

Papers

Regional Spatial Planning—Don't Stop Me Now!

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Introduction

Reviewing the country in the context of a regional perspective has a long history and the Domesday Book is of course the earliest regional survey.

I want to look at regional planning in its historic context since 1909 briefly looking at its achievements and failings before setting out what is envisaged in the new proposals for regional strategies. I will conclude with some views on the governance arrangements and the links to other planning policy areas.

Historical perspective¹

If we take the 1909 Housing and Planning Act as the starting point for our consideration today I think it is widely accepted that the early era was best seen as experimental with surveys rather than plans emerging.

During this period most people will be aware of Patrick Abercrombie's influence, particularly with the Doncaster Regional Planning Scheme which was produced in 1922 and is regarded as the first proper regional plan. But in addition to Abercrombie there was much activity between the wars with planners wishing to regulate locally. Under s.2 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1925 statutory regional planning committees were established. Fifteen of these were in place by 1945.

It is interesting in considering the pilot work currently being undertaken with Manchester to create a "city region", to remember that in 1921 the Manchester and Districts South Town Planning Advisory Committee involved 76 local authorities within a 15-mile radius of the city and in four years they had agreed outline proposals for regional roads, broad zonings and an approach to regional open space.

And I think it is worth mentioning a single catalyst in this emerging thinking at the time: George Peplar. He was Principal Planner to the Government from 1919–46 and whilst he was a civil servant, he was also Secretary and President of the Town Planning Institute—a position of great influence.

But others are worth mentioning including the practice of Adams, Thompson and Fry, who were second only to Abercrombie for their work. However, a contemporary view of their output was that their plans were a,

“lucid if wooden exposition, relatively unsophisticated analysis of physical, economic and social conditions in sketchy surveys and straightforward recommendations which unashamedly had more to do with common sense than environmental schemes. British Regional Planning had little intellectual rationale.”

And there was also a view that regional planning was taken up by local authorities because its measures seemed not to hurt anyone, they seemed full of promise, they cost little and offered

¹ The author has consulted A. Wannop Urrall, *The Regional Imperative: Regional Planning and Governance in Britain, Europe and the United States* (Regional Policy and Development, No.9), (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1995) in the writing of this section.

co-operation rather than conflict. It was recognised that as the number of advisory committees grew, and the statutory power to plan expanded first to county councils in 1929 and then to rural areas in 1932 it was important the process moved from being advisory to one of executing the visions.

So out of the Second World War came a view that the then current approach was not a coherent basis for a programme of works, the schemes and plans did not deal adequately with redevelopment schemes and they were advisory and interim in nature. In 1940 the Barlow Report called for a unified national planning authority which wasn't taken forward but in 1943 the Ministry of Town and Country Planning was created and in 1947 the Town & Country Planning Act made county development planning universal.

I highlight this history partly to emphasise that some things are not new and to illustrate the answer to "why do we do this at all". The regional planning approach was born of necessity—economic activity is not bound by administrative boundaries—and the approach has grown exponentially.

But it is also true that from that classic period of 1940–47 which saw, for example, Abercrombie's Greater London Plan, the story since has been mixed and flavoured at times with political ideology. The period after the 1947 Act surprisingly saw little regard to planning, as people put their energies into the New Town programmes and with a Conservative government in power between 1951–64, there was little appetite for promoting regional planning. Actually by 1958 the Ministry of Housing and Local Government had closed all its regional offices.

A degree of revival during the 1962–71 period was followed by Mrs Thatcher's government which had an antipathy to planning; but it was arguably the push back from Conservative voters in the south east who could see a free market approach to housing in the south east threatening green belt and builders demanding a greater supply of land for housing which meant that ideology gave way to political necessity and an awareness that some intervention was needed. This clearly is particularly pertinent now. It is important not to repeat history and notwithstanding any challenge to the current process which legitimately questions whether we are getting the outcomes we need from the Regional Spatial Strategies it is not in my view a time to abandon regional perspectives but rather an opportunity to embrace changes proposed to make regional planning more effective.

The proposals for a regional strategy

So let us look at the proposals to create a single Regional Strategy in the future. This is set out in Pt 5 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill which has gone through the House of Lords and the committee stage in the House of Commons. On August 6, we also published a consultation document on the Government's policy framework for the preparation of those Regional Strategies. In this paper, I have drawn heavily from that consultation document.²

This Bill provides for the preparation of Regional Strategies for all regions in England, with the exception of London (which has slightly different arrangements under the Mayor).

It is envisaged that Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs) and Regional Economic Strategies prepared under the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 respectively will become Regional Strategies for the purposes of the new Act until replaced by an integrated Regional Strategy. Other non-statutory strategies, such as those covering sport, culture, housing and biodiversity will also be integrated into this single document.

² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/1303429.pdf> [Accessed October 16, 2009]

These new single Regional Strategies will be prepared jointly by “responsible regional authorities” comprising Regional Development Agencies and local authority Leaders’ Boards. Each region has the flexibility to decide this process and the appropriate structure but the intended outcome is that of sustainable economic growth. The Bill establishes Local Authority Leaders’ Boards to represent local authorities in the region. These will replace Regional Assemblies who are currently responsible for drafting RSSs.

This is being taken forward now as a means of implementing the policy which was originally set out in the “Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration” (July 2007). This policy document aimed to streamline the framework for sustainable sub-national economic growth in England and to achieve a greater alignment between economic and spatial planning. This would allow for better prioritisation of regional activity in order to deliver sustainable development. This includes addressing the key issues of planning for the economic upturn, a shift to a low carbon economy, regeneration and the delivery of housing.

In our view Regional Strategies are a key tool to help deliver these objectives and achieve this integrated approach to agreeing economic, environmental and social priorities. They will clearly set out the spatial application of those priorities in line with sustainable development principles: helping the economy to flourish whilst protecting and enhancing the environment.

The new strategies will remain a mechanism by which national policies are translated to the local level. They should be able to articulate the strategic issues and opportunities for a region in a clearer better way; for example in respect of the provision and use of transport infrastructure and services, or the provision of environmental infrastructure, renewable energy generation, large-scale investment and regeneration where a regional and/or sub-regional solution is required. It will require local, regional and central government to work with public, private and third sector partners to deliver both the strategy and its outcomes and this partnership working is essential to the setting of common objectives.

The new Regional Strategies will be part of the statutory development plan under the plan-led system which of course means that local development frameworks must be in general conformity with them and planning applications will be determined in accordance with them unless other material considerations indicate otherwise.

We have tried to be clear about what we consider to be the objectives for the Regional Strategies.

These are to:

1. set out a clear, long-term spatial vision for all parts of the region over a 15–20 year time frame following the publication of the Strategy, taking account of implications beyond this time frame;
2. demonstrate, through an Implementation Plan, how it will help develop sustainable economic growth;
3. be founded on a sound economic, social and environmental evidence base which is informed by local economic assessments and includes a Sustainability Appraisal and a Habitats Regulation Assessment;
4. deal with long, medium and short-term priorities and actions required to deliver the vision, with a separate Implementation Plan setting out when, how and by whom they will be delivered;
5. take an integrated and cohesive approach to the future development of the region by bringing together:

- i. policies for sustainable economic growth, the development and use of land and policies designed to contribute to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change, with
 - ii. other policies and programmes, including those which are focused on the needs of business and the enhancement of the environment and the social welfare of the region.
6. be concise, easily accessible and set out how the vision will be achieved, defining its main aims and objectives with the policies in the Strategy clearly highlighted;
 7. illustrates how the policies relate to different parts of the region, ensuring that such policies are locationally, but not site, specific;
 8. sets out, where possible, the targets and indicators related to policies so that progress can be monitored and, if necessary, remedial action taken;
 9. be prepared in consultation with regional stakeholders.

So, if we have said that the main purpose of the Regional Strategy should be to set out a long-term strategic framework for a region, which provides sustainable economic growth and contributes to sustainable development, we are keen to ensure that it's understood what we mean by this.

Our UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy and Planning Policy Statement 1³: Delivering Sustainable Development sets out the full scope of the meaning of sustainable development and will be a key consideration in applying this policy. Sustainable economic growth is defined as economic growth that can be sustained and is within environmental limits, but also which enhances the environment and social welfare avoiding greater extremes in future economic cycles.

The responsible regional authorities will therefore need to consider the environmental limits that should apply in preparing their strategy and how its policies impact on such limits, taking careful account of the outcomes of the Sustainability Appraisal which need to be undertaken.

In terms of principle and form, the Regional Strategy should set out a clear long-term spatial vision for all parts of the region over a 15–20 year time frame and demonstrate through an implementation plan how it will be delivered and in particular how it will help to deliver sustainable economic growth.

Although we expect policies in the Regional Strategy to be regionally specific it is also important that they are consistent with national policy.

We are clear that this process is best delivered through a robust method of programming so will expect an agreed project plan to be established. This would need to include a clear statement of policies on community involvement as partnership working is vital to ensure the strategy effectively integrates competing demands, and commands cross-regional support.

The Bill anticipates that for all but the most minor revisions, the responsible regional authorities will arrange for an Examination in Public (EiP) into the plan (and if they were to decide not to do so the Act gives the Secretary of State powers to do so instead). The purpose of the EiP, held by a person or panel appointed by the Secretary of State, is to test the draft strategy and build a consensus around controversial issues. It thus provides that opportunity to debate and an opportunity for independent scrutiny in public. We will be recommending that responsible regional authorities (RRAs) should seek an early appointment of a Panel chair to aid this process.

In examining the draft strategy the Panel will need to satisfy itself that the strategy is sound and the key judgements are:

³ http://www.defra.gov.uk/sustainable/government/publications/uk-strategy/documents/SecFut_complete.pdf [Accessed October 16, 2009]; <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/planningpolicystatement1.pdf> [Accessed October 16, 2009].

1. justified—by being founded on a robust and credible evidence base and that it is the most appropriate strategy when considered against the reasonable alternatives; and
2. effective—by being deliverable, flexible and able to be monitored.

The Panel will also need to consider whether the draft Strategy meets the requirements set out in legislation, such as the extent to which it:

1. is consistent with national policy;
2. meets the requirements for the Sustainability Appraisal and Habitats Regulation Assessment;
3. has been prepared in accordance with the responsible regional authorities' Statement of Policies for Community Involvement.

In our view a significant difference in the new regime is the requirement for RRAs to produce, publish and keep up-to-date a plan for implementing the regional strategy (the Implementation Plan). This will be central to the regional strategy preparation and it is where the RS commitment to partnership working is translated into practical actions. It will also be a key factor in assessing the realism and soundness of the overall strategy.

The Implementation Plan should:

- be succinct and translate the strategy's vision, objective and outcomes into clear and deliverable actions;
- be prepared in conjunction with and inform the Regional Strategy;
- focus on the critical actions, priorities and programmes necessary to deliver the strategy over its lifetime, with a detailed focus on the shorter-term priorities over the first 3–5 years from the time the strategy is published;
- Set out specific actions allocated to those key organisations responsible for delivering the policies in the strategy, along with the current status of any proposals (e.g. whether they are committed) and the timescales for each action to be delivered;
- be consistent with the implementation initiatives and actions of adjoining regions, where cross boundary issues are relevant;
- be prepared in close co-operation with regional, sub-regional and local partners and central government to agree a broad delivery programme, including the critical actions and funding streams to be delivered across the region to implement the Regional Strategy;
- be revised regularly.

The Implementation Plan will not, however, form part of the development plan, it will not be subject to a separate approval process by the Secretary of State and nor will it be expected to be a comprehensive business plan of all implementation actions. RRAs will need to consider carefully the need for a Strategic Environmental Assessment for such a plan although we think it is unlikely they will need one. A key element of the plan will be to identify and marshal the funding available for implementation which will require the close involvement of a wide range of public and private delivery partners.

The Bill also provides for an annual monitoring report which will need to be submitted to the Secretary of State and this will ensure the regional evidence base is kept up-to-date.

Finally, the Secretary of State does have a formal role in approving the Regional Strategy and in addition cl.68 and 76 of the Bill set out the Secretary of State's reserve powers for intervention. It is anticipated that these powers will only be used as a last resort and where there are issues of national importance.

Another reason might be the non-compliance of the Leaders' Board, to the principles set out in legislation or function in a manner specified in the approved scheme under s.68(8) of the Bill.

Further considerations

We consider that this more integrated approach will be more effective and enable local communities to create the right framework to meet their aspirations and this is why we do it. Planning should be about real economic geography and we can expect regional strategies to focus on sub-regions with a view to creating an overarching strategy that joins them all up. In this there is a crucial role for politicians, key private sector interests and the public to work together in a variety of ways to implement the necessary actions to achieve the desired outcomes—moving from advisory to execution if you like; through measures such as city region partnerships, Multi Agency Agreements and joint working. Whilst there may be evidence of tensions between Regional Development Agencies and Leaders' Boards; between the third sector and “public voice” and the RRAs, there is no need for these. The process allows for full engagement with the plan making process and impartiality. Whilst the government might specify priority outcomes concerning housing numbers and renewable energy production and economic development measures (infrastructure, transport, skills, jobs), all other issues will need to be agreed and prioritised within the regions. Equally in this thinking, there is a real opportunity through the Implementation Plan to allow work programmes combining the financial input from Regional Development Agencies, the Homes and Communities Agency and the Regional Funding Allocations with expenditure from local authorities, the Environment Agency and the public sector. This is seen as a real incentive for focused collaborative working.

It is encouraging to report that so far five out of the eight regions have already voluntarily moved to a new structure of working prior to the enactment with Regional Assemblies winding themselves up and their functions transferring to provisional local authority Leaders' Boards. We feel that concerns about “democratic deficit” are unfounded with clear opportunities for public examination of new strategies; and whilst some have expressed concern about the loss of single topic strategies, they should draw comfort from the greater weight that an integrated strategy can carry together with the recognition that the “single topic” work will still need to be undertaken to provide the evidence base for the new strategy. The links to the planning decision-making process remain strong, with government national policy being set out in National Policy Statements and Planning Policy Statements, and implemented at a local and regional level.

Conclusion

If regional planning has had its ups and downs in terms of ideology and effectiveness I would argue that the new proposals are designed to put the need for regional and sub-regional thinking at the forefront of the planning system beneath national policy. This integrated holistic approach is the bedrock of effective resource management and planned growth in the context of the challenges we face in dealing with the climate change agenda and the need to build the sustainable communities that are articulated in all plans.

I would argue that it is timely to consider the roots of the planning philosophy and learn from the mistakes of the past. Planning is not a matter to turn on or off depending upon the economic circumstances or political ideology.

Planning is fundamentally “good practice” and the regional perspective is part of that process.

That is why if we are to carry the banner for George Peplar, I urge current practitioners and policy thinkers: Don't stop me now!