising agenda. This led to the abolition of county structure plans and local plans, a system of two tier strategic and local planning, which had existed since 1968. The aim was to reform and speed up of the system, and increase the predictability of planning decisions.

2. South East structures

SEEDA will be replaced with various Local Enterprise Partnerships. LEPs have no template, and are not meant to be mini RDAs. They aim to shift the economy away from the public sector towards enterprise and private ventures. However, they also have a growth role, and this impinges on land use and the character of the region. While the geography of the regions remains in place, because of the need to obtain funding for farming from Europe, most of the agencies will disappear. It has been suggested that GOSE will have to be replaced with a 'South East Hub' to enable government to talk to local authorities and others, like CPRE. It seems few in government know how councils work.

There has been mixed or downbeat news on the economy during 2010. We have seen an easing in growth as the boost from the fiscal stimulus waned. The possible headwinds to economic recovery from low property markets, unemployment and constrained credit supply are difficult to predict. Growth could re-assert itself at any time, including the release of pent up development pressures. How the government responds will be critical, and we may know more after the spending review.

3. Making Space for Nature

Defra is promoting the concept of 'Landscape Scale'. Biodiversity alone is said to be a cul-de-sac. The fragmentation of habitats has continued, and this approach reflects the interdependence of landscape. It could be particularly important for CPRE in the South East, and we should consider a response to the forthcoming White Paper. Isolated ecosystems could be linked up across large areas. In a report for Defra, Sir John Lawton sets out a framework for supporting and enhancing biodiversity and landscape. Ministers are being urged to recast planning for nature conservation in England in a programme which could cost around £1 billion. Sir John recommends the creation of 'ecological restoration zones' where local authorities, businesses and landowners team up to ensure species can thrive and return to that area. He says that planning policy and practice should provide the strongest protection to internationally important sites and strong protection from inappropriate development to SSSIs, and provide protection to local wildlife sites and other Biodiversity Action Plan habitats.

4. Local Enterprise Partnerships

CPRE has kept a close eye on the emergence of Local Enterprise Partnerships in the region. The government received 56 LEP bids. In the South East, they are in: Bexley, Dartford, and Gravesham; Coast to Capital: Brighton and Hove, Croydon, the Gatwick Diamond and West Sussex; Coastal West Sussex; East Sussex; Enterprise M3: covering parts of Hampshire and Surrey including Andover, Basingstoke, Aldershot, Farnborough, Fleet, Hook and Camberley; Hampshire; Kent and Medway; Kent-Essex; Oxfordshire City Region; Thames Valley Berkshire; and Thames Valley Buckinghamshire. It is not clear when decisions will be made on which bids have been successful.

Ministers have been urged not to ignore the rural economy when setting up the Local Enterprise Partnerships. CPRE South East has joined others in saying it is vital that the interests of the rural economy are taken into account in this process. The LEP network must extend into rural areas. LEPs are to reflect 'functional economic areas'. Rural areas are not just about farming, and the issues the Government wants LEPs to deal with, such as planning, housing, transport and infrastructure, are all major concerns for rural communities. It is essential that partnership boundaries do not result in rural areas being left out. Whatever form the new network takes, it is important that the interests of rural areas are represented on LEP boards. The rural economy and rural communities should be represented at board level if a partnership covers rural areas to any significant degree. The Boards of each RDA previously included at least one named director to represent rural concerns and there is no reason why this should be different with LEPs.

5. LEPs and the Voluntary Sector

Voluntary organisations in the South East are pleased at the suggestion that the sector will be more closely involved with LEPs. Greg Clark, Minister for Communities and Decentralisation, has said the government would welcome the involvement of voluntary organisations in negotiations to establish the new public-private partnerships aimed at boosting local economies. RAISE expressed disappointment that the sector was excluded when the government approached local authority leaders in July about the proposals for LEPs to replace SEEDA.

Following pressure from the sector, Mr Clark wrote to a number of umbrella bodies saying that the government would welcome the involvement of voluntary organisations and social enterprises in LEPs. This is regarded as a victory for the voluntary and community sector and welcome recognition of the overall impact of the sector. It also shows it is important for organisations to be ready to argue their case with government when it thinks things are not right. CLG has since said the Government did not intend to leave the voluntary sector out of negotiations, which at the time were at an early

stage with local authorities. It wishes to move to a situation where everyone in the community is brought in, but the aim is to have a local authority lead structure.

6. SEFS future work

SEFS is the environmental umbrella body for the South East, and has been considering its future following the demise of regional strategies. SEFS does information sharing and a call to action, coordinated lobbying focussed on best practice sharing. The nature of the world in which SEFS operates has changed fundamentally since it was set up. It is therefore essential that a strategic plan is developed and implemented if SEFS is to continue operating as a network in the South East (or wider South East). A working party was allocated the task of producing a series of options for the future of SEFS, and recommends a reduced scale of work based on core membership income, as the way forward in the absence of any additional sources of funding for SEFS in this uncertain period.

No substantial reorganisation for SEFS to be able to continue in its current form is appropriate. SEFS has funding to continue to March 2011, but much of this has come from SEEDA. New funding is the ideal as membership income alone does not allow SEFS to continue as is. Unless new sources of funding can be identified continuing as it is may not be practical or feasible. The informal network option takes SEFS back to the time before it was set up. This is regarded as a retrograde step as the future is unclear, and the regional links built up over 12 years have proved an invaluable source of knowledge and influence. CPRE is a core member of the SEFS Executive Committee.

7. Climate Change Partnership

The South East Climate Change Partnership's first annual forum was held in Reading last month. Members voted in support of SECCP's constitution, elected its Executive Committee and endorsed a proposed work programme. 80 delegates from across the region, including CPRE members, attended the session. They heard about the UKCIP02 scenarios, the regional economic context for climate impacts and a water industry case study. mark.goldthorpe@climatesoutheast.org.uk is the contact for the coordinator, Mark Goldthorpe or the website is: www.climatesoutheast.org.uk.

8. South East Rural Forum

The Rural Forum South East meets quarterly, and is chaired by Andrew Bowles, Leader of Swale in Kent. It aims to inform and deliver rural policy and services in the region. All papers are on the website: www.rfse.org.uk. It is funded by GOSE and run by SERCC www.sercc.org.uk. The Rural Forum South East is a champion for mainstreaming services and policies in the region. It works with reps from LSPs (Local Strategic Partnerships) and LAA (Local Area Agreement) Boards, County Rural Fora and Rural Community Councils. RFSE aims to cover all aspects of rural sustainability, including economic, social and environmental. In September, Dr Simon Kiley, from Action in Rural Sussex, gave a talk on the recognising 'rural' in health commissioning and delivery. He said health policy sought to reduce inequalities by looking at deprivation and health outcomes. Rural areas are often thought to be socially uniform, but they are very diverse and are made up of individuals from across the wealth, demographic and occupational spectrums. So while it is easy to treat all rural residents in a similar way, there can be big differences in their health outcomes.

9. South East Historic Environment Forum

The South East Historic Environment Forum met in October under the Chairmanship of Dr Andrew Brown, Regional Director of English Heritage. There was a discussion on the value of the new PPS5 for the Historic Environment. The relative weight that local listing now carries was welcomed, though some felt confusion over whether being on the *Historic Environment Record* was the same as

being locally listed. Authorities had to weigh up public benefit as against substantial harm, though there was now a presumption in favour of the survival of heritage assets. The National Trust Thames & Solent and South East Regions would be merged to form a London and South East Region. It would be less hierarchical, with house managers able to decide their own regimes. Natural England would also take on reduced business, and restructure, with less involvement in planning. A Historic Landscape Project was in progress, working with the Association of Gardens Trusts. CABE (the Council for Architecture and the Built Environment) might also be involved in a merger, possibly with the new EH/HLF body. CPRE was present, and a note of the meeting sent out.

10. Affordable Housing targets lost

Some 9,400 affordable homes were completed in the South East in 2009. This is about 29% of all housing completions. CPRE overall has long been concerned about this. Plans to build more affordable homes are under threat, with those in the sector unable to see a way forward to deliver new homes in the face of budget cutbacks, according to a new survey by the housing, regeneration consultancy, Douglas Wood. The survey of directors in housing associations, housing departments of local authorities and registered social landlords, shows a sector in turmoil fearful of its ability to provide new homes and contemplating radical ways of working.

The sector is gloomy in its predictions for the impact of public spending cuts on its ability to deliver housing, regeneration and asset management programmes. In the survey, 79% anticipated being unable to meet targets for building affordable housing and 77% feared they will have to cut non core services. The biggest threat cited was a risk of further cuts to subsidies and grants, seen as a serious issue by 70% of respondents. For 69% budget reduction was the biggest issue keeping them awake at night, followed by a shortage of staff with the right skills. This was cited by 45% of housing heads as a serious issue. In total, 73% also revealed their expectation of cutting jobs within their organisations to make ends meet over the next two years, and 26% in the private sector anticipate making pay cuts similar to those announced for the public sector in the last Budget.

Faced with a radically changed economic and political landscape, many housing executives are unsure how to respond with many of the view that they do not have the resources to cope with the new environment. Over a third (36%) felt their organisation does not have appropriate delivery models to meet regeneration, asset management and decent homes objectives, and 49% were concerned they could no longer use consultants to deliver programmes. Steve Douglas, a director at Douglas Wood, suggested it was time for everyone involved in the provision of affordable housing to be innovative about finding pathways through the maze. He has also suggested local authorities could do things now such as exploring new delivery models, pre-clearing sites, organising master plans and expediting planning permissions, in order to maintain momentum in difficult times. There is more detail on the website: douglaswoodllp.com

11. SEFS letter to Councils

SEFS has written to all South East councils saying it is vital that environmental sustainability forms an underpinning principle to spatial planning. Pursuing a genuine 'triple bottom line' approach – with guidance ensuring the avoidance of trade-offs between economic, social and environmental factors – will be crucial. It is concerned that recent positive steps towards developing policies that enshrine respect for environmental limits should be continued, with these becoming embedded locally. The South East Plan made some strong statements on critical issues and it is essential these be translated to the new planning landscape. A key area is green infrastructure, where we all support the need to define and provide for its planning and management. The objectives for green infrastructure and list

of assets in the South East Plan are a good starting place. With the demise of South East housing targets, it is still important that housing policies at a local level continue to have coherence.

12. Select Committee on Regional Strategies

In mid September, CPRE South East submitted written evidence to the CLG Select Committee looking into the Abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies. This was presented from a South East perspective, and complemented that sent in by national office. We explained that CPRE had a long record of close involvement in housing and planning issues, and that we welcomed the removal of regional housing targets because they were top down. However, we were certain that some form of strategic planning would be needed to fill the void left by the abolition of the broader strategies. The RSS involved extensive consultation and planning work within the region, especially on directions for sustainable development. We felt this work should remain accessible for the next, more local work on strategic planning. The RSS set the framework within which current local plans were to be prepared. It created an 'action mandate' through core strategies and other local development documents. There was a large gap in policy terms following the revocation of the South East Plan. The strategic issues remained, and would now be looking for locally focussed policies and solutions.

Housing development targets are being reset locally, and some might be lower. Local authorities will continue to manage land supply and approve plans, but they do not deliver housing. LEPs may have to take on some strategic planning functions for housing, infrastructure and transport. This might help to fill the gap left by the removal of regional plans, but only if they are given a wider remit than solely promoting economic growth. Provision of affordable housing – still a backlog, is vital in the South East. More cooperation between local authorities will be essential, based on mutual benefit. Data from the regional strategy preparation, including ideas, plans should be made available to the new LEP teams, through the South East Councils secretariat. We hope to give oral evidence later.

13. Shoreham Harbour Eco Town status

The redevelopment of Shoreham Harbour was long seen as an opportunity to create a mixed use scheme. This is regarded as a challenging brownfield proposal, which SEEDA at one time suggested could take up to 6,000 dwellings. Any intensive development would need supporting infrastructure. The Government has announced Eco Town and Growth Point funding of £1.8m for the Shoreham Harbour Regeneration Project, so long as it has the support of local people. Henry Cleary, Deputy Director of CLG, has proposed Eco-town funding of £750,000 and Growth Point funding of £1.1m. Some of the money will be spent on an eco-demonstration project at the harbour to showcase energy efficient, environmentally friendly and attractive design to encourage developers to become involved. The funds will support several important areas of work, including:

- Getting local people involved in the project
- Producing a planning framework for the project
- Economic development work to encourage new investment and jobs to the area
- Transport modelling and flood avoidance modelling.

Adur District Council has welcomed the funding, explaining that it will boost continuing efforts locally. The Council believes it can now move forward with the full engagement and support of local residents and businesses. The three local authority partners, Adur District, Brighton & Hove, West Sussex County Councils, plus Shoreham Port and other partners, are also looking to Europe for other funding possibilities. More details are on the website: www.adur.gov.uk

Edward Dawson