

RSS EXAMINATION IN PUBLIC SOUTH EAST

STATEMENT BY CPRE SOUTH EAST: PARTICIPANT 7124

MATTER 8J WESTERN CORRIDOR AND BLACKWATER VALLEY

Sub-matter 8Ji Role and Economy

8Ji.1 Bearing in mind its complex spatial and administrative structure what is the rationale for and role of the sub-region? Is it appropriate to combine Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley (Policy WCBV7)?

1. The need for a sub region west of London was long recognised; was originally the Western Arc in the RPG9 of 1994. In the 2001 version, it became the Western Policy Area focusing on the Thames Valley. The Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley, as now defined, is a very large and diverse area. Its inclusion in a single sub region in its present form may not be wholly justified.
2. The Thames Valley is a central feature of the Western Corridor, and its role as the economic driver is recognised. However, the attractiveness of its environment has restricted the opportunities for housing development. Such new sites as may come forward will be primarily located on publicly owned land; mainly defence land. The importance of mixed uses to reduce commuting needs to be fully recognised.
3. The complexity of the spatial and administrative structure, with large tracts of countryside designated as Green Belt, AONB, SPA, woodlands, Strategic Gaps and SSSIs makes for much variation across the area. There are towns that bear no relationship to one another, with restricted communication links, and the only rationale for the sub-region is to try and overlay some co-ordinated policies, supplanting those of the county-based structure. Previous justification for sub regions was based on the need for economic coherence. This is no longer the case, and greater spatial content and clarity is therefore essential.
4. The case for detail boundary revisions has been made elsewhere, but part of the rationale of a boundary, in the context of planning, is to identify change between adjacent areas. This has to be done in a considered way, for which there is no real evidence for this sub-region, or others. The alignment of parish boundaries, local ward boundaries, county divisions, parliamentary constituencies and county boundaries has already become haphazard, thanks partly to the role of the Boundaries Commission, and attempts to establish equal representation.
5. To overlay sub-regional boundaries on the basis of an arbitrary line or a curve superimposed on a map is bound to make the situation even more confusing, potentially bringing the sub-regional concept into disrepute. There has to be a better rationale; avoiding the division of coherent communities by the recognition of existing environmental features, such as rivers, roads and AONBs, with detailed alignment based on parish boundaries so as to safeguard local cohesion.

6. For example the M3 and the A339 represented the original sub-regional boundary to the south and west; any justification for re-alignment should have taken into account parish boundaries but, as elsewhere, these have been disregarded.
7. Regarding the inclusion of the Blackwater Valley, this is only logical if the separate legacies and character of the Corridor and the Valley are recognised. The Corridor and the Valley rely on different transport routes; the former also exhibits much economic buoyancy, while latter struggles to find an identity.
8. The Blackwater Valley may be an appropriate area for development and regeneration. While it should be considered as integral to the Western Corridor, its weakness is that it comprises parts of several districts and a unitary authority (Bracknell Forest) and 3 counties, whereas if it were a single entity focussed on Aldershot, it might be removed from the county structure. Physical and social infrastructure has lagged behind in the Blackwater Valley, partly because of its old 'Area 8' status. This meant that it received much growth without being recognised or supported from central funds.
9. The Blackwater Valley should stay within a sub-region called 'The Western Corridor' and combined within it as an important potential centre for regeneration. It should not be specially identified within the name of the sub-region, of which it forms only a small part. It might also be regarded as a lobe within the great sub region.
10. With Farnham taken out of the sub-region, the previous ellipse that notionally set the geographic parameters of the Blackwater Valley should be re-drawn, more as a circle entirely within the sub-region. This might preferably be identified only in the text of Plan as an area for joint Local Development Documents, a Special Development Area or on some similar unitary basis.

8Ji.2 Are the economic forecasts realistic and is the provision for employment land adequate in relation to these economic assumptions (Policy WCBV4, paras 2.4.5 and 2.8-2.12)?

11. Maintaining an effective employment base should be a key strategic aim of the sub region. The interim forecasts of job growth in the sub region, of 111,500 provides for a significant element of in-migration. The forecasts appear realistic over a 10-year period, but should better address the need for local employment in its many and varied forms. The retention of employment sites will be important, but a judgement will be needed in unusual or controversial cases, as always on their merits.
12. The location of employment sites in the sub region varies considerably due to past influences and the relative performance of settlements. This ranges from the well located industrial estates of Wokingham at Molly Millers Lane to the isolated business and offices uses at Murrell Green, near Hook. The former is close to transport links, while the latter can only be accessed off the A30, by car. This shows the need for flexibility in applying this policy. Seeking an appropriate balance of land uses is a helpful aim, but applying a mechanistic policy to unforeseen needs helps no one. The need to encourage and foster innovation and enterprise will become more acute over the Plan period, and the aim must be to secure a sustainable and socially secure resolution of future employment uses.

8Ji.3 What are the implications of the potential misalignment of houses and jobs?

13. In a buoyant sub region like the Western Corridor, there will be a need for continued adjustments to policy to align housing and employment. This would help to avoid any potential misalignment. Over-heating may be a thing of the past, but this phenomenon could easily re-emerge. It may not be necessary to establish a clear and conclusive link between jobs and housing. It is unlikely that the rate of housing development can in some way be managed on a short term basis.

14. Monitoring will assist in any adjustment process, but the response of affected local authorities must be decisive to ensure the workforce and new housing provision does not get out of kilter. It is not clear whether a serious deficiency would trigger an RSS review or if local adjustments would be possible and sufficient.

8Ji.4 Is the policy on Smart Growth sufficiently clear in its aims and realistic in its prospects for delivery (Policy WCBV5)?

15. The aim of smart growth is laudable, but unlikely to achieve comprehensive coverage. Does all growth need to be smart growth, sticking as closely as possible to the existing footprint of built structures? This may well be the main definition accepted with the sub region. Other non-smart growth may well need to be accommodated in the future and decision-making on such applications may to be guided at a strategic level. A view ought perhaps to be taken as to the amount that is acceptable. It should be clear as to whether smart growth is an expectation and a requirement, or simply an overall aim of the sub region.

16. The social or ‘softer’ aspects of smart growth need to be assessed or quantified in a given situation. Otherwise they will be seen as a public relations effort, open to misuse or misinterpretation. The refinements of technology and improved working practices will certainly make a big impact. However, social and economic pressures change, and the needs of smaller employers should be particularly regarded. Help with green travel plans will be important and existing county-based guidance need to be kept up-to-date. Overall transport aims of better access for those seeking work should be widely known and publicised through information points.

8Ji.5 Does the proposed strategy adequately reflect the role of Reading, Basingstoke, Slough and High Wycombe as Regional Hubs (Policy WCBV1)?

17. Reading is a key hub, with improvements well overdue at the mainline station. Significant expansion is only possible into West Berkshire. The great opportunity to re-use disturbed land there for housing and mixed development should be fully grasped, and could become an exemplar of sustainability. The A33 road corridor between Reading and Basingstoke should not be subject to pressure for widening. This is undesirable strategically, and for pure environmental reasons, mainly to do with the heritage area of the Wellington estate at Stratfield Saye. Basingstoke itself remains well-defined, with development west of the roman road being inappropriate. We do not believe that the formation of hubs implies the coalescence of settlements.