

## **Spatial Planning within a localism agenda: Developing new approaches to implementation.**

### **1. The Government's proposed reforms.**

The proposals for reform of the planning system in England which are set out in the Conservative planning green paper *Open Source Planning* and in announcements since the Conservative/ Liberal Democrat coalition government took office, are predicated on moving away from what is perceived as an over-centralised planning system to a system which is based on promoting a 'localist' agenda – strengthening the role of local planning authorities and promoting neighbourhood based planning and a greater role for existing residents in the determination of development proposals in their neighbourhood.

Decisions taken by the Government to date include the abolition of national targets on housing output and density of development and the revocation of Regional Special Strategies. Regional planning teams are in the process of being wound up, with no proposals as yet in place for alternative structures at sub-regional level. The forthcoming devolution Bill will formally abolish RSS's. Regional Development Agencies are to be replaced by Local Enterprise Partnerships. The Government's view seems to be that any cross authority collaboration should be on a voluntary basis. At present it is unclear whether the remaining county authorities are to be given any planning powers. While there are suggestions of strengthening the powers of authorities with directly elected Mayors, for example giving them some controls over housing investment budgets, there are no proposals to establish city region authorities, or despite the proposals to strengthen the powers of the Mayor of London, to deal with the need for metropolitan regional planning for London and the Greater Southeast.

It is therefore critical to demonstrate the importance of sub-national planning and to develop both governance structures and methodologies for its implementation, which respect the new Government's wish for greater self determination by local planning authorities and increased resident engagement in the plan-making process.

There is currently no national spatial planning framework in England. This in contrast with Scotland and Wales which have national spatial plans. In England, national planning guidance in the form of Planning Policy Guidance (prior to 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act) and Planning Policy Statements (post 2004 Act) are generally lacking a

spatial dimension, the exception being the PPS for nuclear power stations. While the Government, following the publication of the Sustainable Communities Plan, has promoted a number of growth areas and growth points, these have not been referred to in PPG's or PPS's.

## **2. The role of spatial planning**

The main purpose of a national spatial planning framework should be to guide the spatial distribution of development by allocating investment resources from national budgets to support sustainable development in the identified areas. A national planning framework is essential in order to ensure development is focused on locations, where environmental, economic and social sustainability objectives can be achieved. A national spatial framework also needs to address spatial inequalities in terms of supporting the generation of a more balanced economy and to ensure access to jobs, housing and amenities in areas of the country which are in deficit. A national framework is necessary to provide a framework at sub-national level, whether this be on a regional, city-region or sub-regional basis.

With the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, sub-national strategic planning moved from a county basis to a regional basis, with the abolition of the county-led structure plans and the introduction of Regional Spatial Strategies (the framework for regional spatial planning having been already reintroduced for London under the 1999 Greater London Authority Act and the requirement for a Spatial Development Strategy for London). Outside London, regional strategies included sub-regional components, components whose preparation involved county councils, district councils and unitary councils, but components which derived their authority from being components of approved Regional Spatial Strategies. With the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies, these sub-regional components also become invalid, unless adopted and incorporated by into the Local Development Frameworks by the district and unitary councils concerned. This is however not at present possible for the majority of local planning authorities who do not as yet have adopted core strategies under the 2004 Act framework. In some metropolitan areas, such as Manchester and Leeds, with Birmingham and Sheffield following, there has been some move towards collaboration between district authorities at a city-region level. However, at present there is no statutory framework for plan-making on a cross-authority basis, though there is provision under the 2004 Act for authorities to adopt joint Local Development Documents, covering areas within more than one local planning authority.

While the current Government's proposals envisage cooperation on spatial planning between neighbouring authorities, and propose a duty to collaborate, at present it is unclear whether this duty will amount to preparing a common spatial plan. Responsibility for developing infrastructure plans is unclear, though it is perceived that there may be a role for county councils as well as district and unitary councils as local planning authorities. The Coalition Government appears to be supportive of a two tier county/district structure and have opposed the establishment of any more unitary authorities.

### **3. Limitations on the devolution of planning decisions**

It is important to identify the reasons why a planning system which is driven solely by the perspective of a single local planning authority is problematic.

The first and most critical point to make is that local planning authorities are not equal, Some areas are better off than others both in terms of the wealth and income of their residents and in terms of access to services. Some areas may have difficulty identifying appropriate sites to provide development to meet the needs of their existing and future residents; other areas may have significant development capacity. This is recognised in the previous Government's identification of first growth areas and then growth points. To take an example, the Thames Gateway was identified as having a capacity to provide homes, jobs and services beyond the needs of the existing residents of the area, which could contribute to relieving the pressure on other areas in the greater southeast. The ecotowns were seen as fulfilling a similar function if on a smaller scale. The coalition government now sees these development proposals as having firstly to satisfy existing local residents, rather than meet a wider objective.

Secondly, employment and housing market areas do not coincide with local district boundaries. Most employment catchment areas operate on a city regional principle, with a significant number of workers within a city commuting in from adjacent suburban, semi-rural and rural districts. The previous government advised local planning authorities to collaborate on a city-regional or sub-regional basis.

Thirdly, the provision of major new transport and social infrastructure, retail, commercial, industrial, leisure and residential development may have impacts beyond a single local planning authority area. The

definition of a strategic development set out in the strategic planning guidance for London (GOL circular 1/2008) could be applied in other parts of England. The pre-existing planning guidance, both in terms of PPS11 and PPS12, recognised that significant local development decisions need to have regard to the spatial context. Guidance on planning policies for housing in PPS3 is explicit that assessments of housing demand and capacity need to be undertaken on a regional or sub-regional basis.

#### **4. Double Devolution**

The *Open Source* Green Paper however goes beyond the notion that planning decisions should be devolved from national and regional levels to a local planning authority level. The proposals are based on the principle of double devolution and advocate neighbourhood planning as a basis for plan making. The principle is that the existing residents of a specific neighbourhood are best placed to plan their own future. The Coalition government seem to wish to apply this principle both to plan-making – district level plans should be an aggregation of neighbourhood based plans, and to development control – local residents should decide which development schemes are given consent.

This focus on localism has put some planning organisations in a dilemma. The new focus has been welcomed by many local councillors and councils who opposed targets being imposed on them by central government or regional bodies. Some planning organisations also take the view that planning has been too centralist. There is also a view that public participation has been weak, and that the Coalition's case for greater public involvement in both plan-making and the planning decision process has some validity. It is true that both regional level planning and in some cases the preparation of core strategies has had little active engagement of the 'general public' with the consultation process only engaging existing organised interest groups. RSS EiPs have generally had relatively limited attendance and that limited attendance has been mainly consisted of 'professional consultees'. Recent attention has been drawn to the cost of the process. It is true that a more local focus, whether neighbourhood based or scheme specific is more likely to generate public interest, as impact on residents or neighbours of a specific development proposal is more obvious. Part of the difficulty with local plan-making processes is that with local planning authorities focusing on district wide documents such as the Statements of community Involvement, initial options and preferred options reports and then core strategies, and attempts to influence RSS's and sub-regional strategies, there has been

little time to focus on neighbourhood plans, whether for growth points or for existing residential communities or for site development briefs. In fact the majority of development briefs, even those drawn up for councils rather than on behalf of developers, are prepared by private consultancies – the council is in a reactive rather than proactive role, and local council officials and councillors may not be seen as leading the process. Consequently the democratic accountability of the plan making process may not be explicit.

## **5. Neighbourhood planning**

Neighbourhood planning, whether in the form of area masterplans, site development briefs or the consultation process on major planning applications is however important. These processes cannot however be self-contained and must be set within a wider policy context. The planning of a neighbourhood must have regard to potential future needs rather than just the preferences of existing residents. Moreover, these must have regard to wider impacts. Planning is about allocating a scarce resource - in terms of space to a specific land use or uses. Planning decisions have negative as well as positive impacts. Planning decisions are a balance between interests which are often in conflict. As the RTPi states, planning is not just about place-making, it is also about the mediation of space. Planning decisions involve making choices and as these involve subjective judgements, the process is inherently political and therefore has to be accountable to the democratic governance structure.

## **6. Planning and realism**

Planning is not just about conserving the past but also about planning for the future. Neighbourhood planning must therefore be more than just defending the existing heritage and built form. It also has to deal with demands arising from population growth and change. It also has to at least try to mitigate spatial social inequalities in terms of access to resources and facilities. This means that plan-making has to be more than a statement of vision. Allocation of land uses to meet the vision is an important component of plan making.

However a plan which can not be implemented is not a very useful plan. The issue of implementation is critical and a largely under-recognised part of the planning process. Every plan needs to be accompanied by an implementation plan – every planning application by a development appraisal. The planning profession is only discredited by propounding

visions which have no chance of getting being the visionary stage. Residents lose faith in a process which lacks realism.

Planning is therefore a complex balancing act;

- a) between different objectives which may be in conflict
- b) between planning for the needs of the present and the needs of the future
- c) between the interests of individuals and the broader (often unrepresented) public
- d) between what is an ideal outcome and what is deliverable

While it is important that planners have 'vision' it is also important to recognise that different individuals and communities have their own visions. There is no professional expertise that justifies a planner's vision as necessary being the best vision. Planners are not technocratic Gods.

## **7. Rebalancing the planning regime**

'Localism' has for some become a panacea. After more than 30 years during which the public sector has been seen as bad and private sector good, the new mantra is 'centralism bad and localism good.' For some this has become 'planning bad, neighbourhood self-determination good'. This fails to recognise that even 'neighbourhood' is not easily defined, while who are the residents who are determining their future? Who determines how neighbourhoods make their own decisions unless there are accountable structures – and what types of decisions can be made at a local neighbourhood level – or does 'localism' in its purest form mean that within a neighbourhood residents are not subject to any external constraints?

If there is to be a rebalancing of decision making powers between different tiers of government, not just in relation to land use planning and development matters, but on matters of service provision and management (such as schools and health services) or resource allocation matters (taxation and grant making for example), there needs to be both clarity on the process as well as an assessment of the potential impacts. Part of the difficulty of the current Coalition Government proposals is that there is a confusion between devolving decision making to a more local level of governance structure, for example to parish or ward councils, and the proposal for residents to be more involved in the decision making process. The two are not synonymous, and proposals to take pass decision making from locally accountable bodies to 'resident groups' or to individuals are problematic in terms of ensuring that such

groups or individuals are representative and are not solely exercising powers in a way which is primarily for their own benefit. The proposal for schemes with resident support should be taken out of the statutory planning decision making process is an example of a proposition may be popular but is not as yet accompanied by clear mechanisms for implementation and resolving those little details of ensuring public benefit and voiding corruption and personal gain which the statutory process was established to deal with.

## **8 Responsible localism**

Localism has therefore to be responsible. Whereas there are elements of the pre-existing planning system which can be seen as too centralist and insufficiently engaging local residents in the planning process, there is a risk that unconstrained localism will actually generate policy decisions which are only of benefit to a minority of residents and which will in fact increase rather than reduce spatial inequity – in other words will lead to benefits for the informed professional class at the expense of everybody else – benefits for the better off neighbourhoods at the expense of other areas. Responsible localism has to move beyond immediate neighbourhood self interest. The most successful civic leaders are those that have led development and transformation to meet long term challenges – economic, environmental and social, rather than focused solely on conservation and heritage. Planning is a fundamental component of dynamic civic leadership. The term ‘civic’ is important as it combines three components –

a sense of place

a sense of accountability

a sense of the public interest and purpose

The term ‘dynamic’ is equally important, as it reflects the fact that planning is about adaptation – adapting to external factors. There are short term plans, medium term plans and long-term plans. There is an interaction between plan making, plan implementation and plan revision. A plan is not some document that is a fixed masterplan for an indefinite period. The future can be projected – it cannot be predicted. Monitoring and updating the evidence base are essential components of a dynamic plan-making process.

## **9. Dynamic planning and localism**

The challenge is therefore how to adapt the planning structures and processes to reflect the new localism agenda, while retaining a planning regime and practice which has regard to what are loosely called

‘externalities’ both factors which impact on a neighbourhood and the deliverability of its own self determined plans, but externalities in terms of the impact decisions within a neighbourhood have on the world beyond the neighbourhood.

The fundamental issue is to how to establish new decision making structures and appraisal systems that deal with the different interests referred to above. Both plan-making and the planning application decision making system have become too focused on process rather than output and impact analysis. As planning authorities at various levels, national, regional and local, have produced extensive policy requirements and guidance, both plan making and application determination have been predicated on checking policy compliance. Even sustainability appraisals by moving to check list systems have led to a loss of focus, especially with the appraisal systems becoming a specialist industry. The planning process has become too much of a ritual process between different sets of consultants, which an increasing dependence on specialist expertise, a ritual; which becomes even less transparent as the public sector increasingly depends on just those private consultants who are representing their developer clients. Given most applications are not policy compliant in all areas – not surprisingly given policy requirements are so extensive, a planning decision report will often present a decision or recommendation ‘made on balance’ without explicitly assessing the issues of non compliance. Even when decisions are taken at member level, the full policy assessment may be missing as councillors may actually raise points outside the formal policy position of the planning authority. It is perhaps unsurprising that the general public has lost faith in the process.

We should also recognise that this technical process may actually hide or at least disguise the real policy and political choices that are involved in planning decision, and that Government targets over determination timescales and proportions of schemes delegated to officers, have served only to shift the focus even further away from real purpose of the planning system. However it is also important that planning decisions taken by members are also justified with reference to published planning policies. This reaffirms the point that planning decisions must be both based on a full technical and policy appraisal, but that there must be an accountability for decisions. Any new system introduced must incorporate these two components if the transparency and accountability is to be retained or even improved.



## **10 Impact appraisal as an essential component of planning**

One option for ensuring new structures are transparent and accountable, and that introducing a more 'localist' approach strengthens rather than weakens the planning process, and the credibility of both the system and its practitioners, is to make both options and impact appraisals more explicit within both plans and planning applications reports. A report summary for a specific planning application should of course include a statement of which policies requirements a scheme does not meet (if any) and if so, why such non compliance is justified.

However both plans and planning application reports should include explicit statements of

- a) what were the alternative development options and why the proposed option is preferred,
- b) what are the impacts of a policy or development proposal, in terms of negative and positive impacts , including analysis of differential impacts – ie who (individually or interest groups) benefits from a scheme and who ( individuals or interest groups) is disbenifited. This appraisal must go beyond the neighbourhood and the more immediate policy or scheme effects.

This will make explicit the choices made by the planning bodies both proposing plans and granting planning consent.

Any devolution of planning powers either within the existing governance structures or under any new 'localist community based' structures must incorporate these components.

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