

NATIONAL PLANNING FORUM: *inspiring planning*

Draft note of meeting: Thursday 9 March 2006

Local Government House, Smith Square, London

Attendance and apologies: 42 members were present; there were 13 apologies

1. Welcome from the NPF Chair

Henry Oliver (CPRE, and NPF Chair) welcomed existing and new members. He noted that this would be Mike Ash's last meeting as Chief Planner, paid tribute to his achievements and to his support for the Forum and its work. Henry presented a card signed by members of the Forum to Mike, and wished him well for his retirement.

2. ODPM Overview and update

Colin Byrne, Director Planning ODPM, addressed the Forum along the following lines:

- Planning is at the heart of the Government's objectives
- The big task is to explain the role of planning and to change negative perceptions
- There's a real need to generate confidence – in government, front line staff, customers
- If we don't develop that confidence, pressures on the planning system for further change will continue
- Need to respond to the review, and to ensure continuous improvement
- Impressed by the strap line of NPF – inspiring planning
- Reflected on the complexity of the system, asked whether we are making it too complex and suggested there may be better ways of doing some things
- Mike had made a valued contribution and would be hard to replace
- Pleased to announce that Paul Hudson had been appointed as Mike's successor, and would take up his post on 5 June

Mike Ash, Chief Planner and Deputy Director, ODPM gave an update on key issues (note at Doc 1). He concluded by saying that the planning system was in danger of overload; hence the need to simplify where possible, focus on planning in practice via education, support and skills to improve product quality, and to ensure that planning has a place at the heart of local authorities.

Phil Weatherby, ODPM said that he and colleagues were working on:

- (a) revision of Circular 2/99 Environmental Impact Assessment. There were three drivers for change, the need to:
 - change the emphasis of screening procedures,
 - include recent EIA case law, and
 - keep in line with changes to the EIA Regulations such as the incorporation of the public participation provisions of the Aarhus Convention.
- (b) a new good practice guide to replace the "Blue Book" (the EIA Guide to Procedures), primarily aimed at developers.

Consultation on draft versions of both would start at end March/early April for 12 weeks. Questions and comments (*ODPM responses in italics*):

- Clarification requested on the regulations to allow Article 4 Direction in cases of plot sub-division. *ODPM note at Doc 3.*
- Will light pollution feature as an Annex in PPS 23? *ODPM note at Doc 3.*
- When will PPG 4 be revised as PPS 4? *After Barker II.*

- Would guidance on environmental impact clarify why two environmental assessments were now required? *SEA is required for plans and programmes, some individual projects are subject to EIA; material in an SEA can be drawn on for EIA though SEA generally has a broader scope.*
- From what date will Design and Access Statements be required to accompany planning applications? *This would be confirmed in due course.*
- Valued Colin and Mike's attendance, and hoped that Colin and Paul Hudson would attend future meetings.
- Concerned that proposals for local government re-organisation would result in Planners being drawn into R&I, rather than working on LDFs.
- Planning is coping with issues that could be dealt with in other ways, eg development control via Building Regulations, informed by design codes
- Welcomed the thrust of CB and MA's comments - were their views shared by Ministers? *There is Prime Ministerial interest in planning, and pressures from different Departments.*
- Constant flux is having a negative effect - when CBI and CPRE agree, Ministers should take note.
- Is GLA reform likely? It would make for more complication. *Additional powers for the Mayor were contained in a Government consultation paper; however there had been strong reactions to some of the proposals.*

3. Barker II

Liz Peace (BPF, and NPF Vice Chair) introduced the debate, referring to the NPF Secretary's paper. She added that the recently published report by the Policy Exchange "Better Homes, Greener Cities" contained some ideas which were worth considering. ODPM's view appeared to be that this review was narrowly focused, but indications from the Treasury were that it could be more fundamental. She suggested that members should focus on the question of whether there needs to be a fundamental review, and then on individual questions. The Barker II interim report is due in June/July and final report by the end of the year. Points made included:

Business:

- the new planning system is not yet delivering more certainty of outcome
- concern about under-resourcing of local planning authorities, and scarcity of planners
- if there's a need for review, there should be a Royal Commission chaired by an eminent QC, to ensure the required level of expertise
- concern about the cost of planning applications
- constructive involvement of business in planning is vital
- PPS 4 is needed now – there is a lack of policy relative to that on housing, and no guidance on issues such as competitiveness, new development forms, live/work units
- concern at the continuing loss of employment land to housing
- Regional Economic Strategies and Regional Spatial Strategies need to be aligned better (eg using the same forecasts).
- useful that Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) now have a consultee role on major applications.
- good businesses need an effective planning system
- business is diverse; there's a need for stratified input to reflect the variety of different views
- major companies seeking to develop rarely have problems with planning, there's a need to look at the next tier and provide examples so that the real problems

- can be tackled
- there's no need for a fundamental review at present, but there is a need to simplify procedures and support delivery of plans.
- the pressures on business should be recognized, the focus need to be on achieving better outcomes
- short, more focused consultation on issues is needed, and less text
- system is complex, costly and still too slow

Local Government:

- new style development plans are starting to emerge and it would be wrong to pre-judge how they would work
- need to ensure a rounded, sustainable, approach
- the principles of the new system are sound, but the processes and procedures are causing problems
- a transitional stage; there's no best practice guidance available yet
- simplification of Sustainability Appraisal/Strategic Environmental Assessment (SA/SEA) and Statements of Community Involvement (SCI) processes would help current and future rounds
- need to find a better balance between management effort and professional work
- agreed that plans should be brief
- need to bear in mind that, if local government reorganisation takes place in 2009, the first round of new-style development plans will have been adopted, and the boundaries will change for the first review.

3rd sector:

- the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution had done interesting work on "four-dimensional planning"
- with the advent of SEA and climate change the real question on about the planning system and parallel regime, including taxation, was whether it could facilitate development that is sustainable
- not everyone in the Treasury understands what planning is, what it does, how it works, and what it delivers – the Forum could help to explain this
- need to make the system work – members should make common cause, showing the many examples of where planning has inspired – case studies of regenerated town centres, coastal towns, small scale heritage and conservation
- the system doesn't need fundamental review, but does need some important changes eg simplifying Local Development Frameworks so that they can be delivered, and planning for all city regions(not just the largest)
- the new system also needs a change of mind sets, an understanding of how we deliver planning in a market system, and requires planners to work with the market to deliver creative outcomes.

Professions:

- the property industry wants incremental improvements, not another review
- transition from old style development plans to new makes it difficult – the new system has a lot of merit and should be given time to bed down
- simplification is needed (eg shorter plans with soundly based, joined-up content; more effective processes for plan-making and development control)

- planners need the confidence to move on from SCIs to the undoubted challenges of plan-making; they need professional, more than managerial, leadership

Government agencies:

- we should learn the lessons of history, particularly the need for certainty
- the first pre-examination meetings are being held; there are positive examples of what's happening, it will be important to disseminate these early examples and ensure positive learning

Liz summarised the broad consensus that had emerged from the debate, that:

- Forum members value the planning system;
- there is no appetite for a "root and branch" review of the system;
- the current system can be made to work, but needs to be properly resourced and/or some procedures simplified; and
- this is a good opportunity to highlight examples of good planning, and solutions.

Members endorsed the Executive Board engaging with the Barker team to present the views of the Forum. Liz asked members to send examples of good practice and ways of improving procedures to the Secretary as soon as possible.

4. Reports back from Working Groups

National Spatial Framework Liaison Group - Henry Oliver said that there would be a report to the next meeting. The TCPA report is expected to be launched in May.

Housing Working Group - Henry Oliver invited comments on, or additions to, the paper that had been circulated. There were none.

Planning Gain Supplement (PGS) Working Group - Liz Peace invited further comments, but there were none.

Henry Oliver said that he and Liz Peace would meet officials in ODPM Planning shortly, and possible Treasury officials re PGS, to confirm the points set out in the Working Groups' papers.

Planning Delivery Agreement pilot and Pre-applications project - Ed Watson, Planning Advisory Service, reported for Sarah Richards (Doc 3 attached).

Culture Change Working Group – Mark Southgate (EA, and NPF Vice Chair) reported on the key elements of the emerging Draft Action Plan:

1. Map current culture change/planning renaissance activity
2. Define/reach a common understanding of planning/explain its role (Stage I)
3. Strategy to communicate 2. above (Stage II)
4. Identify champions in each sector
5. Develop a cross-sectoral skills programme
6. Demonstrate the outcomes of positive planning

These would be considered in more detail at a Working Group meeting in 6-8 weeks, with a view to a full report to the June meeting of the Forum. Henry Oliver said that the Executive Board would look at reviving a redraft of the Concordat in this context.

Delivery Working Group – Kay Powell said that Mike Hayes (RTPI, and NPF Vice- Chair) had had to leave the meeting, but had asked her to invite additional expressions of interest in this WG. The work will have a number of strands covering aspects of spatial planning and development management, and would link with the work of the Culture Change Working Group.

An initial meeting would take place at 11am on Thursday 27 April in the offices of the British Property Federation, London. Katrine Sporle's offer of a PINS presentation to the June Forum on the first DPD Examinations was welcomed by the Chair.

5. Presentation on the Audit Commission report "The Planning System – matching expectations and capacity", February 2006

Bruno Moore, Audit Commission, made a short presentation on the report (ppt on the web-site), highlighting the main recommendations [*responses in italics*].

Questions/comments were:

- How is competition and propriety dealt with? *Guidance is available from Audit Commission and the Standards Board respectively*
- Could BM envisage a system whereby applicants could use the lpa of their choice to process their application provided the decision was taken by the lpa that contained the site. *No difficulty was envisaged in principle.*
- Staff dealing with development control need local knowledge, lpas do share eg landscape design, strategic planning expertise.
- The issue of potential conflict of interest when using private consultants was rather skated over.
- The proposal to use private consultants doesn't get over the problem of the overall lack of planners.
- Is the Audit Commission engaging with lpas on implementation? *The Audit Commission would follow up the report's recommendations with lpas as part of their routine audit work.*

6. Note of meeting on 13 December 2005, and matters arising

The draft note of meeting had been circulated. It was agreed, and signed by the Chair as a true record of proceedings. There were no matters arising, but the Chair confirmed that neither the Working Groups, nor the Forum as a whole, would respond formally to Government consultation.

7. Any Other Business

(i) Brian Waters said that there would be a meeting hosted by University College, London on the Review of the London Plan on 26 or 27 June (tbc), to which all were invited.

(ii) Michael Coupe asked whether the Code of Conduct precluded ward councillors from attending Planning Committee meetings to discuss controversial issues. The Chair asked the Secretary to ask Lee Searles, LGA, to provide clarification to Michael.

(ii) John Anderson tendered his apologies for the 20 June meeting - it clashes with the World Urban Forum in Vancouver which he will be attending for CAP.

The Chair thanked members for their contributions to the debate, and to the other agenda items.

The meeting closed at 4.20pm.