

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY**

Date: 10 January 2001

Subject: **Regional Planning Guidance**

Report of: Director of Planning and Transport

**Recommendation:**

To welcome the publication of the Regional Planning Guidance for the South East and to agree to consider a further report on more detailed issues relating to monitoring and implementation at a subsequent Committee Meeting.

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**I. Introduction**

- I.1 On the 18 December 2000 the long delayed Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG 9) was finally published. All members of the Planning Committee have been provided with a copy of the Guidance as an accompaniment to this report. The Guidance covers the period up to 2016 as well as setting a framework for the longer term.
- I.2 The primary purpose of the Guidance is to provide a regional framework for the preparation of Local Authority Development Plans. It covers the whole of the South East Regional Assembly's area as well as Greater London and the Shire Counties and Unitary councils for Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Essex.
- I.3 The Guidance also provides the spatial framework for other important strategies and programmes, notably the Local Transport Plans of Local Authorities Regional Economic Strategy of the South East England Development Agency and the work of a number of other government agencies and advisory bodies.
- I.4 Members will also be aware of the protracted process of preparation which has led to this formal new guidance. The South East Regional Planning Body (SERPLAN) initiated a first draft of the guidance, which was then subjected to an extensive public examination in 1999. The report of the Examining Panel was published in October 1999 and caused considerable controversy with a proposed range of radical recommendations. In March 2000 the Secretary State issued his proposed changes to the draft RPG 9 in response to the Panel's report and many other representations. The guidance now published represents the final stage in that process.

- 1.5 There is however, one important caveat. Although the document now issued represents, in substantial part, the definitive guidance for the Assembly's region, one dimension remains unresolved. This is the distribution of housing between the different parts of the region, although not the overall regional target. This distributional aspect remains the subject of a further period of consultation, which will close on February 12<sup>th</sup>.
- 1.6 In commenting on this guidance I would remind members that the assembly does not take on the role of planning and transportation body until 1 April next. At the moment that responsibility still lies with SERPLAN. It is therefore SERPLAN and its constituent bodies who have the task of formally responding to the final element in the Regional Guidance. Members will also appreciate the guidance was only received by officers a few days before it was necessary to send out this agenda. This commentary therefore does no more than identify the main issues in the guidance and provide an opportunity for an initial discussion. It will be necessary to return to the Guidance and particularly to the issues surrounding its monitoring and implementation, at later Committees.

## **2 Urban and Rural White Papers**

- 2.1 The delay in production of the Regional Planning Guidance has a benefit, in that it now follows closely on the publication of the Rural and Urban White Papers. These two White Papers provide the most comprehensive analysis of policy issues relating to urban and rural development for over twenty-five years, and indeed their combined publication covering both the urban and rural, is a unique event. Although they put forward a number of policies and proposals which will be controversial, in overall terms they nevertheless provide a welcome national framework against which to set regional policies. Together they also contain a plethora of proposals and initiatives, which should help us to address the many challenging targets in the Regional Planning Guidance. A summary of the two White Papers will be distributed to members of the Committee at the meeting. Your officers will take into account the White Papers in their relevant work on regional issues.

## **3 Vision and Development Priorities**

- 3.1 The Regional Guidance states that it has a stated vision of "encouraging economic success throughout the region, ensuring a higher quality of environment with management of natural resources, opportunity and equity for the regions population, and a more sustainable pattern of development. The focus is on enabling urban renaissance, promoting regeneration and renewal, concentrating development in urban areas, promoting a prosperous and multi purpose countryside, and promoting wider choice in travel options, thereby reducing the reliance on the private car."

3.2 In Para. 3.5 of the guidance the main principles that should govern development of the region are set out as follows: -

- Urban areas should become the main focus for the development through making them more attractive, accessible and better able to attract investment;
- Greenfield development (namely on previously undeveloped land) should normally take place only after other alternatives have been considered, and should have regard to the full social, environmental and transport costs of location;
- The Pattern of Development should be less dispersed with more sustainable patterns of activity, allowing home work and leisure green spaces, cultural facilities and community services to be in closer proximity;
- London's world city role and the South East 's international connections should be developed as a basis for the enhancement of the Region's attractiveness in Europe and the world;
- Economic opportunities should be increased by raising skills levels and reducing the disparities between different parts of the Region. In particular, by positive investment strategies for the Thames Gateway and Priority Areas for Economic Regeneration to improve the performance of poorer parts of the Region and by managing the localised impacts of development in economically buoyant areas;
- Sufficient housing, and in particular affordable housing, should be provided for all who need to live and work in the Region, to encourage social inclusion and avoid pressure for housing in adjoining regions;
- The development of housing should be more sustainable, providing a better mix of sizes, types and tenures, having regard to the structure of households and peoples ability to access homes and jobs;
- Development should be located and designed to enable more sustainable use of the Region's natural resources, in the supply of food, water, energy, minerals and timber, in the effective management of renewable energy sources and to assist in reducing pollution of air, land and water;
- There should be continued protection and enhancement of the Region's biodiversity, internationally and nationally important nature conservation areas, and enhancement of its landscape and built and historic heritage;
- The life of the countryside and rural communities should be sustained through economic diversification which respects the character of different parts of the Region and enables sustainable agriculture and forestry;

- Access to jobs, services, leisure, and cultural facilities should be less dependent on longer distant movement and there should be increased ability to meet normal travel needs through safe walking, cycling and public transport with reduced reliance on the car; and
- Transport investment should support the spatial strategy, maintaining the existing network, enhancing access as part of more concentrated forms of development, overcoming the bottlenecks and supporting higher capacity and less polluting modes of transport.

3.3 In Spatial terms the Guidance highlights three different dimensions of the region which require specific policy approaches: -

- **Priority areas for economic regeneration** - these are areas which as the name suggests, require a degree of encouragement for new development and associated policy action. The areas identified in the Guidance in the Assembly's region are South Hampshire, Southampton and Portsmouth, the Isle of Wight, Sussex Coastal Towns, former coalfields and coastal towns in East Kent.
- **The western policy area** to the west and south of London ranging round from the M1 near Watford in the North to Reading to Gatwick in the South. It covers parts of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Hampshire and Surrey. This is an area which has enjoyed very substantial economic success over recent decades, which has in turn brought problems relating to pressures on the labour market, housing and property markets as well as severe traffic congestion and environmental disturbance. The focus is now on reinforcing economic success by growing in a sustainable way, with the minimum additional pressure on labour or land resources.
- **Potential growth areas** - these are areas where there would appear to be scope for substantial new development over the medium and the longer term. Two such potential growth areas have been identified, at Milton Keynes and Ashford.
- In addition, although not strictly falling into any of these categories, the single largest focus for regional regeneration and development is the **Thames Gateway** area. This is both a regional and national priority and is an area which spans the interests of this Assembly, London and the Eastern Region.

## **4 Quality of Life in Town and Country**

- 4.1 The new planning guidance places far more emphasis on issues relating to the quality of life than earlier regional planning guidance. It does this with a particular focus on the need for Urban Renaissance and on the concentration of development. Essentially Urban Renaissance is centred on the concept of improving the quality of living environments in towns and cities within the region through a process of renewal and redevelopment. It focuses therefore on the physical opportunities in these Urban areas first and foremost before considering the scope for development elsewhere.
- 4.2 Accordingly, the very first formal policy statement in the guidance states that “Urban areas should be the prime focus for new development and redevelopment.” It goes on to emphasise the importance of urban design and design considerations in achieving improved standards of urban development and the effective improvement of urban environments. It draws attention to the scope for improvement in suburban areas quite as much as in town centres and inner areas. It emphasises the importance of achieving design excellence not as a marginal or aesthetic consideration but as a fundamental of the planning and development process. It suggests a number of priorities and criteria which can under-pin this approach, and which include the need to carefully locate and design development to create better use of land for services and infrastructure, paying particular attention to the implications for travel movements and the need to invest more consistently in the public realm. This policy about the quality of life, together with the broad themes about transport investment and change are probably the most significant new elements of the strategy, compared with earlier guidance.

## **5. Environmental Strategy in the Countryside**

- 5.1 The importance of protecting and enhancing **Green Areas** and the Countryside of the South East is one that is strongly stressed in the Guidance. This is essentially a reinforcement of earlier policy, but it is also important to note in this context that the Guidance states as formal policy that there is no regional case for reviewing regionally Green Belt boundaries in light of the regional strategy and its development requirements. Specific local reviews may however be justified.

## **6. The Regional Economy**

- 6.1 This chapter of the Guidance is devoted to the importance of encouraging successful regional economy and making full use of the region’s wealth of human resources.

6.2 Policies to encourage that use of human resources are included as are clear policy statements that the regional economy should be supported and further developed whilst ensuring the development process follows and supports sustainable development. There are of course strong linkages here with the Regional Economic Strategy, which is referred to as a key dimension of Regional Planning Guidance consideration. Emphasis is also placed on the need to make the best use of land resources in this densely populated region and to do so in a noticeably more economical way than some land use policies and development plans of the recent past.

## **7. Housing**

7.1 Housing, or more particularly the scale of housing and its distribution, has of course proved the most controversial aspect of recent discussions on Regional Guidance. This brief report does not attempt to rehearse all the issues or make a substantial analysis of housing issues and the problems that may arise in delivering the Guidance. Nevertheless it should be recorded that the targets set by the Government in the Guidance will prove challenging. Ministers have reduced their earlier suggested target of 43,000 homes per annum in the Guidance following representations to an initial target of 39,000 per annum over the years to year 2006. The next round of Regional Planning Guidance will provide an opportunity to review that target and determine whether it is appropriate to be continued into the future or whether it might need amendment to a higher or lower figure.

7.2 Notwithstanding the concern about overall numbers, it is also important to recognise that the new guidance places a welcome emphasis on the importance of providing a higher proportion of future housing development for those who are unable to purchase on the ordinary housing market. In other words provision for affordable and social housing. The Guidance includes policies to require development plans to cater for a range of dwelling types and sizes, including alternative forms of tenure, in order to meet the needs of all sectors of the community and to plan for balanced communities. It specifically refers to the requirement that affordable housing be provided to meet local need.

7.3 It further suggests that the Assembly should monitor the overall regional provision of affordable housing against a provisional indicator of 18-19,000 affordable homes per annum in the region. These statements may not seem revolutionary to the members of the Committee, but in fact they represent a very considerable advance to the opaque and inadequate references to this issue in previous Regional Guidance for the South East.

7.4 It is also important to note the emphasis that is being placed on making use of existing land and property in order to meet property needs rather than develop on greenfield sites. In overall terms the Guidance sets a target of achieving at least 60% of all new housing developments on previously developed sites through the conversions of existing buildings. This is undoubtedly a challenging target but does relate coherently to the overall

theme of urban renaissance set out in the Strategies vision and core objectives.

## **8. Water Waste and Minerals**

- 8.1 Later chapters of the Guidance deal with other important dimensions of regional provision and the use of resources. These include issues such as energy, which have not been the subject of much prior attention in previous in the Regional Guidance and which will probably require much more attention in the next round of regional guidance. Of more immediate significance therefore are the references to water resources, waste, and minerals. All of these are dimensions, which have considerable significance and sensitivities for the Assembly's region.
- 8.2 In respect of water resources the document adopts a clear policy statement that development should be guided away from areas at risk or likely to be at risk in future from flooding, or where development will increase the risk of flood damage elsewhere. It further adopts a policy of focussing new development in a way as to allow for sustainable provision of water services and timely investment in sewage treatment and discharge systems. Techniques, which improve water efficiency and minimise adverse impacts on water resources are to be encouraged.
- 8.3 Waste is another dimension which is likely to grow in significance in the region in the next few years, given the run down in existing landfill sites, the slow progress that is being made in achieving recycling targets, and the increasing controversy surrounding aspects of incineration. In this context the Guidance states that the Region should seek to make provision for its waste disposal within its own boundaries wherever possible. Waste planning authorities should aim to make provision for a sufficient range and number of facilities and the reuse and recovery of disposable waste so that it can be managed within their areas. Every effort should be made to minimise waste. These policy objectives are appropriate but their fulfilment will undoubtedly prove very testing, and will require an early review process.
- 8.4 Finally in this section the Guidance devotes a chapter to the issue of mineral extraction and its impacts. This has long been a subject of controversy, but in recent years there has been a growing acceptance that a greater contribution to future mineral needs should be made by the use of substitute materials and recycling of suitable wastes. Appropriately the new Guidance sets out a policy to encourage that approach and also requires that the regional contribution to the supply aggregates in the South East will need to be reassessed by a early review of current mineral planning guidance for the region.

## **9. Monitoring, Implementation and General Review**

- 9.1 One of the weaknesses of earlier regional planning guidance has been the absence of a set of clear targets, coupled with effective measures to encourage implementation and monitoring of the Guidance once established. The new regional Guidance represents a considerable advance on these earlier documents and credit must be given to SERPLAN for their work over the last few years in developing this dimension for regional planning work as part of their preparation of the initial draft strategy. As a result, the guidance is able to refer to a range of indicators, set out in a table, which suggests the measures by which progress may be assessed. This work is not yet complete and the range of indicators will undoubtedly have to be revised and refined, but it does represent an important development. There is also a strong and welcome correlation between the indicators and those that have been developed for the new framework for a sustainable future for the Region “A Better Quality of Life “ which has been produced by the Assembly and partners for comment. The work of the Planning Committee will be informed and enhanced by this new regional framework and it will be used as a reference point to help us in refining the monitoring process for regional guidance in the future.
- 9.2 Equally important is the emphasis the Guidance places on the regional planning body’s role in assisting the process of implementation of the key regional policies and targets. This is again a more active role than the modus operandi for SERPLAN in the past, and reflects the enabling approach, which the Assembly has already taken to other areas of its work.
- 9.3 It will of course be of crucial importance to ensure that an adequate database is put in place to allow this implementation and monitoring work to proceed effectively and efficiently. Discussions have therefore already taken place with the Government Office, SEEDA and adjoining regional planning bodies in order to design a data assembly processes that allows easy comparisons and avoids duplication of effort.

## **10. Conclusion**

- 10.1 There are a number of aspects of the Regional Policy Guidance, which are very challenging, and doubts must remain that the tools for effective implementation are fully in place. Nevertheless the publication at this point in time of the Guidance is timely and welcome, and much of it provides a sound framework for the work of this Committee. It represents a considerable advance on earlier regional guidance documents and taken together with initiatives announced in the Urban and Rural White Papers it does provide a basis for the Planning Committee and Assembly’s role as Regional Planning Body to begin in earnest.

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