

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

Date: 15 December 2006

Subject: **Regional Planning Committee**

Report of: Chairman of the Regional Planning Committee

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Committee note the report.

Purpose of Report:

To update the Executive Committee on the meeting of the Regional Planning Committee held on 20 November 2006.

1. Appropriate Assessment

- 1.1 The meeting had been re-scheduled to enable the Committee to consider and discuss the outcome of the Appropriate Assessment of the South East Plan. The need to undertake an Appropriate Assessment arises from a judgement in the European Court of Justice in autumn 2005. The Assembly had given a commitment to undertake an assessment of the South East Plan at the Plenary in March 2006.
- 1.2 Ultimate responsibility for completing the Appropriate Assessment rests with the Secretary of State, as it will be her that publishes the version of the South East Plan that becomes legally binding. However the work that the Assembly has undertaken will help inform the debate at the Examination in Public and provides the opportunity for participants to discuss potential measures that may be required to ensure that the South East Plan address issues identified through the Appropriate Assessment.
- 1.3 The Committee spent the majority of the morning session going through the outcome of the assessment and considering potential changes that would need to be promoted by the Assembly at the Examination in Public in order to ensure that the South East Plan is compliant with the requirements of the relevant legislation. These related to a number of policy areas but primarily focused on the policies in the Natural Resource Management section of the South East Plan.
- 1.4 The Committee noted the fact that as a regional spatial planning document the South East Plan does not contain the level of detail that enables the conclusion to be made that the Plan will definitely not have a significant adverse impact on European designated sites (the test that has to be applied in undertaking the Appropriate Assessment). This can only be resolved through the consideration of site specific allocations at the local level as part of the LDF/LDD process. It is therefore essential that Local Planning Authorities are aware of the need to build upon the work on Appropriate Assessment at the regional level to inform a more detailed assessment at the local level.
- 1.5 The proposed changes, as agreed by the Committee, have been submitted to the Panel for their consideration in the forthcoming debates.

2. Thames Basin Heaths – Peer Review

- 2.1 As part of the ongoing work to reach agreement on the way forward to mitigate the potential impact of further development on the Thames Basin Heaths DCLG commissioned a peer review of the available evidence base. This review also included a legal opinion of the approach advocated by Natural England (formerly English Nature). The Assembly had contributed financially to the work and Cllr Moira Gibson had been a member of the reference group for the study.
- 2.2 The peer review has concluded that while the evidence is not overwhelmingly convincing in some regards, in the absence of any compelling evidence to the contrary, the application of precautionary principle means that the approach followed by Natural England in its draft Delivery Plan is reasonable.

The outcome of the peer review has been made available to the Panel and is part of the evidence base being considered as part of the Technical Session examining the Thames Basin Heath issue.

- 2.3 The Committee noted that to date two local planning authorities had agreed “mini-delivery plans” with Natural England and that a further six were working on similar documents (subsequently one of these has been agreed). The mini-delivery plans provide the basis for enabling development to take place in the short term thereby enabling a long-term solution to be agreed by all parties.

3. Partial Review of the South East Plan: Gypsy and Travellers

- 3.1 The Committee considered feedback from the recent consultation on the draft project brief for this review. As a result of this a number of minor changes had been made to the brief which were agreed by the Committee.
- 3.2 The Committee took the opportunity to emphasise the importance of local authorities to continue to move forward with their own work on addressing the needs of these communities in parallel with the work underway at the regional level.

4. Spatial Strategies: Consultation Responses

- 4.1 The Mayor for London is currently consulting on a set of further changes to the London Plan. Two critical issues were identified by members as being of concern. Firstly the potential weakening of the Mayor’s opposition to further growth at Heathrow Airport. Secondly, the increasing emphasis given to the corridor from London southwards along the route of the M23/A23 (the Wandle Valley) as a potential development corridor. The Committee agreed to strengthen the Assembly’s representations on these particular points.
- 4.2 The meeting also considered the draft Regional Spatial Strategy for East Midlands. Here the key issue is the need to ensure that the document adequately reflects the work of the Milton Keynes/South Midlands Growth Area.

5. Major Planning Applications

- 5.1 As part of the regular review of the Assembly’s role as a statutory consultee on major planning applications the Committee agreed a limited number of revisions to the criteria issued to local authorities. In addition to ensuring that the criteria reflect the content of the Implementation Plan, the revisions will ensure that the Assembly continues to be consulted on only those applications that are truly regionally or sub-regionally significant.

6. Housing Completions

- 6.1 The Committee were advised of the headline figure for housing completions in the last year. This had showed an increase on the previous years figure with annual completions standing at just over 33,000. When considered over the first five years of the RPG9 the total number of housing completions was slightly higher than the planned for figure.
- 6.2 Notwithstanding the success to date, the Committee noted the growing concern that there is imbalance in the housing market. In particular the emerging findings of Assembly research currently underway suggests that there is an over emphasis on the provision of 1 and 2 bedroom flats. The results of this research will be published in the New Year and will help the Assembly develop its arguments with regards the size and type of dwellings that are required to meet the need for housing in the region.

Cllr Christine Field

4 December 2006