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REACTION IN THE FACE OF GROWTH AND DECLINE

**THE COUNTY CONTEXT:
DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT
IN THE SOUTH-EAST**

BY

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DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE SOUTH-EAST
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THEME OF PAPER

The paper is written from the perspective of a county in the relatively prosperous South East. However Kent is a county of diversity, sharing growth pressures common to the areas surrounding London, but also exhibiting decline in its Thames-side manufacturing towns and in its East Kent tourism base. Because the social and economic forces affecting a county such as Kent are heavily influenced by London and need to be understood in that dimension, Kent County Council is an active member of the regional planning conference, SERPLAN, which has concentrated in recent years in examining the forces of growth and decline affecting the inner and outer parts of the London region. The paper therefore reviews SERPLAN's findings about the relationship between decline and change in London and growth and pressure in the 'outer Metropolitan area', including the impetus behind the notion of 'dispersal'. It then considers the responses to such change in the areas beyond London, and particularly the adequacy of the existing framework of planning to tackle effectively the key issues facing the region. Specific examples are drawn from Kent.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE SOUTH EAST?

(i) To its Economic Geography:

Employment in London has been in long run decline, as the historical reasons why many sectors of industry and commerce have located within the capital have been replaced by a complex of cost and congestion factors, coupled with overall structural change out of manufacturing and into services. Following the steady relaxation of the production and marketing links which previously bound much economic activity to a Metropolitan location, it is only the central financial and 'west end' services which need to be in London, and the decline of traditional manufacturing and port sectors has spread beyond London itself down the Thames Estuary. However, the South East has intensified its position as

the 'core' region of national economic growth: the point is that the growth has occurred outside London, in the Rest of the South East (ROSE). Between 1971 and 1981 Greater London lost, net, 520,000 jobs, mostly manufacturing; ROSE gained 460,000 jobs, mostly in services (SERPLAN, 1985). This exemplifies a long run decentralisation in the location of employment in the South East, which means that 'the London region' extends far beyond the Greater London area, which has less and less meaning as a functional entity.

Geographically, this outward shift of employment has not occurred evenly around London. It has been heavily concentrated in a 'Golden Triangle' with a base from the A1 to the M23 and its apex up the M4, whereas other parts of the region, particularly east of London, have seen little overall growth as their performance has been depressed by declines in traditional manufacturing and tourism industries. It is in this 'Golden Triangle' that the conditions of growth (labour supply, environment, accessibility) are best met and which have stimulated an enormous development momentum. This is the preferred area for the new information technology industries. A key issue facing the region is the extent to which such growth should be planned for positively in the counties (and west London Boroughs) involved; much of this area is subject to policies of restraint on development, including the Green Belt.

(ii) To Housing Markets:

Demographic growth (particularly in numbers of households), coupled with the long run encouragement of home ownership (accelerated by this Government) has put great pressure on housing land availability. Because this is in short supply in environmentally acceptable areas in London, the bulk of private sector new housing has been, is and will be provided outside. The Green Belt has meant that much of this has been located well away from the London area which is the main generator of demand. This has implications for the evolving structure of the region, as the preference for attractive living areas by the upwardly mobile stimulates further development of economic activity beyond London. Moreover, the legacy of rapid housebuilding in some parts of the

region is a high rate of new second generation household formation, maintaining demand and making it difficult to slow down, despite many recipient areas claiming 'enough'. These factors have stimulated controversy about future provision of building land, while the housebuilding industry seeks new forms of development which may be more environmentally acceptable (e.g. Consortium Developments Ltd.). In fact, considerable provision still remains outside London and is not declining (SERPLAN, 1986), while within London the GLC was on the verge of showing that housebuilding could increase to 150,000 units a year, although pump-priming will be required.

(iii) Infrastructure Effects:

Public investment creates a major stimulus to the location of new investment. The construction of the 120 mile M25 Orbital motorway, linking the main radials from London to the rest of the country and the Continent, is the latest and most significant element of highway infrastructure affecting the location of development in the region. Potentially the most accessible locations in Britain are where the M25 intersects with the main radials such as the M1, M4 and M20: the last mentioned will grow in importance with the Channel Tunnel. The location of the London Airports, particularly the growth of Heathrow, has been a powerful factor in the concentration of new economic activity west of London. Government investment in research and development establishments has been almost entirely outside London, with a strong concentration to the west, another major factor in the growth of the Golden Triangle. A key regional issue is whether the disposition of new infrastructure reinforces existing growth locations (on a 'backing winners' basis) or should be used to 'steer' development to weaker areas. In this respect, development of Stansted Airport, related by the M11 to east London, is awaited with interest. The M11 corridor could form a new axis of development which, if positively planned for, could extend to include M25-related centres on the east side of London southwards into Kent to incorporate the Channel Tunnel dimension.

THE REGIONAL PLANNING SCENE IN THE SOUTH EAST

The Local Planning Authorities, through SERPLAN, have long advocated that the strong trends of decentralisation into the Home Counties require an effective regional strategy which seeks a better balance between London decline and ROSE growth. Structure Plans for the individual county require a good comprehension of the forces operating and the efficacy of intervention. Yet the history of regional planning has been strangely uneven: strong in the 1940s, weak in the 50s, waxing again in the 60s and culminating in the Strategic Plan for the South East of 1970, and weakening thereafter through the growing inner city debate. This included the GLC's ill-judged decision to withdraw from the new and expanded towns programme, which means there is no machinery for moving out those sections of the community who are trapped in areas of decline. Regional Planning reached its nadir in the early years of this Government, with Heseltine's 1980 derisory and simplistic encapsulation of guidelines for the South East within the span of 2 pages. However, with increasing consciousness about the pressures facing the region, including Green belt and housing land issues and the uneven geographical incidence of economic development, thorny decisions have to be made and Government interest is reawakening.

SERPLAN's monitoring findings, together with the need to prepare an updated round of Structure Plans (which have not been very effective in resolving the key economic development and housing issues facing the Home Counties), have led it to campaign for stronger and more sophisticated regional planning guidance from Government. Other voices, such as the HBF and even the CBI have preached the same message. The Secretary of State indicated in the summer of 1984 that he would entertain proposals from SERPLAN, which led to a document 'South East England in the 1990s - a Regional Statement' being submitted to him in the Autumn of 1985. A favourable response was indicated by DoE, and following consultation an authoritative six-page statement was given by the Secretary of State in June 1986. This takes the matter several steps forward, but begs a number of questions as to realisation of its principles. Critical to its effectiveness is the extent to which it can influence decisions outside the narrow land-use

planning competence of the DoE: it needs to be taken into full account in strategic decisions concerning public expenditure planning generally, affecting all the infrastructure-providing authorities and the location of Government investment.

Given a more explicit and issue-relevant set of Government planning guidelines for the region, will the existing basis of Development Plans deliver the goods? Structure Plans have not realised the potential seen by the originators of the concept 20 years ago: they tend to lack a clear definition of strategic purpose, with policies often too imprecisely targetted or concerned with detail, and they are insufficiently binding on the Districts whose local planning effort is often out of step and unco-ordinated. Moreover complexity and delay in the DoE approval process (often responsible for the muddling of strategic objectives and confusion of detail) severely undermines the need for responsive review and alteration on which the concept relies for credibility.

VALIDITY OF GROWTH AND RESTRAINT CONCEPTS IN THE COUNTY CONTEXT

The two most pervasive concepts underlying planning in the South East have been 'growth areas' and 'development restraint', enshrined in the 1970 Strategic Plan for the South East. These concepts are increasingly discredited. The Growth Areas were based on the notion that development would be more effectively provided for, in infrastructure and environmental terms, if concentrated into certain locations. Some were New Towns, such as Milton Keynes, where implementational machinery existed. Others had no formal mechanisms; where authorities could co-ordinate their efforts, much has been achieved, as in South Hampshire. In South Essex, the economic stimulus (in the absence of a Third London Airport at Maplin) did not exist and the emphasis has since swung to the inner City (Docklands), with Basildon a safety valve further out.

The most interesting case is 'Area 8' (Reading/Bracknell/Aldershot/ Basingstoke), four-square in the aforementioned 'Golden Triangle'. It has transpired that this could not be planned as an entity, primarily because three Structure Plan Authorities were involved and the Government did not have the will to set up an

overall Agency. The piecemeal planning which resulted made it very difficult to strike a proper balance (outside Bracknell New Town, and perhaps Basingstoke) between the form of development (over which there was inadequate control) and the conservation and enhancement of important environmental resources. It also meant an inability to secure adequate infrastructure provision. Rapid development did however ensue, but because of these failings has led to increasing opposition to continuing growth. The present situation is one of unresolved and mounting conflict, between a growing backlash against what has happened on the ground and the continuing momentum of economic development (this area has the best employment growth record in the region). The failure is due to the lack of organisational machinery, and the current outcome is confusion as to what planning (in the round) is seeking to achieve there.

The notion of 'restraint' is equally woolly in its present state. Three distinct elements are apparent, in decreasing order of clarity: first, countryside conservation (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Special Agricultural Significance, etc.); secondly the Metropolitan Green Belt, established in the 1950s and aimed at stopping the outward spread of London and the coalescence of settlements; and third restrictions on the scale of development in designated towns, below past trends or market pressures and expressed in low housing or economic development targets.

Countryside conservation has proved robust, but may be affected by change to the Common Agricultural Policy so far as land in the lower grades is concerned.

The Metropolitan Green Belt is under increasing challenge, in terms of its social impact, the effect it has on house prices and land values, the development pressures enhanced by the M25 and the changing economic geography of the region. Its basic justification is in articulating a regional development strategy, and until there is an overall picture of where development is being provided, there must be doubts whether the concept of a continuous belt all around London has continuing validity, in a situation of increasing imbalance between a buoyant west side and an east side in need of development. While drastic change may be

politically unacceptable, there is a strong case for its rejustification with some selective policy adjustments, concerning boundaries and uses appropriate within the Belt.

As regards restraint towns, the evidence indicates that the policy has not worked: much development has been permitted without local detriment and, so far as proposals for new economic activity are concerned, this is increasingly welcomed in these days of high unemployment. The continuing pipeline of development in the buoyant areas around the west of London is particularly noteworthy. Again, policies need review in the light of new economic and social realities.

Cutting across these growth and restraint area concepts has been the increasing awareness that the region is not uniform, in terms of prosperity and development pressure, but includes a buoyant western area attractive to investment, stimulated by Heathrow, the transport networks, labour market and environmental factors, and a declining eastern area including East London, North Kent/South Essex and the eastern coastal towns. The regional strategy put forward by SERPLAN seeks 'sensitively operated restraint' in the west, to be elaborated in Structure Plans, and positive policies of public investment and rejuvenation in the east. In the latter, SERPLAN is proceeding by identifying infrastructure and other needs to bring development land forward in the East Thames Corridor, to bid for enhanced expenditure priority.

THE EMERGING RESPONSE IN KENT

Kent is one of the biggest counties in the 'East' and the County Council is currently reviewing its strategic planning approach, relegating its old restrictive image to a new aim of attracting economic development through a more positive policy framework and a more extensive and varied provision of development opportunities. There are three different local economies in Kent: the industrial urban centres in the north; East Kent, more remote from London and where the Channel Tunnel is a key concern; and West Kent where the present policy is to restrain development. Yet it is West Kent, close to London and the M25, which is most

attractive to new development and where chances of attracting the 'new technologies' are best. The major issue, therefore, is the extent to which this restraint should be relaxed in order to attract new economic activities, or whether all effort should go into the 'needy' areas. This is a dilemma facing the country as a whole, and can only be addressed in terms of the nature of new economic activity and its locational requirements.

In industrial North Kent, the County Council is already committed to action, through the mechanism of a (non-statutory) strategy revised each year, aimed at co-ordinating and extending the programmes of individual agencies, all being party to the strategy. Intervention to gain development includes keenness for new instruments such as Enterprise Zones, planning regimes offering more certainty, 'planning gain' contributions to infrastructure etc., and new development agencies. Success already achieved includes a redevelopment framework for the former Chatham Naval Base, where the integrity of the 230 hectare estate has been secured in the hands of English Estates (new development), the Historic Dockyard Trust (the Georgian area) and a port activity.

Current attention is focussed on Dartford, in North West Kent just beyond Greater London, and tightly hemmed in by the Green Belt. Dartford illustrates the case for a different, more relaxed attitude to the Green Belt on this side of London, as the effect of 30 years of no growth has been to choke its social and economic health. Both County and Borough Councils are at one that policy should swing from restraint to development promotion, by the removal of extensive areas from the Green Belt (some being 'institutions' or land worked for minerals) to the north and east of the town in order to give it land for new expansion, bearing in mind its situation astride the M25.

Whether and how to relax restraint policies applying to the Green Belt towns in West Kent is still under consideration. The quality of the environment here is high, and jealously guarded. One possibility is a fresh look at uses appropriate in the Green belt to attract new 'campus' developments in the information technology field. Further development opportunities just beyond

the Green Belt towards Maidstone are likely to be part of a more welcoming attitude to development, including new forms of out of town activity.

There is no reason to take the view that such policy shifts would adversely affect the balance with environmental factors. At Dartford, the areas proposed to be taken out of the Green Belt are not environmental assets at present, and development properly planned at the local scale would enhance the urban fringe, including a new managed nature reserve adjacent to the Thames. Campus-style development would necessarily be environmentally attractive and 'green' in nature, the attributes sought by such new forms of development. Elsewhere, it will be necessary to underline environmental policies where justified in today's circumstances.

Further east, the County will be seeking to take advantage of the Channel Tunnel with specific reference to Ashford, well placed on the road and rail links into England. It will also strive for new forms of growth in the problem coastal towns which would be adversely affected by being 'behind' the flows of tunnel-using traffic.

THE CASE FOR REGIONAL PLANNING

The message of current planning experience around London is the need for a more explicit and effective regional dimension to planning. The expanded guidelines just issued by the Secretary of State are a welcome acknowledgement by Government that there are major issues which Structure Plans cannot tackle without regional planning. But they are hardly adequate considering the crucial forces and changes apparent in the region, especially the economic and social future of inner London (noting what is happening in Docklands), related to the emerging concentrations of the new wealth-creating activities outside, and how to achieve an environmentally attractive housing balance in and out of London.

The thread of regional growth and decline, the former manifest in the counties, but unevenly, arising from underlying economic and social change and its spatial expression, runs through the paper. Issues of provision for new forms of economic

development, the housing pressures, the regional accessibility pattern, the future of the Green Belt, potential overheating in the west and rejuvenation needs in the west, all require effective policies, resource priority identification and appropriate agencies to be defined at the regional scale, backed by an effective information, analysis and research capability. This is not to seek a regional authority; the South East region is far too big and unwieldy for that, and any subdivision into geographical sectors would be pointless. What is needed is professional competence, advising the Secretary of State directly or (preferably) through a joint regional committee of Government departments and Local Government. The Institute for the Isle-de-France region of France is a possible model, which assembles information, analyses issues, formulates objectives and relates implementation to resources for the agencies concerned, from Government down to the municipality. An expanded and better funded SERPLAN could fulfil such a role.

Coupled with this would be an overhaul of the development planning machinery at County and District scale, probably to one tier of plan only. What is needed is a mechanism which is concerned above all with the formulation of strategic objectives related to the area's priorities, harnessing the agencies concerned into key programmes of action and full analysis of the resource implications.

There would be no place in this planning scheme for a new Greater London Planning Authority: the strategic issues transcend the old GLC boundary, when most of the development pressures arising from the dispersal and re-grouping of economic activity and the search for new living and leisure environments in the London region is taking place outside. What is needed in London on the other hand is the strategic management of change and co-ordination of renewal initiatives in the inner City.

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