

PAPER 4

FURTHER ADVICE ON SCALE AND DISTRIBUTION

1. INTRODUCTION

The Assembly's brief asks the Steering Group "to have completed work on options and advised the Assembly of initial spatial preferences for distributing growth where this has not already been provided by the 6th June". The purpose of this is to assist the Assembly in its own debate on scales and patterns of growth across the region on 13 July.

You will recall that we have already provided the Assembly with some guidance on the scale and distribution of growth in previous submissions. This report summarises that, and considers how much further the advice can be taken at this stage, without pre-empting the decisions to be taking on the district-level distribution of growth, later in the year.

2 Guidance already given on the scale of growth

2.1 In the 2004 submission to the Assembly we stated, in general terms, that housing levels continuing at current RPG9 levels were preferable, subject to the necessary infrastructure improvements; housing provision at RPG9 + 10%* (see footnote below) is the most that could be accommodated, but only if there is significant investment in infrastructure to support such a level of growth. Anything higher was unacceptable. The reasons for that conclusion are set out at paragraph 2.2 in Section E6 of the South East Plan. In summary, they are that:

- locally-generated housing need arising from within the existing population to 2026 could broadly be met by a continuation of RPG9 levels of growth;
- with transport, growth rates in excess of RPG9 levels, or continued growth beyond 2016, are forecast to result in worsening congestion in the area, even if all the schemes in the Thames Valley Multi-Modal Study are carried out and complemented with other measures, some of which are controversial;
- growth rates in excess of RPG9 levels would result in a need for substantial additional investment in infrastructure, the provision of which is not yet guaranteed in funding or planning terms; however, against this:
- maintaining the current state of balance between the forecast labour force and the forecast growth in jobs could require house-building rates of up to 40% above RPG9 levels; but the degree of uncertainty associated with such long-term employment forecasts is so great that they cannot be a major determinant of housing growth levels. The labour/jobs balance is something that rather needs to be kept under regular review, within time horizons that are sufficiently short to enable robust forecasts to be made. A more detailed critique of these forecasts appears elsewhere on this agenda;
- the area's need for affordable housing is such that even house-building rates of RPG9 + 40% could not deliver sufficient affordable housing through the planning system. A planning-led solution to the affordable housing problem therefore does not seem a realistic prospect, given the other consequences such a rate of growth would have. Again, more detailed information about affordable housing need appears elsewhere on this agenda.

* (Following the Assembly's decision to include housing growth options for the sub-region ranging from 3,500 dwellings per year, the Member Steering Group resolved that the ramifications of these lower levels should also be tested)

3 Advice already given on the distribution of growth

3.1 As part of the earlier advice, members considered a number of distribution options for your preferred level of housing development:

- A continuation (to 2026) of current policies;
- A greater emphasis on development within all of the urban areas across the sub-region;
- A distribution that gives priority to transport considerations over all others.

3.2 The preferred option was a hybrid containing elements of all of these, and the work now being undertaken by officers is based on that. In summary, it is proceeding as follows:

Further work on distribution

3.3 The first priority was to make efficient and effective use and re-use of land within existing built-up areas, without compromising quality of life considerations. To this end, officers have been building up a bottom-up picture of existing commitments at an individual district level, and the district officers' best estimates of additional urban potential to 2026. In total, the latest estimate is that these could deliver around 88,000 dwellings between 2006 and 2026 (though there are outstanding questions about the precise impact of the proposed Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area in the southern part of the sub-region).

3.4 The preferred options for growth (set out above) would require the provision of between 93,000 and 102,000 dwellings over this period. This would therefore leave a shortfall, after commitments and urban potential, of between 5,000 and 14,000 dwellings to find, mainly on Greenfield sites.

- **Members of the Western Corridor and Blackwater Valley Steering Group wish to emphasise that their position on the lower level housing provision is 70,000.**

3.5 The initial area of search for these – in line with the principles that members have previously agreed - has been in the areas immediately adjoining the key transport hubs. These hubs were those variously identified in the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) as regional hubs, namely *Reading, Slough* and *Basingstoke*, and in the Thames Valley Multi-Modal Study (TVMMS) as sub-regional hubs, namely *High Wycombe, Maidenhead* and *Bracknell*. To these, we have added *Newbury*, which was outside the study area for the TVMMS, but which in other respects seemed to qualify as a sub-regional transport hub. These seemed to be the locations where, all other considerations being equal, the most sustainable transport solutions for accommodating growth might be found, since they also represented the main service and employment centres of the sub-region. The officers from these authorities were asked for more detailed information about the potential for, and constraints preventing, additional growth over and above existing commitments and urban potential in their areas.

3.6 It became clear from this that some of the hubs had more potential than others for accommodating growth. Some were almost completely constrained by land subject to designations reflecting its international, national or regional importance. We therefore asked those with the most apparent potential to investigate a specific range of growth options in more depth. These are, in alphabetical order, *Basingstoke, Bracknell, High Wycombe, Newbury and the area centred on Reading*. Wherever it seemed possible that a growth option could affect an adjoining authority, they were asked to ensure that that authority's officers were fully engaged in the discussions.

4 CONCLUSION

4. This is where the process has currently reached. Once an initial view is reached on the technical feasibility of the above growth options, more detailed testing of infrastructure and other delivery issues will need to take place. It is important to emphasise to the Assembly that, at this stage, there is no assumption that all – or any – of the hubs listed above will necessarily emerge as suitable candidates for accommodating substantial additional growth. The other point to emphasise is that none of the other authorities is “getting away without providing for additional growth”. All have been asked to assess their contribution from existing commitments and additional urban potential to 2026 – the latter being likely to necessitate changes to existing policies in some areas.