
off the fence

The regional planning vision has been systematically eroded, and is now so degraded that it is time to admit that the system is broken and needs fixing, says David Lock

a case for regional planning reform



The foothills of the argument were that it was a mistake to have abolished the Regional Economic Planning Councils. In the 1960s they had provided the strategic framework for major decisions about the need for, and location of, new towns and major infrastructure.

The long uphill slog of the argument was in the 1970s and 1980s, against the unaccountable gatherings of councillors who, nominated by themselves, tried their hands at regional-scale planning. SERPLAN and SCEALA and suchlike worked hard, but they never committed enough staff or resources, and found it almost impossible to transcend short-term localism. Shameless horse-dealing took place as housing numbers were traded from one district to another, and it took years to produce regional documents that too often represented blatant under-planning. Too little, too late, and in places that reflected political rather than real-life geography.

It felt like the sunlit golden uplands when a resurgence of regional-scale planning was declared in the 1990s. Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) would be produced by Regional Planning Bodies (RPBs) that would be steered by Regional Assemblies while real devolution of government to the regions was organised.

The emerging drafts of RPG would be consulted upon, and examined in public by an investigative panel of Inspectors through constructive discourse, leading to a report to the Secretary of State, who would be the ultimate publisher of the document. The RPG would be refreshed in a five-year cycle.

Some good staff migrated from shrivelling county council strategic planning teams, and the auspices for strategic planning were good.

Having secured the regional level of planning, our arguments could turn to the need for a national planning framework for England, to match those already instituted for Wales and Scotland. This would give RPG a context, and ensure that when all the

regional diagrams were stapled together, the new railways joined up and went to the right ports and airports.

A semblance of this has lately been achieved by the creation of National Policy Statements (NPSs). Designed initially as a way of getting nuclear power stations, and new railway lines without stations, through the system, they could be developed to provide the national spatial planning framework we all need.

Sadly, however, the regional planning vision has been systematically eroded. It is now so degraded that it is time to 'fess up' and admit that the system is broken, and needs fixing.

Regional Planning Guidance was renamed Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) and incorporates the Regional Transport Strategy, which is a sensible mend of an unnecessary weakness. But attempts to create proper elected regional authorities were abandoned after a badly-handled referendum in the North East. After that, some Regional Assemblies started to behave skittishly, letting timescales drag out to embarrassing lengths to avoid awkward long-term issues (like the need for much more housing) spoiling short-term local election campaigns. They are now disappearing, to be replaced by 'Leaders' Boards' which exclude local councillors even more, and remove any pretence at direct public accountability.

The RSS has become the responsibility of the Regional Development Agency, partly because RSS documents were becoming more and more divorced from economic reality. The RPBs never got the staff and resources they needed. Some, like that in the South East, coped by merely subcontracting the RSS to what remained of the old county council planning teams. Other RPBs coped by simply not doing whole chunks of work. The most recent East Midlands Plan had no employment studies attached to it, other than a report on warehousing and distribution which the RPB tried to avoid having to accommodate.

Public consultation on emerging RSS has become very difficult, as the timescales have become so extended that few can remember what stage has been reached, and lower tiers of planning (which have also moved at a snail's pace) have become confusingly out of kilter. There are abounding

technical complications, through which logical requirements (such as synchronising with the Regional Economic Strategy, and forming wholly integrated Regional Strategies) become unintelligible to all – so complex and opaque as to sound like the plot of a Dan Brown novel.

The Public Examinations are painful. The number of participants has to be limited for practical reasons, but the seats are mostly given to the people who authored the document in the first place (the local authorities); to the government officials that will receive the Panel's report when it is all over (a really odd one, that); to parish councils and other micro-interests who are out of place and often bewildered; to MPs who come once, to grandstand; and to the usual suspect set-piece pressure groups with entirely predictable views. The

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Panels control the sessions in such a way that there is rarely an exploration of issues – just set-piece questions and answers that could have been dealt with by e-mail. The Panels have insufficient support staff, insufficient equipment, and inadequate budgets.

The output is not very good. Housing numbers are usually around the median of what everyone has said, regardless of what is actually needed. No-one knows how the strategic infrastructure is to be delivered, or where the jobs will come from. And everyone knows that most local planning authorities won't like what is laid upon them, and will do all they can to defer delivering it.

We must stop pretending that this mess is worth fighting to keep. The Conservative Party has promised to abolish it, 'within a month', if elected before July. The two other main parties may feel the same way, but of course they now can't say so.

We need to build something different. The case for strategic planning – wide area, long term – is irrefutable where change is expected or desired. That doesn't mean we need it for Sleepyshire or Dozyville. Let's focus strategic planning effort instead on sub-regions or sub-areas where the effort is worth while. These areas can be identified in one of the new National Policy Statements, approved by Parliament.

Our strategic plans need to focus on spatial planning concepts, and to avoid trying to become the answer to the Universe and everything.

A dedicated team of full-time staff with a serious budget would be needed. We can now prove that secondments, sub-contracting back to counties, and doing things too thinly is a waste of money and of everyone's time.

Oversight would have to be provided rather like in the old Development Corporations: a Board nominated by the Secretary of State, including a proportion (probably a third) of persons from local government in the area concerned. England is a small space. The Secretary of State is more accountable to you and me than a Leaders' Board!

Inquiry would be by Planning Inquiry Commission – a properly equipped panel of Inspectors with a brief to be interrogative and to ensure that the principal interests in the matter at hand are fully heard, with formal cross-examination permitted for selected issues.

The main differences are, first, that we only do strategic planning where it is needed, and don't try to cover everywhere with the same rare and precious elixir. Second, that there are people exclusively charged with doing the job. Third, that they are given the resources to do it properly. And, last, that examination is thorough.

Got a better idea?

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