

Briefing Paper 2 Strategic Planning for housing

- We need a national spatial plan
- There should be a statutory requirement for sub-regional spatial development strategies
- Strategic planning at local authority level must be properly resourced

Introduction

The framework for strategic planning in England is very weak. There is an urgent requirement to strengthen the framework at national, regional, sub-regional and local levels. The absence of an adequate framework leads to inefficient use of resources and development capacity and therefore limits the potential for economic growth.

Policy Objectives

- The development of a **national spatial plan** integrated with national infrastructure strategy under national land use framework, which identifies those areas of the country with potential for economic as well as residential growth. This would act as a steer for national investment in infrastructure, employment and residential development and as a framework for strategic planning at regional and sub regional scales.
- The establishment of **non-statutory regional spatial planning frameworks**, working within the national spatial planning framework, and acting as a steer for sub-regional frameworks.
- The establishment of **Spatial Development Strategies at sub-regional level** based on county council areas or combined county council areas, incorporating all unitary and district authorities within the area.
- Strengthening of **district planning authority capacity** to prepare local plans and contribute to sub-regional spatial development strategies.

The Present Context

The abolition of Regional Assemblies and Regional Strategies was a serious policy error, and attempts by government to encourage cooperation between local planning authorities through the introduction of a 'duty to co-operate' and then through a proposed 'alignment test' failed to generate increased collaborative strategic planning. Moreover, increased focus by government on each local authority meeting its own housing requirements meant that authorities could opt out of any collaboration if it was not in their interest.

Successive governments encouraged localism, with an increased focus on neighbourhood planning, discounting the fact that this could obstruct a more strategic approach at the local district level.

Government targets for new housebuilding in each authority ignored any assessment of development capacity with each authority required to undertake its own assessment of local housing need. There was no requirement to take into account housing need or demand within the wider housing market area. This meant that a local authority with limited demand but significant development capacity could ignore need and demand within neighbouring authorities with insufficient development capacity to fully meet their locally assessed need for new homes.

This situation militates against attempts to use development capacity within an area wider than a single district. Moreover, it does not enable the provision of housing necessary to support economic development in areas which have strong local economies. Nor does it allow for any national government to pursue a regional policy which seeks to focus economic and/or residential growth in certain locations. This was intended to be one element of the last government's 'levelling up' agenda, or even to support those authorities that welcome economic and or residential growth.

The new government's proposals in the Devolution White Paper to require cross-authority planning and the preparation of Sustainable Development Strategies (SDS) by groupings of local authorities are therefore welcome. Such groupings will need to be adequately resourced.

Housing Market Assessments on a strategic sub-regional basis and Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments need to be carried out in parallel for the development of the SDS. Objectively assessed housing need is required within the SDS area and for allocating new housing targets to constituent planning authority areas. These housing targets would replace the current government local housing targets, which are set as a proportion of local housing stock and bear no relation to either objectively assessed housing need or to residential development capacity.

Lessons from past experience in the UK and elsewhere

The experience of the London Plan has demonstrated the value of strategic planning at a regional level, but the planning of housing provision across the London metropolitan region, that is beyond the London administrative boundary requires a framework for collaborative strategic planning across a wider area.

This is essential for considering any possible revisions to Green Belts round major cities, London included. Previous examples of a wider approach to strategic planning exist in the form of the Abercrombie Greater London Plan, the South East Studies (1960s/1970s) and the role of the South East Regional Planning Conference (SERPLAN) in the 1980s and 1990s.

Far more effective strategic planning exists in countries with well-articulated planning systems, such as Germany and the Netherlands, and England can learn from this European experience. Global examples which can help learning include the work of **the New York** Tri-State Regional Planning Association, the **Greater Sydney project** and the **Grand Paris initiative**, which covers a far larger region than Paris itself and is allowing the dynamic reinvention of the key French metropolitan region – London is left far behind in comparison.

Contributing to government policy objectives

The re-establishment of an effective system of strategic planning at national, regional and sub-regional level is essential to the effective use of development capacity across the country which is a precondition of economic growth.

Duncan Bowie

duncanbowie@yahoo.co.uk